

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL STATUS ON THE HONESTY OF OTHERS*¹

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A. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly assumed that the manner in which people dress tells us something about them. A number of studies done in the United States have shown that the attire of a person affects our impression of him (1, 2, 4, 8). However, except for the Lefkowitz, Blake, and Mouton (4) study, none of the research was conducted in natural settings nor was it concerned with anything other than impressions. In contrast, the present study takes place in the natural environment where the stimulus person and subject actually interact.

From previous research we can tentatively conclude that people judge others by their clothing along a status continuum. In addition, one study (4) has pointed out that this status judgment can affect overt conformity behavior. The present study is concerned with how the dress of a stimulus person will affect the honesty of others. That is, will a stimulus person's status, as reflected in his dress, influence the subject's attempt to keep something that does not belong to him?

B. METHOD

1. *Subjects*

Two hundred and six persons who happened to use specified phone booths located in Grand Central Station and Kennedy Airport in New York City were the subjects of this experiment. Eighty-five percent of the subjects were white, and 15% nonwhite. Forty-six percent of the subjects were male, and 54% female. The average age of the subjects was estimated to be 35 years. Forty-three percent of the subjects were judged to be of low status, and the remainder of high status, according to a criterion explained below.

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2. Procedure

a. Variation of perceived status. The apparent social status of the three male and three female stimulus persons was varied by the type of clothing they wore. The high status males wore suits and ties. When the males were simulating low status persons, they dressed as workers—i.e., wore work clothes and carried something that would identify them as workers, such as a flashlight, lunch pail, six-foot rule. The high status females were clothed in neat dresses and either wore or carried dress coats. As low status women they wore skirts and blouses and were generally unkempt in appearance.

b. The situation. The stimulus person entered a designated phone booth, placed a dime on the shelf in front of the phone, and then left. After a subject entered the phone booth, the stimulus person observed the subject to see if he took or used the dime. The dime was in such an obvious position that most subjects noticed the coin. The subjects who, from the stimulus person's observation, never noticed the dime were not included in the data analysis.

After a subject had been in the phone booth for two minutes, the stimulus person approached him. It was felt that approaching the subject while he was picking up the dime might make him feel that he had been seen. Occasionally the subject would finish the call in less than two minutes. If this occurred, the stimulus person approached the subject upon completion of his call.

When the stimulus person approached the subject, the former tapped on the phone booth door and said: "Excuse me, Sir [Miss], I think I might've left a dime in this phone booth a few minutes ago. Did you find it?" The stimulus person then recorded whether the dime was returned or not. In addition, the subject's status (as determined by dress), perceived age, race, and sex were noted. These characteristics were determined by a consensus of agreement between the experimenter and an observer who was stationed close by.

C. RESULTS

1. Perception of Stimulus Persons

Pictures of the six stimulus persons in both status conditions were shown to 28 student judges. The judges were asked to rate each stimulus person as being of either high or low status. All the judges agreed that the stimulus persons dressed as low status persons appeared to be of a low status and those

dressed as high status persons appeared to be of a high status. This finding provides evidence for the validity of the status manipulation.

2. *Perception of Subjects*

There was complete agreement between the stimulus person and the observer with regard to the subject's sex, race, and social status. Status was defined by the same dress characteristics used in the experimental manipulation. The age estimates were highly correlated ($r = .87$).

3. *The Effect of Status on Honesty*

When the stimulus person was dressed in low status attire, 38% of the subjects returned the dime. However, when the stimulus person was dressed in high status attire, 77% of the subjects returned the dime. This difference is highly significant ($\chi^2 = 31.63$, $p < .001$, 1 *df*).

No relationship was found between the tendency to return the dime and the sex, race, age, or status of the subject. In addition, the sex of the stimulus person did not affect the proportion of subjects returning the dime. Thus, the only factor that was found to be significant in this study was the mode of dress (status) of the person whose dime was taken.

D. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study showed that a person's honesty was dependent upon the person with whom he was interacting. When the subjects thought they were dealing with a high status person, they returned the dime more than twice as often as when they perceived the stimulus person to be of low status. These results should be interpreted in the context of the situation studied.

In the present experiment the subject was free to act without any external constraints. That is, he was anonymous, not caught in the act of pocketing the dime, and only a small amount of money was involved. The subject was never accused of having taken the dime. Instead he was asked if he had seen it. Since the stimulus person appeared to be uncertain as to whether he had actually left a dime in that specific phone booth, the subject might have felt that the stimulus person would not know that he was lying if the subject said that he had not seen the dime.

That the low status person was treated differently may not be surprising, given the findings of previous research (3, 6, 7). However, what does appear surprising is that, in a situation involving money, the low status person

should be treated more dishonestly. A single dime is a small amount of money, but it certainly should mean more to a person who appears to be poor than to a well dressed person. Thus, it is not obvious that the apparently low status person should be the one to lose his dime more often.

However, there may not have been a conscious attempt on the part of the subject to deceive the low status person. In the present experiment the stimulus person interrupted the subject while the latter was in the midst of a telephone conversation. When the high status stimulus person approached the phone booth, the subject might have interpreted the interruption by this well dressed person as meaning that he had something important to say. Thus, he might have paid more attention to the content of the stimulus person's message and returned the dime more often. However, when interrupted by a person appearing to be of low status, the subject might have attempted to rid himself of this annoyance simply by saying no to him without really paying attention to what he was saying.

Since most of the previous research in this area has been carried out in the classroom or laboratory by use of questionnaires, it would be interesting to compare the results of the present field experiment with results obtained by use of a questionnaire technique.

The best sample of subjects to use in the questionnaire study would be one composed of people sampled in the field experiment. Since this was not feasible, a questionnaire was given to 66 Smith College students.

Two forms of the questionnaire were devised to describe the experimental situation. In one form the person asking for the dime was described as a well dressed middle-class person. In the other version, given to different subjects, the person was described as a poorly dressed working-class person. The subjects were asked to predict the probability of their returning the dime on a scale from zero to 100. They were also asked to predict the probability of others' returning it. After the subjects made their judgments, it was made certain that they had perceived the status of the stimulus person on the questionnaire. All subjects correctly recalled the description of that person.

The results showed that the subjects who received the "high status" questionnaires thought they would return the dime with an average probability of 94%. They predicted that others would return it with a 71% average probability. The subjects who received the "low status" questionnaires reported they would return the dime with an average probability of 96% and others with a 72% probability. Thus, there was no difference between the two status descriptions in either the subjects' prediction of their own behavior or in the prediction of others' behavior.

Although the subjects in the questionnaire sample differed from those in the field study in age, social class, and sex, it was found that none of these factors affected the results of the field study. The disparity between the results of the questionnaire study and the field study suggests that there should be some caution in extrapolating the results of similar questionnaire studies to actual behavior.

Unlike the laboratory experimenter who deals on his own terms and in his own laboratory with the average college sophomore (5), the field experimenter must deal with the environment as it is. If the research is to remain unobtrusive, the experimenter must adapt his methods to fit reality rather than *vice versa*. However, coming to terms with the environment and the people that inhabit it can have its problems. Passersby do not always respect the right to conduct undisturbed research. For example, we encountered a number of women at Grand Central Station who somewhat interfered with our research. It seems that there are some individuals who earn their livelihood by going from phone booth to phone booth looking for change left by others. The experimenters found it somewhat difficult to explain to these women that they were not to take all our dimes because we were conducting a social psychological experiment in a phone booth in Grand Central Station.

E. SUMMARY

The present study is concerned with the effect of dress of a stimulus person on the honesty of others. Two hundred and six persons were approached in phone booths by a stimulus person and asked if they had found a dime which the stimulus person had left in the booth a few minutes earlier. When the stimulus person was dressed to appear to be of high status, 77% of the subjects returned the dime. However, when he was poorly dressed, only 38% of the subjects returned the dime.

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