

LIKE STATUS SELLS: A FIELD TEST OF BELIEF-CONGRUENCE

PAUL N. HAMID and PAUL A. STRINGFIELD

University of Waikato

The sales of 53 life insurance salesmen of six occupational group backgrounds were compared when selling to clients of the same six occupational backgrounds. Strong support for the belief-congruence theory was obtained with salesmen selling predominantly to clients of their own or lower occupational status. Further, for four of the six occupational groups salesmen sold significantly more insurance to their own client status group than salesmen of the other occupational groups. The limitations and implications of the study for belief-congruence theory and the prediction of selling performance are discussed.

It is well established in studies of interpersonal attraction that if people hold similar beliefs they tend to like each other more than if their beliefs are dissimilar (Rokeach and Mezei, 1966; Berschied and Walster, 1969; Byrne, 1969). This principle is behind such common adages as "birds of a feather, flock together" and "likes attract." Rokeach (1960) has shown that interpersonal attraction is a positive linear function of the proportion of attitude statements attributed to an individual which is in agreement with the attitudes of the subject. This finding forms the basis of the model of belief-congruence for which Rokeach and Rotham (1966) assert "that we tend to value a given belief subsystem or systems of beliefs in proportion to their degrees of congruence with our own belief system, and, further that we tend to value people in proportion to the degree to which they exhibit beliefs, belief subsystems, or a system of belief congruent with our own." For these writers a belief system represents the total universe of a person's belief about the physical world, the social world, and self. Given two beliefs or subsystems of belief equal in importance, the one more similar to our own is more congruent.

Much of the research stemming from the belief-congruence hypothesis has dealt with racial beliefs and more particularly racial beliefs in college sophomore subjects (Byrne and Wong, 1963; Byrne and Nelson, 1965). There are recent studies, however, that have generalised the hypothesis beyond campus samples. Byrne, Griffitt, Hudgins and Reeves (1969) found support for belief-congruence in populations as different as schizophrenics, alcoholics, and surgical patients. Brislin (1971) found through both sociometric and behavioural indices that similarity of beliefs predicted friendship choice regardless of country of origin. Subjects were from a school of residence at the University of Guam which included Pacific Islanders from the Phillipines, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Ponape, Saipan, Truk, and Yap. It seems, therefore, that belief-congruence has considerable generality beyond a laboratory setting.

It was the intention of the present study firstly to test the hypothesis in a field study with naturally occurring data, i.e. without experimental control. Secondly, an attempt was made to test the hypothesis in a situation where its occurrence has considerable applied value.

Behind the belief-congruence hypothesis is the assumption that if two people hold similar positions on a value, attitude, belief, or opinion, then not only are they more likely to be attracted towards each other but also they are more likely to influence one another. A shared social reality provides mutual support and it is more pleasant to feel that we have objective and correct views of the world (Festinger 1954). Of course, the more central the value, attitude, belief, or opinion is to one's life the more likely belief-congruence will be influential. It was decided, therefore, to use the field of life assurance selling. Obviously, values and attitudes relating to death are of extreme importance to the individual and similarity between a salesman's values and attitudes towards life and death and those of his client is likely to be a significant factor in "making a sale." Occupational status was used as the basis of the belief-congruence measure with the assumption that salesmen from the same occupational background as their client have more in common with them, including similar education, economic standing, types of friends, and interests, and are therefore more likely to sell to them.

In the field of life assurance selling in New Zealand, agents are supposedly selling to a free market. There is no restriction as to the age, the type of person, or the social class of client he should sell to. He is left to find his own selling strengths. Most life assurance salesmen have held other jobs before moving into the job of insurance selling. This means that salesmen are drawn from a wide range of occupational groups each of which involves different ideas, attitudes, and values associated with the role behaviours they demand. If the belief-congruence hypothesis were to hold then it should be possible to show that commercially successful salesmen sell predominantly to occupational groups similar in thought, language, and attitude to themselves. For example, to sell life policies to a wharf worker the salesman must hold similar attitudes or at least, be seen to hold similar attitudes, to have the same kind of social link, and use a common language (slang) with his client if he is to be influential. A salesman from the same occupational background as his client is going to have more in common and is more likely, apart from selling technique, to sell his product.

