

## SIMILARITY IN THE INFLUENCE PROCESS: THE BELIEF-VALUE DISTINCTION<sup>1</sup>

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An experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis that when a belief was at issue, agreement from a dissimilar other would increase judgmental confidence more than agreement from a similar other; whereas when a value was at issue, agreement from a similar other would be more influential. The subjects judged either the relative academic success of two students (belief) or which of the two they liked more (value). The subjects were given an evaluation of the students by another subject who they had been led to believe was similar or dissimilar to themselves in terms of his style of judging other people. In all cases, the evaluation subjects received agreed with their own. The results supported the predictions.

There is a considerable body of literature in social psychology converging on the conclusion that similar others are more influential than dissimilar others. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that, when possible, people evaluate their opinions by comparing them with those of others who are similar. Several studies have supported this prediction. For example, Darley and Aronson (1966) have shown that subjects prefer to compare with similar others in appraising an anxiety-provoking situation. Festinger's theory further implies that agreement from a dissimilar other will render a judgment imprecise and unstable, and that confidence can only be increased if similar others agree.

Consistency theories also suggest that the agreement of a dissimilar other will not effectively increase an individual's judgmental confidence. For example, Berscheid (1966) conducted a study derived from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) showing that if a subject found that a dissimilar other took his position on an issue, he moved away from his own initial position.

In contrast to social comparison and con-

sistency theories, Kelley's (1967) attribution theory would seem to have different implications for the role of similarity. His formulation specifies the conditions under which a perceiver can attribute his response to an entity, either to his own idiosyncratic or biasing characteristics or to the compelling stimulus qualities of the entity itself. Kelley suggested that if a perceiver can show that his response is consensual, that other perceivers make the same judgment, he can be more confident that his judgment accurately reflects the true nature of the entity.

Thus, both Kelley's (1967) formulation and that of Festinger (1954) suggest that one's feeling of correctness is enhanced when others agree. However, in terms of Kelley's model, if agreeing others are similar, they may share the biasing characteristics that generate inaccurate person-caused judgments. If the agreeing consensus is dissimilar, however, there is a correction for bias. The others are less likely to share the error-producing characteristics, and their agreement reduces the probability that the judgment is person caused.

Thus, the agreement of dissimilar others can be most impressive and influential. It increases judgmental confidence by demonstrating to the perceiver that his judgment is supported by others with different perspectives—that it rests on a broad and heterogeneous consensus. This reasoning is comparable to the navigational principle of triangulation, and one could speak of a "triangula-

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tion effect" where perceivers or judges are substantially influenced by the error-correcting agreement of a dissimilar other.

There is at least some evidence supporting this reasoning. Goethals (1972) found that dissimilar agreeers are as influential, or more so, than similar agreeers if they have the same information about the entity being judged. Wheeler and Levine (1967) have shown that a dissimilar model is more effective in inducing the contagion of aggression.

Thus, it remains to delineate the conditions under which similar others are more influential, as opposed to those in which the triangulation effect applies. Quite relevant is Jones and Gerard's (1967) distinction between the belief and value components of attitudes. The Darley and Aronson (1966) and Berscheid (1966) studies used value issues: appraising the emotionally arousing components of an experimental situation and evaluating educational policy positions. The Goethals (1972) study employed an issue of objective belief: judging the relative academic performance of two students in terms of the grades they had earned.

These considerations suggest an interaction between similarity and the judgmental issue. When the issue in question is a belief—a potentially verifiable assertion about the attributes of an entity—Kelley's considerations seem more relevant. The person's interest is in being confident that his response is correct, that is, entity caused, and he should be more impressed by agreement from a dissimilar other than by agreement from a similar other. In contrast, when the issue is one of value—an assertion about the goodness or badness of an entity or a state of affairs—triangulation is not relevant. Rather, the person's interest is in discovering what is affectively positive or negative for him. Here he should welcome the support of a "co-oriented peer" (Jones & Gerard, 1967), a person who has the same basic interests and perspectives.

Therefore, the present experiment was designed specifically to test the following hypothesis: When a belief issue is in question, an individual's confidence in his decision will be more increased by agreement from a dis-

similar other, whereas in those situations in which a value issue is being considered, a similar other, a cooriented peer, provides the most social support.

