

CHAPTER 17:

Differences in the Perception of an Authority Figure and a Nonauthority Figure by Navy Recruits¹

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[This] selection shows us a different kind of incidental “training” effect — one that hinges on interpersonal experiences rather than on intensive exposure to facts. In this case, the relationship of the “trainer” to the “trainee” ultimately affects the way the “trainer” (and, hence, people like him) are perceived.

The method used to test for this effect is again taken from the perceptual laboratory. It consists of inducing an optical distortion that generally results in a perceptual distortion — a change in the size and tilt of a person. If this illusion does not materialize (if the observed figure remains unchanged), we can infer that cues are being “manipulated” in a special way. The study shows that cues can be suppressed to prevent a shift in a person who is feared or disliked.

It must be emphasized that the manipulation of sensory information by the brain always occurs within the limits of this information. We cannot “create” what we see (except in hallucinations), nor can we delete or suppress cues. We can merely substitute kinds of information for each other, when we have two or more sets from which to select. In this fashion, data which for most people are assigned a high probability may for some people be replaced by items which most persons might not notice.

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The Navy recruit is introduced into military discipline immediately upon his arrival in boot camp. He is taught that orders given are orders obeyed — the alternative being severe disciplinary action. He rapidly learns to recognize those individuals who represent authority, and he becomes aware of the implications that these authority figures have for his own successful behavior.

In the early phases of training, when the recruit is still relatively unsure of himself, the appropriate visual configuration bearing stripes or bars is often sufficient to provoke fear and anxiety. As recruit training teaches him the appropriate forms of behavior in the appropriate situations, the element of fear is gradually diminished. Yet, seldom is that element completely eliminated. The comforting reliability of being in the presence of one's

¹ The opinions or assertions contained in this article are the private ones of the authors and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Navy Department or the naval service at large.

own peers is invariably preferred to the ever-present uncertainty involved in dealing with authority.

The question then arises: Does this element of fear involved in viewing and being with an authority figure actually influence the perception of that figure? Previous studies in this general area would indicate an affirmative answer. Gilder *et al.* (1) provide evidence which seems to indicate that a threatening figure changes less readily than a non-threatening figure under conditions of induced optical change. Wittreich and Radcliffe (2) have shown that the human figure under the condition of simulated mutilation is less susceptible to induced optical change than the human figure under conditions of normal configuration.

Hence the hypothesis is advanced that under conditions of induced aniseikonic distortion a figure that represents authority is more resistant to perceptual change than a figure that does not represent authority. This hypothesis was tested in a study of Navy recruits.

METHOD

Twenty-four white male Navy recruits in their seventh week of training at the Naval Training Center at Bainbridge, Maryland, served as *Ss*.² The *S* was seated approximately 10 feet from a black backdrop. During the experimental session the *S* was able to view only a single figure standing before the backdrop. Illumination was provided by four 60-watt bulbs mounted in reflectors which were focused on the figure being observed.

Two figures were observed by each *S*: (a) *Authority figure*. The observed individual was dressed in a white enlisted man's uniform. On his left sleeve was the rating badge of a 1st Class Boatswain's Mate and two hash marks. (It should be pointed out that the *Ss* used had 1st Class Petty Officers as their Company Commanders.) (b) *Nonauthority figure*. The observed individual was dressed in a white enlisted man's uniform with the identifying marks of a recruit: canvas leggings or "boots" and the stripes of a Seaman Apprentice. (At Bainbridge all Seaman recruits wear the stripes of a Seaman Apprentice.)

Two different individuals played the roles of the authority and the nonauthority figure. Every effort was made to present these figures as genuine. Within each subsample of 12, one individual played the role of the authority figure 6 times and the nonauthority figure 6 times. The names assigned to the authority figure and to the nonauthority figure remained constant. The two individuals employed were approximately the same size, weight, and body build.

Each figure was viewed by the *S* through aniseikonic lenses in a series of 14 lenses ranging in power from 0.25 per cent to 4.50 per cent. Four series of lens presentations were given for each figure; 2 of the series were ascending, 2 were descending. The *S* attended a single experimental session which lasted approximately 50 minutes. The observed individual was visible to the *S* only during the actual presentation of each single lens power. After a lens

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had been inserted into the viewing apparatus, the *S* pressed a button which illuminated the figure standing in front of the backdrop. He then observed that figure for a period of 25 seconds, at which time an electronic timer shut off the light. Following each lens presentation the *S* reported the appearance of the observed individual for that particular lens presentation.

The *E* gave the following specific instructions: "Each time the light goes on you are to observe the appearance of the individual in the room as closely as possible. After the light goes off, I want you to tell me what he looked like when the light was on. If he looks the same as usual, I want you to tell me that. If he appeared to be changed in any way whatsoever, I want you to tell me that. I also want you to tell me in what way he changed. Now he may change in a number of ways. He may change in size; he may appear to tilt forward or backwards; he may change in his distance from you; he may change in specific parts of his body. Any one or a combination of these changes may occur. In any event, please tell me after each lens presentation what his appearance was while the light was on."

The *E* recorded the point on the optical scale (lenses numbered 1 through 14) at which distortion of the observed individual was first reported when the series was ascending, or the point at which distortion was no longer reported if the series was descending. The starting point for any particular ascending or descending series was varied within conditions, but equated between conditions. Also, the order of presentation of the authority and the nonauthority figure, as well as the order of presentation of the ascending and descending series, was balanced within each subsample of 12 *Ss* so as to cancel out any possible effects due to order of presentation.

RESULTS

For the total sample of 24 *Ss*, the mean threshold for distortion for the Boatswain's Mate was 3.28 (*SD* 2.29); for the Seaman Apprentice 2.16 (*SD* 1.32). For 22 of the 24 *Ss*, the threshold for distortion was higher for Boatswain's Mate than Seaman Apprentice. By sign test, this gives a two-tailed *p* value of less than .0001.

SUMMARY

As predicted from previous work on fear-evoking objects and resistance to perceptual distortion, Navy recruits viewing persons through aniseikonic lenses showed higher distortion thresholds when viewing an authority figure than when viewing a nonauthority figure.

REFERENCES

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