It was predicted, therefore, that salesmen with a particular occupational background will sell significantly more in that group than salesmen from other occupational backgrounds.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 53 life assurance salesmen who constituted 65 per cent of the salesmen throughout New Zealand in one insurance company. The age of the subjects ranged from 23 to 53 years. The other

35 percent was excluded because either they could not be classified into the six occupational groups used, or they were salesmen who had sold over 70 percent of their insurance to a miscellaneous group and were considered uncharacteristic sellers.

Procedure

The total value of life insurance sales made by each salesman during 1969 was obtained. The buyers of life insurance were classified according to the Congalton and Havighurst (1954) major occupational groups and the sales each salesman had made were calculated for each of six occupational groups. With regards to the occupational categories used, several minor modifications to the Congalton and Havighurst scheme were made. The group 'farmers' was not considered because insufficient sales were made to this group to warrant statistical analysis. Further, semi-skilled clients could not be considered for although there were adequate sales to this group only one salesman came from this background. Housewives and other client classes which cannot be classified in terms of the major occupational groups were also excluded from the study. The category of sales and office workers was divided into two separate groups because many of the salesmen were from sale backgrounds and there were sufficient numbers of them to warrant a separate category. Thus in this study six major occupational groups were considered. In order of status position they were, Professionals, Managers, Clerks, Salesmen, Skilled Workers and Unskilled Workers.

Fifteen subjects were classified as Salesmen having been in the job for 10 or more years. All other subjects were classified on the basis of jobs previously held.

Validation of Occupation Categories

As several changes had been implemented in the Congalton and Havighurst (1954) scale it was necessary to validate the classification scheme in terms of status rank. Three specific job types were drawn at random from each of five categories used by Congalton and Havighurst plus the new category of Salesmen. These were printed on 3 x 5 cards, there being 18 job labels in all. Ten graduate students in psychology at the University of Waikato were each asked to sort the cards into six piles of three according to similarity of job and to put these six piles in order of status. After sorting the cards the judges checked their classification and were asked to make any adjustments they felt necessary. The judges' sortings of specific jobs to status rank were not significantly different from each other (chi square) and the sum of the ranked scores across judges for the occupational status categories conformed entirely to the original status rank positions of Professional, Managerial, Clerical, Sales, Skilled, Unskilled, in order from high to low status rank. It was concluded that the occupational categories represented a valid status hierarchy.

RESULTS

Sales figures within each client group were ranked from lowest to highest. The Mann-Whitney U Test was used to test if there was

any significant difference, for example, between salesmen from a Professional background selling to Professional clients as compared with salesmen from other backgrounds selling to Professional clients. The results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Z Values for differences between occupational client groups

Client Occupational Group	Between Salesman Group Z	Differences P
Professional	2.93	.0017
Managers	No result calculated	
Clerks	2.19	.0145
Sales	1.06	.1635*
Skilled	4.23	.00003
Unskilled	1.75	.0401

*Not significant

The hypothesis that salesmen from a particular occupational background will sell more to clients of their background than will salesmen from other occupational backgrounds was confirmed at the .05 level or better for all groups except the Manager and Sales groups. The results for the Managerial group could not be tested as no salesmen from that group sold to Managers. The result for the Sales group was not significant.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of total sales to each client group for each salesman group. All salesmen clearly sold most to the Unskilled Worker group, but approximately 40 percent of the labour force in New Zealand belongs in this group. The results for the Professional Skilled, and Unskilled Salesmen groups clearly support the prediction that all will sell more to their own client group than to any other. Managers made no sales to their own group. Perhaps Managers are experienced in business and tend to maximise gains by concentrating their efforts on the larger market available to them in the lower status categories. The Sales and Clerical groups also did not sell much to their own groups. Both preferred to spread their clientele across all categories, though like the Managers, the Sales group showed a distinct preference for the larger market.

