

## **BELIEFS VERSUS ACTIONS: ASSESSING ABORTION VIEWS AND BEHAVIORS AT TWO COLLEGES**

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The study assesses discrepancies between people's beliefs and behaviors with regard to abortion. Participants in this research were two college student populations who have strong, but opposite views, about abortion. Both groups were surveyed regarding their beliefs about abortion and a subset of students was subsequently selected and asked to volunteer an hour of their time at a local Crisis Pregnancy or Planned Parenthood Center. The respective reported views did not predict behavior relative to actually assisting at Crisis Pregnancy or at Planned Parenthood. Thus we concluded that while students may hold strong beliefs about issues such as abortion, they are reluctant to take action regarding these reported attitudes.

*Keywords:* beliefs, actions, abortion, college students, pregnancy, parenthood.

In his seminal study, "Attitudes and Actions," LaPiere (1934), through empirical research, introduced for the first time a construct with multiple, rich applications to the social psychology field: that actions are not always consistent with beliefs. In this study, LaPiere addressed the controversial subject of prejudice. Discrimination against Asians was prominent during the 1930s when LaPiere conducted his research. Many businesses were denying service to people of Asian descent, or as LaPiere's study shows, they were only claiming to deny service. LaPiere traveled across the United States with a young Chinese couple, visiting approximately 251 restaurants and hotels. Only one establishment denied the couple service. After their travels, LaPiere wrote to the owners of the restaurants

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and hotels, asking this question: "Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?" Of the 128 responses that he received, 92% said "No", one respondent said "Yes" and the others responded "Uncertain, depends on circumstances." Ironically, the places that claimed they would deny service to Chinese individuals had actually accepted as guests the Chinese couple with whom LaPiere had traveled. LaPiere had identified a discrepancy between people's attitudes and their actual behaviors (Dockery & Bedeian, 1989).

LaPiere had challenged the idea that if social psychologists knew people's attitudes, then they could also predict their behavior and through his findings of discrepancy between beliefs and actions caused uneasiness in the realm of social psychology. If people are unpredictable by attitudes, then by what measure can behavior be predicted? Through decades of follow-up research, the principle of belief-behavior disparity as originally conceptualized by LaPiere became firmly rooted in social psychology literature (Wicker, 1969). Once individuals form social opinions, then their capabilities for distortion of subsequent information is cogent, leading to significant difficulties in apt behavioral prediction (Brownstein, 2003; Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004).

More recently, the attitude - behavior relation has been investigated by Zanna and Fazio (1982) in researching what they call the "Is" question. They ask: "Is there a relationship between attitudes and subsequent behavior?" For a time, this question was the focus of research studies as social psychologists compared attitudes and action. When asking the "Is" question, however, researchers were looking for an answer regarding a one-to-one relationship between attitudes and behavior (Fazio, 1986). Zanna and Fazio suggested that researchers switch from asking "Is" to asking "When." Restated, their question asks: "Under what conditions do which kinds of attitudes held by which types of individuals predict which type of behavior?" (Fazio & Zanna, 1981). Turning the focus from "Is" to "When" allowed for a relationship between attitudes and behavior, but allowed the potential strength and circumstances of the relationship to vary.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1974, 1975) had previously developed a theory they called the model of reasoned action, which furthered understanding of attitudes and action. In this model, they suggest that LaPiere's research had shown that general attitudes could not predict specific behavior. For example, LaPiere did not ask the management if they would serve this particular couple, nor did he ask if the couple would be served when he accompanied them. Fishbein and Ajzen stated that attitudes and behaviors are closely correlated if they have a comparable level of generality of specificity.

Similarly, Newby-Clark, McGregor, and Zanna (2002) reported that attitude-behavior discrepancies are most pronounced when subjects do not value consistency. Perceived loyalty to the attitudes of one's group may also play a moderating role in dividing stated beliefs from measured behaviors (Olson

& Maio, 2003). However, most individuals do not act on automatic belief reasoning when forming attitudes, direct cognition appears to play a deliberate role (Apperly, Riggs, Simpson, Chiavarino, & Samson, 2006). It is likely that this phenomenon holds through the lifespan, including the belief-behavior tendencies among children (Friedman & Leslie, 2004).

Petokova, Ajzen, and Driver (1995) carried out a study in which participants completed an opinion survey addressing the potential for making abortion illegal and were then questioned regarding their willingness to distribute a petition that supported their position. Because of the strong attitudes that abortion evokes, they found this controversial topic to be useful in researching the effect of attitude strength and the relationship between attitude and behavior. Pro-life respondents were found to be significantly more willing to distribute the petition than were those who indicated themselves as pro-choice. The study by Petokova et al. tested Fishbein and Ajzen's theory, by pairing a specific attitude (making abortion illegal) with a specific behavior (distributing petitions, which represent a pro-life or pro-choice position). Their results demonstrated that strong attitudes held with high commitment are more likely to accurately predict behavior. This principle has particular cogency for situations that are real-life, compared to laboratory-contrived situations (Galotti, 2007).

