

NOT PRACTICING WHAT YOU PREACH

LaPiere, R. T. (1934). Attitudes and actions. *Social Forces*, 13, 230-237.

Stanford psychologist Richard LaPiere's 1934 study may have generated more subsequent research projects in the history of psychology than any other research presented in this book. It was a study about social attitudes—the attitudes you hold about other people or groups of people. It is logical to think that a person's attitude about an attitude object (either a person or a thing) will influence that person's behavior toward the object. If you tell me your attitude toward brussels sprouts is one of hate and disgust, I would predict that when faced with those little green vegetables, you will very likely refuse to eat them. And I would probably be correct.

In the early years of psychological science, there was an untested assumption that this correspondence between attitude and behavior was generally true, whether the subject of the attitude was vegetable preferences or opinions regarding other people (social attitudes). Consequently, it was quite common for psychologists and sociologists to measure attitudes through the use of questionnaires, and then assume that the measured attitude would be reflected in future behavior when the attitude object is actually encountered.

LaPiere questioned this assumption, particularly as it pertained to social attitudes. To illustrate his criticism, he used the example of a researcher asking American men the question, "Would you get up to give an Armenian woman your seat in a streetcar?" (Remember, this article was published in 1934!) Whatever the answer, LaPiere explained, the response would only be a symbolic (or hypothetical) response to a symbolic situation, and would not necessarily predict what a man would actually do if faced with a real Armenian woman on a real crowded streetcar. Even so, most researchers would, according to LaPiere, be quite willing to suggest that they could predict the respondents' actual behavior from the symbolic attitude as measured by the answer to the hypothetical question. Not only that, but the same researchers might even draw conclusions about the overall relationship between Americans and Armenians based on the same data. LaPiere argued that the assumption researchers were making of a direct correspondence between symbolic behavior (responses on questionnaires) and real behavior was far too simple, unwarranted, and probably wrong.

Throughout the following discussion of LaPiere's famous study, it is important to keep in mind that in the 1930s, there was a great deal of racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination in American society. This is not to say that such attitudes do not exist today, but 60 years ago discriminatory practices were generally more widespread, blatant, and accepted. For example, it was a common practice for hotels and restaurants to have policies refusing service to members of certain racial or ethnic groups. LaPiere decided to capitalize on such discriminatory policies to test his idea that spoken attitudes are often poor predictors of actual behavior.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

During 1930 and 1931, LaPiere traveled extensively with a young Chinese student and his wife. "Both were personable, charming, quick to win the admiration and respect of those with whom they had the opportunity to become intimate" (p. 231). There was in the United States then a great deal of prejudice and discrimination toward anyone of Asian descent. Because of this, LaPiere reported feeling quite apprehensive when, early in their trip, the three of them approached the clerk in the best hotel "in a small town noted for its narrow and bigoted attitude toward Orientals" (p. 231). So he was surprised when they all were immediately and politely accommodated. LaPiere went on to explain, "Two months later I passed that way again, phoned the hotel, and asked if they would accommodate 'an important Chinese gentleman.' The reply was an unequivocal 'No.' That aroused my curiosity and led to this study" (p. 232).

The theory implied in LaPiere's study was that, contrary to prevailing beliefs, people's *social actions* track very poorly with their spoken social attitudes. In other words, what people say is often not what they do.

METHOD

This study was conducted in two distinctly separate parts. The first part focused on actual behavior, while the second assessed related symbolic attitudes.

Real Behavior Phase

LaPiere and his Chinese friends traveled by car twice across the United States, as well as up and down the full length of the Pacific Coast. Their journey totaled approximately 10,000 miles. From a careful examination of LaPiere's article, it appears that his research on attitudes was not the purpose of the trip, but rather was coincidental. For one thing, LaPiere did not inform the Chinese couple that he was making careful observations

of the treatment they received wherever they went. His justification for this was that had they known, they might have become self-conscious and altered their behavior in some way that would have made the study less valid.