DISCUSSION

The contention that "like status sells" is evident in the present study and supports the belief-congruence theory. When considering differences between groups it was found that similar occupational status produced maximum sales to a group in four of the five salesman-occupational cases tested. Salesmen of Managerial background did not sell more to their own group. But Managers are near the top of the occupational scale and represent 5 percent of the total work force. Therefore, selling to lower status groups is the predominant response of this group.

For the occupational group of Salesmen, where most are skilled in the art of selling insurance, clients of sales backgrounds are also skilled sellers and are likely to be aware of the selling techniques used. The subsequent lower likelihood of being convinced by a life assurance salesman's technique will make them poor targets. Also, as with the Managerial group it would be intelligent selling practice to concentrate on a more available market, that is to lower social-economic groups, where a greater insurance demand is more likely. That is indeed what appeared to occur in the present study. The salesman group may have seen the labour class as the group of the greatest sales potential and, therefore, sold 46.35 percent of their total insurance to this group with almost identical percentages of sales to all other groups. However, all salesman groups made most sales to the Unskilled Workers, who constitute approximately 40 percent of the workforce and therefore, with regards to possible sales strategies, any interpretation must be taken with caution.

It was found that salesmen holding a particular occupational rank will sell significantly more below this rank than above. A probable reason for this is that salesmen will have had more social contact with classes below them than above them. For example, the probability of a salesman having a reasonable amount of contact with an unskilled worker must be high since they comprise 40 percent of the workforce. This being the case salesmen should feel less inhibited selling to clients of lower occupational rank than clients of higher occupational rank.

It is evident from the body of research in the area of interpersonal attraction, e.g. Newcomb (1956), Byrne and Wong (1962), Byrne and Nelson (1965), that individuals with similar attitudes tend to be attracted to each other. Furthermore, as individuals get to know one another, mutual liking tends to grow stronger among individuals with similar attitudes and beliefs. The implication is that a salesman of the same background as his client is going to have an advantage over salesmen from other occupational groups when it comes to selling. He will have more interests and values in common with his client and this would be advantageous when trying to persuade a client to buy life assurance.

Much of the research on belief-congruence has been concerned with prejudice. Rokeach, Smith and Evans (1960) contend that the prejudiced person does not reject a person of another race, religion or nationality because of his ethnic membership, but rather because he perceives that the other differs from him in beliefs and values. The results of the present study offer support for this finding.

An interesting question is whether belief-congruence would apply to other types of salesmen, for example, commercial travellers and encyclopedia salesmen. It is possible that the theory holds only where very important values are concerned. Age and personality may be other criteria for congruence. Similarly, after many years of selling to different occupational classes a belief-congruence theory may no longer be effective because a salesman will recognise the values and beliefs of

