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Aubrey Immelman

St. John's University / College of St. Benedict, aimmelman@csbsju.edu

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Attitude-Behavior Correspondence? Why Susan Smith Was Spared

Aubrey Immelman
Department of Psychology
St. John's University / College of St. Benedict
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In its August 7, 1995 issue, *Newsweek* magazine pondered the question, Why does America support capital punishment yet puts so few people to death? The article points out that it took the jury in the Susan Smith trial no longer to reach a unanimous verdict of life in prison than it took that same jury to render its swift and certain guilty verdict.

Common sense would dictate that a jury so convinced of a defendant's guilt in a capital offense as heinous as that of Smith would somewhat show less unanimity and more protraction in its sentencing deliberations than reflected in the seemingly uncontested outcome of the trial. After all, a *Newsweek* opinion poll the week of the verdict showed 63 percent of Americans in favor of the death penalty for Susan Smith. Of course, the Smith jury cannot be regarded as a representative cross-section of the population of adult Americans; nonetheless, one may assume that the prosecution (which sought the death penalty) would have excluded from jury selection those individuals in principle opposed to capital punishment. Granted, hindsight is 20/20, yet in retrospect the Smith verdict is not all that surprising; not surprising, that is, in view of well-established scientific knowledge concerning the uncertain relationship between verbal reports of attitudes and their corresponding real-life behavior.

In the early days of psychology, social scientists frequently took it for granted that people's behavior could be predicted simply by measuring their attitudes and opinions. This belief was drastically challenged by a landmark study published in 1934 by researcher Richard LaPiere in the journal *Social Forces*. LaPiere described how, for two years starting in 1930, he traveled extensively throughout the United States with a Chinese couple. He reported that they were received at 66 overnight lodgings and served in 184 eating establishments during their travels, only once being denied service — by a proprietor who said he did not provide accommodation for “Orientals.” However, when LaPiere sent out questionnaires 6 months later asking each of the 250 establishments that served them whether they would accept Chinese guests, only one of the 128 respondents replied that they would!

LaPiere's findings are echoed more than half-a-century later by *Newsweek* in its assessment that “Americans seem guilty of vast hypocrisy. ... Citizens support the death penalty in general, but frequently refuse to apply it when, as in the Susan Smith trial, they are confronted with a face, a name and human frailties that ... bear at least some resemblance to their own.” To which one might add: especially when it's the face of a woman — a mother who fits none of our collective stereotypes of cold-blooded killers.

Subsequent studies have borne out LaPiere's finding that prior verbal report is frequently a poor predictor of actual human behavior. One of those investigations, dealing with the more mundane issue of the environmental problem of littering, established, as did LaPiere, that the manifest behaviors of humans are frequently diametrically opposed to their expressed attitudes.

In this study, published in 1972 in the *Journal of Social Psychology*, psychologist Leonard Bickman reported that he and his students placed crumpled newspaper several feet from a trash receptacle directly in the path of pedestrians. The choice was clear: walk over or around the litter, or pick it up and deposit it in the adjacent trashcan. Pedestrians were stopped and interviewed 10 feet beyond the litter and asked, “Should it be everyone’s responsibility to pick up litter when they see it or should it be left to people whose job it is to pick it up?” Although 94 percent of subjects answered that it was everyone’s responsibility, a mere 1.4 percent actually behaved in accordance with their stated belief by stopping to pick up the litter!

This does not, of course, mean that people *typically* behave in a counterattitudinal fashion; it has been established, for example, that people generally vote for their preferred candidate in presidential elections. Accordingly, social psychologists have conducted investigations to identify the circumstances under which attitudes do, in fact, guide behaviors. Among the findings: behavior will be consistent with attitudes *when the attitude is particularly strong and when social norms relevant to the situation favor expression of the attitude*.

How, then, do these findings inform the Susan Smith verdict? First, the attitudes of individuals favoring capital punishment tend not to be potent, well-informed, important positions central to their belief systems; and second, the social norms implicit in the Susan Smith situation militated strongly against the imposition of the death penalty.

What, then, might these social norms be? Apparently, that one does not execute someone with a history of personal tragedy, emotional difficulty, and sexual exploitation who, moreover, is a woman and — ironically — a mother. *Newsweek* missed the point when it accused Americans of “vast hypocrisy”; the inconsistency forming the basis for its observation is simply a reflection of basic human nature.

In the end, just as Richard LaPiere’s Chinese traveling companions were not turned away by attitudinally bigoted hosts in face-to-face transactions with the objects of their prejudice, so the Smith jury simply could not contemplate exacting the ultimate price when confronted with the multifaceted reality of the countenance of a killer.

Note. This article was originally published as “Views, actions don’t always match” in the *St. Cloud Times*, August 20, 1995, p. 9A.