Between 1930 and 1933, the travelers approached 67 hotels, auto camps, and tourist homes (whatever those were) for accommodations. They ate at 184 restaurants and cafes. LaPiere kept detailed records of the responses of hotel clerks, bell boys, elevator operators, and waitresses to the presence of the Chinese couple. So that reactions would not be unduly altered because of his presence, LaPiere often let the Chinese couple secure the room or other accommodations while he took care of the luggage, and whenever possible he allowed them to enter restaurants before him. The treatment the Chinese couple received are discussed in detail shortly.

Symbolic Behavior Phase

In the second part of the study, LaPiere mailed questionnaires to all of the establishments they had visited. He allowed six months to pass between the actual visit and the mailing of the questionnaire. His reason for this delay was to allow the effect of the Chinese couple's visit to fade.

The question of primary interest on the questionnaire was, "Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?" These questionnaires were returned by 81 of the restaurants and cafes and 47 of the lodging establishments. This was a response rate of 51 %.

To ensure that the questionnaire responses were not directly influenced by the Chinese couple's visit, LaPiere also obtained responses to the same questionnaire from 32 hotels and 96 restaurants located in the same regions of the country, but not visited by the travelers.

So, after nearly three years, LaPiere had the data necessary to make a comparison of social attitudes with social behavior.

RESULTS

LaPiere reported that of the 251 hotels and restaurants they patronized on their travels, there was only one instance in which they were denied service because of the ethnicity of his companions. This single rejection, in a small California town, was described by LaPiere as occurring at a *rather inferior auto camp*. The proprietor came toward the car and upon seeing the occupants said, "No. I don't take laps!" This ugly experience aside, most of their other experiences involved average or even above-average treatment, although at times the treatment was altered due to *curiosity* about the Chinese couple. LaPiere explained that in 1930, outside the Pacific Coast region, Chicago, and New York, most people in the United States had little experience with, and perhaps had never even seen, people of Asian heritage. Table 1 summarizes LaPiere's ratings of the service they received. As you can see, in all but a very few establishments, the service they received was rated by LaPiere to be the same as or better than what he would have expected if he had been traveling alone.

TABLE 1 LaPiere's Ratings of Service Received

QUALITY OF RECEPTION	LODGINGS	RESTAURANTS AND CAFÉS
Very much better than expected if investigator had been alone	25	72
Good, but different because of increased curiosity	25	82
Equal to normal expectations	11	24
Perceptibly hesitant for racial reasons	4	5
Definitely, but temporarily, embarrassing	1	1
Not accepted	1	0
Total	67	184

(Adapted from p. 235.)

The responses to the questionnaires mailed to the establishments six months later and those mailed to the places not visited are summarized in Table 2. Nearly all (over 90%) of the hotels, campgrounds, tourist homes, restaurants, and cafes visited by LaPiere and the Chinese couple replied that they would not serve Chinese individuals! In addition, the distribution of responses from the establishments not visited were virtually the same, indicating that the findings were not somehow caused by the travelers' recent visit. On the contrary, the one "Yes" response to the questionnaire came from the manager of a small auto camp who enclosed a "chatty letter describing the nice visit she had had with a Chinese gentleman and his sweet wife during the previous summer" (p. 234).

TABLE 2 Number of Questionnaire Responses to Question: "Will You Accept Members of the Chinese Race as Guests in Your Establishment?"

ANSWER	LODGINGS VISITED	RESTAURANTS VISITED	LODGINGS NOT VISITED	RESTAURANTS NOT VISITED
No	43	75	30	76
Undecided, depends on circumstances	3	6	2	7
Yes	1	0	0	1

(Adapted from p. 234.)

DISCUSSION

LaPiere's discussion of his findings focused on the lack of validity of questionnaires in determining a person's true attitude. He contended that "it is impossible to make direct comparisons between the reactions secured through questionnaires and from actual experience" (p. 234). He pointed out that if a Chinese person were to consult the findings of the questionnaire prior to setting out on a tour of the United States (in 1930), he would undoubtedly decide to stay home! However, LaPiere's friends enjoyed an almost discrimination-free trip and became increasingly confident about approaching new social situations without fear of rejection or embarrassment.