## METHOD

### Overview

As part of an alleged study to reevaluate certain college admissions procedures, small groups of high school students were shown a videotaped recording purported to be excerpts from the interviews of two applicants to a university. The subjects were asked to decide either which student they thought had become the more academically successful at the university (belief condition) or which they personally liked better (value condition). After the subjects indicated their choice and confidence in their decision, they were given an evaluation of the two applicants written by someone who had supposedly participated in the study previously. Half of the subjects were led to believe that the person whose evaluation they would be receiving was similar to themselves in judging others and the other half that he was markedly different. The evaluations that the subjects received always agreed with their own. After reading the other's evaluation, the subjects were again asked to indicate their preference and confidence. The change in confidence was the major dependent variable of the study. Thus, the design was a 2 (belief versus value)  $\times$  2 (similar versus dissimilar) factorial.

### Subjects

Thirty-four male and female students who had recently graduated from a local high school and were planning to attend college the following fall served as subjects in the experiment. The subjects were contacted by telephone and scheduled in groups of 3 or 4 for a study allegedly concerning "college admissions procedures." Groups were randomly assigned to either the belief or value conditions, and, within a group, both the similar and dissimilar conditions were run simultaneously.

### Experimental Materials

*Videotapes.* The experiment required the subjects to decide which of two university applicants had eventually made the better academic record there or which of the two they personally liked better. The tapes consisted of eight interview segments: four of one applicant alternating with four of the other. The first applicant was made to appear interested in a variety of academic and extracurricular activities and very fluid with respect to his educational objectives. The second appeared to be more intelligent and articulate, but with a much narrower range of academic and nonacademic interests. The scripts were designed not to favor one applicant so much that the initial confidence levels would be too high.

*Similarity manipulation.* As in Goethals' (1972)

study, specially prepared "interpersonal judgment profile" sheets were used to manipulate similarity. The subjects were given two profiles: their own and that of the person whose evaluation of the two applicants they received. The profiles allegedly indicated their standings on a test which could measure one's style of judging personal characteristics. The subjects were told that they could compare the two profiles to determine how similar their own style was to that of the other person. The profiles were almost identical in the similar condition, and they were very divergent in the dissimilar condition.

### *Procedure*

When the subjects arrived, the experimenter explained that a large state university was reevaluating its admissions procedures, and one idea was to include high school students on the admissions committee. He added that a large study had been designed to see how high school students evaluated applicants. The experimenter said that several schools in the area had been asked to assist, and that the Williams group had been asked to study the impressions that applicants made in their admissions interview.

The subjects were told that they would be shown excerpts from the interviews of two applicants to the university, and that they then would be asked to make decisions concerning the applicants on the basis of the information in the interviews. But because each person's impressions of the applicants would supposedly reflect his own orientation to other people, his interpersonal judgment style, the subjects were asked to take a short test that would indicate

what characteristics and values in other people that you think are important, what kinds of people you particularly like or dislike, and, in general, how you form impressions of other people.

Once the subjects had completed the questionnaire, the experimenter explained that the applicants had been interviewed 3 years earlier, that both applicants had been accepted at the university, and that both applicants had just completed their junior year there. He said that both were doing well academically, and that they were active in the extracurricular and social affairs of the university. In the belief condition, he continued:

But in terms of grades and scores on the university's own specially designed and standardized achievement tests, one of the students is clearly better. And what I want you to do is to make a judgment as to which of the two you think it is. In other words, I want you to watch these tapes, and, on the basis of the impressions you get of the two applicants, try to decide which student has made the better academic record at the university.

In the value condition he said:

But they are obviously different people, and everyone has a somewhat different impression of

them. What we are interested in are your own personal impressions, feelings, and reactions to them. I'd like you to watch the tapes carefully, and then, on the basis of the two interviews, I'd like you to decide which of the two students you personally like better. That is, which of the two would you prefer to have as a close friend or fellow student if you were also going to be a freshman there?

The experimenter said that he would be scoring the interpersonal judgment tests while the tape was being shown, and he then played the tape without further comment.

After the tapes were shown, the subjects in the belief conditions were asked to indicate which applicant they thought had made the better academic record at the university. Those in the value conditions were asked to denote which of the two they liked better. The subjects were also asked to explain some of the reasons underlying their decisions. The experimenter added that the study was also concerned with how confident students felt about their decisions, and the subjects were told that they could indicate their level of confidence by using numbers from 1 to 100. The experimenter asked the subjects to be as accurate as possible in indicating their confidence level, and he added that this would be only a preliminary rating.

After collecting the ratings, the experimenter told the subjects that it was rare for committee members to go to a group discussion without having discovered informally how others felt. He said that this feature of decision-making groups would be duplicated, and that each subject would receive an evaluation of the two applicants written by someone who had previously participated in the study.