For every issue, there is a differing position or attitude. As aforementioned, Petokova et al. (1995) and Lynn (2006) found abortion to be a topic about which many people have opinions, and they are often very strong ones. However, for every attitude pertaining to abortion, is there a behavior that is consistent with the belief? In their study of abortion activism, Kaysen and Stake (2001) found that many people have opinions, but few actively defend their positions. They investigated the backgrounds of those who took part in abortion activism, and found that full-time students were more likely to be involved. Their involvement was more likely because often pro-choice and pro-life organizations exist on college campuses with opportunities to participate in activism. For members of the general public who do not participate as pro-choice or pro-life activists, there are many opportunities to engage in supporting behaviors, but few actually translate their beliefs into behavior in this area. Kaysen and Stake found that people who held strong opinions used some of their free time for activism.

In summary, social psychology literature clearly has established a longstanding, general principle that beliefs do not always predict behavior (Albarracin & McNatt, 2006). In the present study, we sought to apply this principle for the first time to abortion. Specifically, we used a relatively simple and straightforward design that would address the research question of whether or not student views regarding abortion would aptly predict the behavioral actions that one would expect from respective abortion groups with strongly held views. Based on the literature available for review, we predicted they would not.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Randomly selected groups of 120 undergraduate students at two private Midwest universities were selected to complete a survey. The first (university A) is predominantly a politically conservative, evangelical, comprehensive university. The second (university B) has a reputation for a humanist approach to liberal arts education, and is known as an institution with politically liberal leanings. The former institution had an enrolled student body of 2,700 and the second had 350 on-campus students.

### MATERIALS

A letter requesting students' participation in the study was emailed to university A students and intercampus mailed to students at university B. The survey that was to be completed was attached to the letter. Surveys were anonymous; however, in order to keep track (for tabulation) of those who had completed them, students from university A were asked to enter their student identification numbers and students from university B were asked to write their post office box numbers. A Likert scale was used to measure attitudes toward abortion. The scale ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 9 (*strongly oppose*). Underneath the Likert scale, a box was provided where participants could write any additional comments.

Two thousand seven hundred fliers were then produced for the entire student body of university A, and three hundred and fifty were sent to the students of university B. These fliers indicated that the local crisis pregnancy center (university A students) or Planned Parenthood (university B students) would welcome an hour's help from students assisting with unskilled tasks, such as stuffing envelopes. If students wished to volunteer for this opportunity, they could write their name and number for identification, and return the flier through campus mail.

### PROCEDURE

One hundred and twenty participants were randomly selected from both populations of students and letters were sent to them asking for participation in a survey. University A students were sent emails which contained a link to the online survey. They were then instructed to complete the survey and return it to the researchers. The researchers had a master list of the student identification numbers that had been randomly chosen, but students were assured that their individual replies would be anonymous. Seventy-four students of the 120 replied (62%).

The researchers believed that in order to obtain optimal participation, it was prudent to provide utmost assurance to students that their responses could in no

way be traced back to them, including not tabulating demographic data regarding the participants. Consequently, use was made of a private website where no login information was needed. The result was that we would be able to report group outcomes only, but this trade-off was considered worthwhile, despite not having demographic information regarding the participants.

Additionally, we believed that brevity would be another key variable in obtaining a high response rate. Therefore, our survey comprised only a single question, asking about the subjects' attitude toward abortion. Again, in designing the study, we believed that the benefits obtained by asking the single question (high response rate) would be worth the potential liabilities in a cost-benefit consideration (no demographic information). This principle is true also of the other variable, that is, the request for service, which was reported only in terms of group data.

University B students were also sent an email link; however, the on-campus students did not have easy accessibility to computers. Therefore, both computer and campus mail were utilized in data collection. Practical consideration dictated the difference in sampling procedures (i.e., university B students had access to few campus computers, compared to university A), not philosophical ones. A total of 25 university B students (21%) replied to the surveys sent.

After the surveys were completed, fliers were sent to all 2,700 on-campus students at university A as well as to the entire university B student body (i.e., 350 on-campus students). These fliers advertised a local crisis pregnancy center's (for university A) and Planned Parenthood center's (for university B) need for help doing manual tasks such as stuffing envelopes and requested that students volunteer an hour of their time to help. Interested students could reply by filling out their name and student identification number (for university A) or post office box number (for university B), and returning the replies through campus mail. A total of 41 university A students responded to the flier (1.5%), and 2 university B students responded (0.5%). Identification numbers were compared to the list of those who responded to the initial survey. This was done in order to measure the disparity between student's attitudes toward abortion and their actual behavior when confronted with a real-life situation in which they had the choice to do something supporting a cause they believed in with minimal inconvenience to themselves.