So was LaPiere suggesting that we eliminate the use of questionnaires altogether? No. He suggested that such data might be useful in determining people's symbolic attitudes about issues that would remain symbolic. For example, he allowed that questionnaires could measure political attitudes, but this information would provide little information about how people will vote or behave if they meet a candidate on the street or at a party. Another example of an acceptable use of questionnaire data was the measurement of religious attitudes. LaPiere pointed out that "an honest answer to the question 'Do you believe in God?' reveals all there is to be measured. 'God' is a symbol; 'belief,' a verbal expression" (p. 235).

His conclusion was that if you want to predict how someone will behave when actually faced with a certain situation or another person, a verbal reaction to a symbolic situation (i.e., an attitude questionnaire) is wholly inadequate. He contended that social attitudes can only be reliably measured by studying human behavior in actual social situations. His article ended with what might be interpreted as a warning to other researchers:

The questionnaire is cheap, easy, and mechanical. The study of human behavior is time-consuming, intellectually fatiguing, and depends for its success on the ability of the investigator. The former method gives quantitative results, the latter mainly qualitative ... Yet it would seem far more worthwhile to make a shrewd guess regarding that which is essential than to accurately measure that which is likely to prove quite irrelevant. (p. 237)

CRITICISMS, SUBSEQUENT RESEARCH, AND RECENT APPLICATIONS

Psychologists reacted to LaPiere's findings almost as an athlete would react to being challenged to a competition. A great deal of research was generated, and this response took three directions. First, some leveled several strong criticisms at LaPiere's methods and findings. Second, researchers set about trying to determine why attitude assessments fail to predict actual behavior. And third, behavioral scientists have attempted to determine the conditions under which attitude measurements will reliably predict behavior.

LaPiere's methods were criticized on the basis that a simple yes-no answer to a question in a letter is not a valid measurement of a person's attitude regarding a specific group of people. For example, the image of "members of the Chinese race" in the minds of the respondents may have been very different from the Chinese couple they actually encountered. Another criticism was suggested that only half of the places the three travelers visited responded to the questionnaire. The critics contend it is possible that those who took the time to respond may have been the ones with the strongest prejudicial attitudes against Asians. Finally, after six months, the person responding to the letter may not have been the same person who met the travelers face to face.

However, nearly 40 years after LaPiere's findings, a review of the attitude-behavior research that had accumulated over the years concluded that the correlation between measured attitudes and actual behavior was indeed weak and perhaps nonexistent (Wicker, 1971). Some researchers have focused their attention on trying to

determine why this inconsistency exists and they have proposed a variety of reasons (see Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, for a complete discussion). A few of these are discussed here.

First, you have many attitudes and some may compete with each other. Which attitude will exert the most influence on your behavior depends on the specifics of the situation. Second, there are times when you might behave in ways that are contrary to your attitudes because you have no alternative, such as situations in which your job or a friendship depends on a certain action. Third, social pressures and the human desire to avoid embarrassment can exert strong influences that may produce behaviors that are inconsistent with attitudes.

So this question remained: When, if ever, will attitude measurements be successful in predicting behavior? Recently, there has been a major research effort to identify the factors that produce greater consistency between attitudes and behavior. These factors can be summarized into the following five categories (see Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2002):