The experimenter added that in real groups, a member did not merely receive a written evaluation from a stranger, he generally knew the other person and knew whether the other judged people in the same way that he did. Again, the subjects were told that this feature of group processes would be simulated and that each of them would receive his own score and the score of the other person on the interpersonal judgment questionnaire that they had completed earlier. The experimenter explained the scale and how, by carefully comparing profiles, they could determine how similarly they and the other person judged people. After explaining the profiles, the experimenter asked the subjects to read the other person's evaluation. The evaluations were identical for belief and value conditions and in all cases agreed with the subject's own choice.

After the subjects had read the other's evaluation, the experimenter said that he would give them some further information about the two applicants. This information contained some details of the applicants' high school activities. This sheet was included so that the subjects could change their confidence ratings without admitting that they had been directly influenced by the other's evaluation.

When they had finished reading the biographical summaries, the subjects were again asked to indi-

care their choice and final level of confidence. The experimenter reminded the subjects once again to be as accurate as possible in indicating their confidence level. He also asked them to complete a final questionnaire which contained checks on the experimental manipulations.

The completion of the final questionnaire marked the conclusion of the experiment. There was a final discussion period in which the subjects were informed of the true purpose of the experiment and the necessity of employing the deceptions involved. Possible suspicions were explored, but no subject suspected the true nature of the experiment. Finally, the experimenter secured from the subjects a promise not to reveal the purpose of the study to others.

### RESULTS

The videotapes were designed so that initial confidence ratings would not be too high, thereby creating a ceiling effect on possible increases. Although initial confidence ratings were low enough for present purposes (for all subjects  $\bar{X} = 69.06$ ), there was considerable consensus as to which stimulus person had made the better academic record. Only 1 subject of 16 in the belief conditions chose the first stimulus person. There was less consensus as to which stimulus person was more likable: 6 subjects of 17 in the value conditions chose the first stimulus person. Since there was no theoretical reason to expect the predictions of the study to apply differentially on the basis of the subject's choice of stimulus person, the subjects were assigned to conditions, and the data were presented without regard to choice. If the data were analyzed separately, there would be no differences in initial confidence levels or confidence change scores on the basis of choice of stimulus persons. The data of one subject in

the similar-belief condition was eliminated, however, because he changed his choice between the first and second evaluations.

### Manipulation Checks

A question on the postexperimental questionnaire asked the subjects whether the other person was similar or dissimilar to them in his interpersonal judgment style. All subjects correctly grasped the similarity manipulation. Also bearing on the effectiveness of the similarity manipulation was an item asking whether the other's evaluation was about what the subject expected or different from what he expected. The data from this measure are summarized in Table 1. An analysis of variance performed on these data reveals a main effect for similarity ( $F = 5.10$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ,  $p < .05$ ).<sup>3</sup> This result suggests that the subjects expected a similar other to agree with them but were mildly surprised when a dissimilar other agreed. Thus, the similarity manipulation had impact; specifically, it created an expectancy as to whether or not the other person would agree. Although the Similarity  $\times$  Judgmental Issue interaction was not significant ( $F = 2.35$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ), the Newman-Keuls procedure shows that the other's agreement in the dissimilar-value condition was significantly less expected than his agreement in the dissimilar-belief condition ( $q_2 = 3.08$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This finding may reflect the fact that the judgments made in the belief conditions were made fairly confidently, and thus even the agreement of a dissimilar other was expected.

### Changes in Confidence

One- and two-way analyses of variance revealed no significant differences in the initial confidence ratings. The only trend was toward a very slight main effect for judgmental issue ( $F = 1.48$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ,  $ns$ ). This trend may reflect the consensus noted above among the subjects in the belief conditions as to the stimulus person with the better academic record.

The means for changes in confidence are presented in Table 2, and the analysis of

TABLE 1  
DEGREE TO WHICH EVALUATIONS RECEIVED FROM THE OTHER WERE EXPECTED

Item	Similar	Dissimilar
Belief		
$\bar{X}$	2.88	3.50
$s^2$	4.41	6.75
$n$	8	8
Value		
$\bar{X}$	2.89	6.13
$s^2$	.86	11.84
$n$	9	8

Note.—The lower the number, the more the evaluation was expected.

<sup>3</sup> All analyses of variance reported in this study used the unweighted-means analysis for unequal  $n$  presented in Winer (1962).

