

STATUS SYMBOLS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR: THE EFFECT OF THE VICTIM'S CAR ON HELPING*

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SUMMARY

The results of studies of the effects of status on helping have varied when automobiles have been used to denote status. The present study ($N = 60$ men and women passersby) showed that a female victim was more likely to receive help when she was associated with a high status car than when she was associated with a low status one. This finding was due mainly to the responses of male rather than female *Ss*.

A. INTRODUCTION

A variable that has been shown to be effective in determining social behavior among American *Ss*, but relatively neglected in the helping literature, is the status of the victim. In studies where status was manipulated by varying the dress of the victim, high status victims received more lost dimes (2) and more change (6), and they elicited more favorable comments (5) than low status victims. When status was manipulated by varying the type of automobile used by the victim, a low status parked car had its neglected headlights turned off more often than a high status one (3). However, this action occurred in the absence of the owner. When the car contained a driver, low status cars were more likely to be honked at and were honked at sooner at a green traffic light than were high status cars (4). It may be, then, that when the victim was not present, American *Ss* responded to status in terms of dependency and social responsibility norms (*cf.* 1), while the presence of the high status victim (as opposed to the low status one) elicited identification needs. In any event, high status individuals (as denoted by the automobile they are driving) seem to have inhibited antisocial responses (at least in the form of horn-honking) to a greater extent than low status ones, and it may be that high status individuals elicit more prosocial responses than those who are low status.

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B. METHOD

The present study manipulated the victim's status by varying the type of automobile used; however the help required was not directly related to the car itself. Since status effects on behavior might also vary with the sex of the *S*, this variable was included in the design.

The design was 2 (sex of *S*) \times 2 (status of victim's car) with 15 *S*s in each of the four cells. The *S*s were 60 adult passersby (30 males and 30 females) who were unaccompanied and unencumbered by parcels. The settings were several middle class shopping centers in New York City. The victim was an attractive adult female, dressed in neat sweater and slacks. She was in the process of loading bags of groceries into the trunk of either "an old dirty Chevrolet Impala" (Low status) or a "shiny Buick Electra" (High status) automobile. As an *S* approached, the victim dropped a bag of groceries, spilling the contents. The victim turned away from the *S* as she bent to pick up her things in order to minimize eye contact or any other implied "request" for help. Instances in which a can of groceries rolled into the path of an *S* were eliminated from the analysis. Helping was defined as physically picking up groceries rather than kicking them toward the victim or offering only verbal support. Each *S* was allowed to pass out of sight before the next *S* was selected. Sex of *S* and status of car were counterbalanced, and all conditions were run on each day of the data gathering period.

C. RESULTS

As predicted, the High status victim received significantly more help than the Low status victim [53% *vs.* 23%, $\chi^2(1) = 4.41, p < .05$]. Using the method for assessing 2 \times 2 interactions in categorical data patterns proposed by Langer and Abelson (7) resulted in a significant sex \times status interaction [$Z(1) = 3.17, p < .01$]. While the pattern of helping by females did not differ significantly between High and Low status conditions (27% *vs.* 20%), males were more likely to help a High status victim than a Low status one [73% *vs.* 33%, $\chi^2(1) = 3.84, p < .06$].

To check the possibility that the interaction was due to a sex difference in the perception of the status of the two stimulus cars, 13 additional male and female *S*s in the shopping centers were asked to rate the two cars (in counterbalanced order) on two separate seven-point graphic scales (the higher the rating, the higher the perceived status). A 2 \times 2 repeated measures analysis of variance of the mean status ratings yielded a significant main effect of status [High $\bar{X} = 5.73$ *vs.* Low $\bar{X} = 2.62, F(1/11) = 95.97, p < .001$]. There were no

other main or interaction effects. Thus, the status of the cars was probably perceived similarly by both sexes and did not account for the sex by status interaction in helping.

D. DISCUSSION

The data of the present study support the hypothesis that when the victim is present, responses to status favor the high status victim. In addition, this was found to be true mainly for male Ss and, as noted above, was not accounted for by any differences in perceived status. One explanation may be linked to the generally low incidence of helping by female Ss in this study, a finding that is consistent with those of other investigators [at least in studies with American Ss where the physical help required was not consistent with the female role (e. g., 8)] and may have served to eliminate any status effects. In any event, the data suggest that while males and females recognized status symbol differences in the same way, only males varied their helping responses in terms of status in this sort of situation.

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