## RESULTS

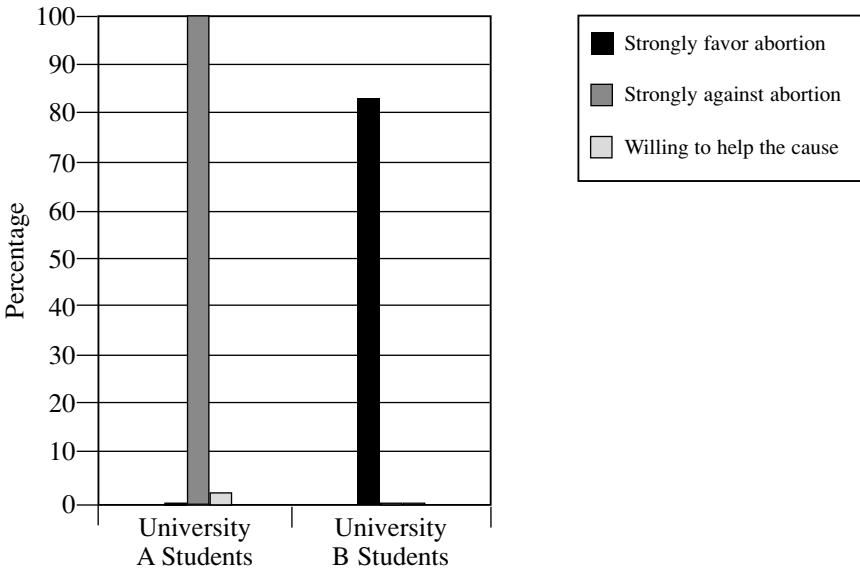
At university A, 74 responses to the email survey were received. Of these, 100% of the students stated they strongly opposed abortion. Of the 41 responses to volunteer time at the Crisis Pregnancy Center, only two were from the group

we had previously surveyed. Thus only 2.4% of the 74 who were initially surveyed responded to the flier.

At university B, 25 responses were received to the survey. Of these, 84% of the students stated that they strongly supported abortion. Of the two responses to volunteer time at Planned Parenthood, none were from the original 25 who stated they strongly support abortion. The results are summarized below in Figure 1.

Consistent with Cumming et al. (2007), statistical comparisons among the groups were not germane for analyzing the study's results. Particularly, differences among the means for the two groups of college students was not the point of the study. Rather, we anticipated finding disparities between how the two groups (university A and university B students) would state their respective beliefs and then consequently act – or not act – on those stated beliefs. No hypotheses were made regarding whether or not there would be differences between university A students and university B students. Figure 1 shows that this difference did, indeed, exist.

Figure 1. Survey Results.



## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that there is a substantial discrepancy between students' stated attitudes and their behavior. In particular, 2.4% of students from university A who said they were strongly against abortion volunteered to spend an hour at the Crisis Pregnancy Center. From university B, none of the students who stated they strongly supported abortion volunteered at Planned Parenthood. In short, a minuscule percentage of the students were willing to support their strongly stated beliefs with their actions. The hypothesis stating that expressed attitudes will not accurately predict subsequent behavior was, therefore, supported by the results of this study.

The attitudes expressed by the students were very general because they were only indicating if they strongly oppose or strongly support abortion. The volunteer forms that the students received were requiring specific tasks. While the form indicated a general activity (generically stated "unskilled tasks"), it did indicate a specific amount of time and a specific locale for providing needed assistance. The present study was designed to assess whether expressed attitudes would or would not accurately predict subsequent behavior. The results showed congruence with Fishbein and Ajzen's theory (1974, 1975), stating that general attitudes do not aptly predict specific behaviors of people.

Obviously, the topic of abortion is a highly loaded one and replete with multiple factors that influence one's beliefs. Kowalski (2003) reports that individuals with similar beliefs often congregate. But rationale for how such persons come to adopt those beliefs may be idiosyncratic at times (Morton, 2006). Regardless of this, the belief that one holds about abortion has so many components loading into the decision that it simply did not show itself to be an adequate predictor regarding subsequent behavior.

Implications for the study's findings are important. Crusaders on both sides of the abortion debate, including feminists (Gibson, 2004), church leaders (Salminen-Karlsson, 2005), and social activists from numerous perspectives (e.g., Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2006; Linders, 2004) seek to accrue converts to their position – eventually taking action for their side and against the other's. Research from the present study suggests it is likely that belief alone is insufficient to mobilize forces en masse – even if that belief is held very strongly. There are other psychological variables that future studies might investigate and that warrant additional research for both sides of this controversial issue.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In future research, the present study should be replicated at other colleges and universities holding similar strong beliefs regarding abortion. To the degree possible, communication mediums should be parallel to the ones used in the

present study. That is, researchers should try to select institutions where either email or campus mail is the normal communication means. In the present study, all university A students had computers in their dormitory rooms (as well as campus accounts) whereas university B students did not have similar computer access for communications. In addition, institutions of similar sizes should be compared, given the disparity of student body sizes at universities A and B. And finally, while the 62% return rate at university A is within a generally accepted range for survey research, the university B return rate of 21% was low. Subsequent researchers should try to obtain higher response rates in order to improve the internal validity of the results obtained from their studies.

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