1. *Strength of the attitude.* The stronger you feel toward certain people or situations, the more likely you are to behave accordingly when you encounter them in person. On the other hand, weak or ambivalent attitudes may exert little or no influence on your behavior.
2. *Stability of the attitude.* This factor deals with how your attitudes change over time. Attitudes that are stable, predict behavior better than those that change with time. Ideally, for an accurate attitude-behavior connection researchers should measure both at nearly the same time.
3. *Relevance of attitude to the behavior.* Some early studies asked people if they believed in God, and then tried to use their answers to predict their attendance in church. It didn't work. If you measure someone's attitude about sports, it is likely to be a poor predictor of how often they attend athletic events. This implies that attitudes will predict behavior much better if the attitude measured relates *exactly* to the behavior of interest. To demonstrate this, one study asked a group of college women about their attitudes toward birth control and asked another similar group about their attitudes toward using birth control pills during the next two years. The correlation between the measured attitude and actual use of birth control pills during the following two years was .08 (nonsignificant) for the first group, but .57 (highly significant) for the specific attitude group (Davidson & Jaccard, 1979).
4. *Salience of the attitude.* If an attitude you hold toward something or someone is salient, it is conspicuous, important, and readily accessed from your memory. The more salient the attitude, the more likely it will predict your behavior. Suppose you have a positive attitude about the act of donating blood. If a friend or family member has recently had surgery that required a lot of blood, your attitude about giving blood is probably much more salient than usual. Under these circumstances, you are more likely to give blood than at other times, even though the attitude itself did not change.
5. *Situational pressures.* Sometimes the external pressures that exist in a particular situation are so strong that your internal attitude will have little effect on your behavior. For example, imagine a new stop sign has recently been installed at a corner near your home. The street usually has little traffic, and you believe the sign is an unnecessary nuisance, so you usually just roll right through it. This week, however, a police car is parked at that corner every day. Suddenly, your internal attitude toward the sign loses all its power and your behavior falls under the influence of the situation: you come to a full stop. Can you see how this concept could explain LaPiere's findings? When the various proprietors in the study were face-to-face with a nicely dressed couple asking for food or lodging, the situational pressures to accommodate them were very strong and may have prevailed over their internal racist attitudes.

LaPiere's research of more than 70 years ago continues to be cited in 3i studies of attitude-behavior connections and prejudice and discrimination. One ambitious study examined the extent to which the discrimination toward Chinese Americans experienced by the couple in LaPiere's study has changed in the decades years since its publication (Goto, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2002). In interviews with over 1,500 Chinese Americans, participants were asked about unfair treatment they had received due to race, ethnicity, language, or accent. "Nearly 21 % of the participants reported being unfairly treated in their lifetime Retention of cultural practices, age at immigration, and contact opportunity were associated with racial discrimination" (p. 211). *Contact opportunity*, the amount of contact between those of various races, was inversely related to discrimination; that is, direct contact *reduced* discrimination based on race as well as on language and accent. You can see from

these findings that when people have greater opportunity for interaction with people of other racial and ethnic groups, stereotyping and discrimination may be reduced. This has become known as the *contact hypothesis* (Guttek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990).

A new word related to attitude-behavior research has crept into the American English vocabulary over the past 10 years or so: NIMBY. This is an acronym for *not in my backyard*. The context in which the NIMBY concept usually appears is when an event, a project, or an environmental change of some sort is under consideration. Often the issue receives widespread support, and many people agree that the project will serve the public good. However, when it appears that such an undertaking may affect them personally, they become emphatically opposed to it. In other words, "It's a great idea, *but not in my backyard!*" A frequent example of the NIMBY attitude-behavior discrepancy relates to nuclear waste dumps. Most people agree that such radioactive waste should be disposed of safely in sealed underground storage facilities. However, just try to find a place where the local residents will allow such a facility to be built. NIMBY! This concept has broad applications for psychological services and public health initiatives. A study by Zsombok, Hammer, and Rojahn (1999), called "Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is," cited LaPiere's early work in assessing the attitudes of residents to a proposal to open a group home for mentally retarded individuals in the neighborhood. Some residents responded to a survey in which they expressed agreement with the need for such facilities. Other, however, were asked to sign a petition in favor of opening such a facility nearby. You've already guessed the results, haven't you? The correlation between the two measures was very low, demonstrating that the survey did a very poor job of predicting the petition responses.

CONCLUSION

The research on attitudes and behavior constitutes a huge body of literature, of which only a minuscule sample has been included here. Behavioral scientists may never unravel all the complexities of this relationship, but the research continues. As theories and methods have been refined and perfected over the years, evidence has increased to suggest that our attitudes do play an important role in determining our behavior. It is no longer a question of whether attitudes predict behavior, but exactly how and when they do so. Most importantly, in the present context, is that the beginning of all this interest in the attitude-behavior connection rests largely on a single study by LaPiere, more than 70 years ago.

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