TABLE 2  
CHANGES IN CONFIDENCE

Item	Similar	Dissimilar
Belief		
$\bar{X}$	+6.38	+17.38
$s^2$	59.41	69.41
$n$	8	8
Value		
$\bar{X}$	+21.11	+10.63
$s^2$	73.61	245.98
$n$	9	8

variance performed on these data is summarized in Table 3. Neither main effect approached significance. The result of major interest is the highly significant Similarity  $\times$  Issue interaction ( $F = 8.58$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Consistent with this interaction are the simple effects showing the dissimilar other to be more influential in raising confidence within the belief conditions ( $F = 4.37$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the similar other to be more influential in the value conditions ( $F = 4.20$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These findings support the hypotheses outlined above.

The variance in the dissimilar-value condition is considerably larger than the variances in the other three conditions as shown in Table 2. (It should be noted, however, that an  $F_{max}$  test [Winer, 1962] does not approach statistical significance, and the assumption of homogeneity of variances is not violated.) A few subjects in this condition showed substantial increases in confidence, among the highest in the entire study. Perhaps these subjects considered likability as an inherent attribute of the stimulus person entity and followed the logic of triangulation.

#### Other Findings

Another item on the postexperimental questionnaire asked the subjects to indicate how much they thought they had been influenced by the other person's evaluation. The means for this item are presented in Table 4. It can be seen that the pattern of these results does not coincide with the pattern of results on the confidence change measure. An analysis of variance revealed only a nearly significant main effect for similarity ( $F = 4.14$ ,  $df = 1/29$ ,  $p < .06$ ). The subjects reported that they thought they had been more

TABLE 3  
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF CHANGES IN CONFIDENCE

Source	$df$	$MS$	$F$
Similarity (A)	1	.56	
Judgmental issue (B)	1	131.18	1.18
A $\times$ B	1	950.46	8.58**
Error	29	110.78	
Similar vs. dissimilar within belief	1	484.00	4.37*
Similar vs. dissimilar within value	1	465.68	4.20*

\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

influenced by the similar other in both the belief and the value conditions. Thus, while the subjects in the belief conditions were actually more influenced by the dissimilar others as measured by their changes in confidence, they nevertheless had a tendency to report the opposite—that they felt more influenced by the similar other.

#### DISCUSSION

The results seem to offer strong support for the experimental hypotheses. The findings of major interest would seem to be the effect indicating that when the subjects were attempting to decide which of two stimulus persons had made the better academic record in college, their confidence was more influenced by dissimilar agreeers. This finding stands in contrast to a good deal of literature, suggesting that people's attitudes are more affected by the influence of similar others—an effect obtained only within the value conditions of the present study. However, the finding is not an isolated one. Goethals (1972) and Wheeler and Levine (1967) ob-

TABLE 4  
DEGREE TO WHICH SUBJECTS PERCEIVED BEING INFLUENCED BY OTHER'S EVALUATION

Item	Similar	Dissimilar
Belief		
$\bar{X}$	4.63	3.88
$s^2$	7.70	1.55
$n$	8	8
Value		
$\bar{X}$	4.33	2.00
$s^2$	8.25	.86
$n$	9	8

Note.—The higher the number, the more the subject perceived being influenced.

tained conceptually similar results. Together, these findings strongly suggest the existence of a triangulation effect. As in the navigational analogue, the greater the difference in perspectives converging on a judgment, the more confidently that judgment can be held.

In light of the fact that this research qualifies the notion that similar others are more influential than dissimilar others, it is of interest to note that even in the belief conditions, the subjects reported that they were more influenced by the similar other (though the difference is not significant). Whether the subjects in the belief conditions were denying that they had been highly influenced by the dissimilar other, were unaware of his influence, or were labeling the impact of his support as something other than influence cannot be ascertained. Perhaps people's patterns of routine social interactions prevent them from discovering how dissimilar others feel, and, consequently, they are unaccustomed to recognizing a dissimilar other's influence. It may often take a traumatic experience, such as the disconfirmation of an important belief, before people desperately seek social support from dissimilar others. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's (1956) study of the Lake City group and their doomed prophecy can be considered an example of this phenomenon.

The results of the present study also suggest the importance of the belief-value distinction and specifically demonstrate that the two classes of judgments can be subject to divergent social influence processes. There has already been some reasoning along these lines. For example, Jones and Gerard (1967) suggested that beliefs can be more influenced by experts, whereas values can be more influenced by cooriented peers. Of course the belief-value distinction is not a new one. Many authors have distinguished the affective and cognitive components of attitudes (e.g.,

Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960), while more recently Jones and Gerard (1967) and Bem (1970) have discussed the varying foundations of beliefs and values.

In conclusion, the present study strongly indicates that situations do exist in which a dissimilar agreeer provides more social support than a similar other. In addition, the experiment points to the importance of the belief-value distinction in identifying those situations.

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