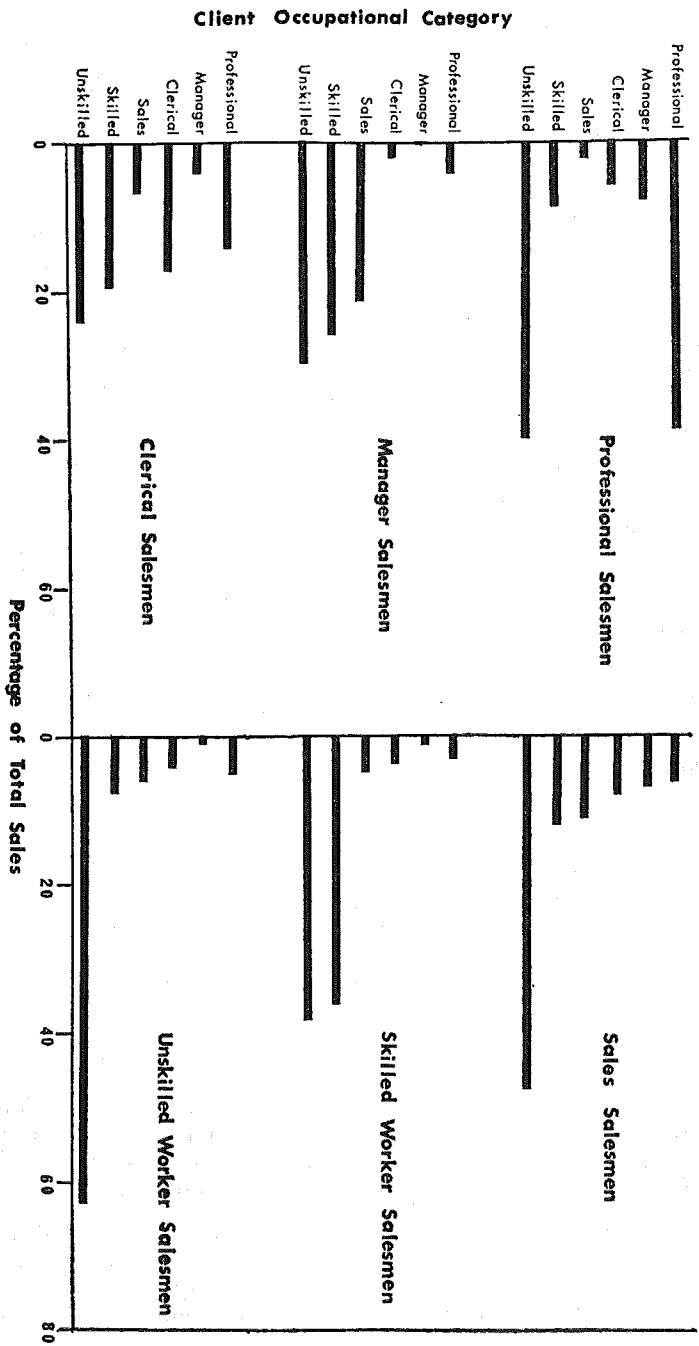


Figure 1. Percentage of total sales for salesmen of six occupational backgrounds to clients of the same occupational backgrounds.

different occupational groups, using a repertoire of responses appropriate for each group.

REFERENCES

- Berscheid, E. and Walster, E. H. *Interpersonal attraction*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1969.
- Brislin, R. W. Interaction among members of nine ethnic groups and belief-similarity hypothesis. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1971, 85, 171-179.
- Byrne, D. Attitudes and attraction. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 4. New York: Academic Press, 1969.
- Byrne, D., Griffitt, W., Hudgins, W., and Reeves, K. Attitude similarity-dissimilarity and attraction: Generality beyond the college sophomore. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1969, 79, 155-161.
- Byrne, D. and Nelson, D. Attraction as a linear function of proportion of positive reinforcements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, 1, 659-663.
- Byrne, D. and Wong, T. J. Racial prejudice, interpersonal attraction and assumed dissimilarity of attitudes. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1962, 65, 246-253.
- Caplow, T. *The sociology of work*. Illinois University of Minnesota Press, 1954.
- Congalton, A. A. and Havighurst, R. J. Status ranking of occupations in New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 1954, 6, 10-16.
- Festinger, L. A theory of social comparison process. *Human Relations*, 1954, 7, 117-140.
- Newcomb, T. M. The prediction of interpersonal attraction. *American Psychologist*, 1956, 11, 575-568.
- New Zealand official yearbook* (1970). Department of Statistics, Wellington, New Zealand, 1970.
- Rokeach, M. *The open and closed mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1960.
- Rokeach, M. and Mezei, L. Race and shared belief as factors in social choice. *Science*, 1966, 151, 167-172.
- Rokeach, M. and Rothman, G. The principle of belief-congruence and the congruity principle as models of cognitive interaction. *Psychological Review*, 1965, 72, 128-142.
- Rokeach, M., Smith, P. W. and Evans, R. I. Two kinds of prejudice or one? In M. Rokeach (Ed.), *The open and closed mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1960.