

**An Example of Consumeristic Social Psychology:  
Bargaining Tough in the New Car Showroom**

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Recent discontent within scientific psychology, especially social psychology, was discussed and found to be caused, at least in part, by a widespread perception among psychologists that the discipline has failed to act with social responsibility in researching and reducing areas of social concern. One such area of concern, consumer welfare, was examined. Social psychology's contribution was seen to be biased against the individual consumer for reasons that are primarily methodological rather than ideological. A study was conducted as an example of how social psychological theory and research could be directly and positively applied to the issue of consumer welfare. Procedures derived from aspiration level theory were employed in new car bargaining interactions set in the field. Results indicated that a consumer could realize substantial savings on the price of a desired automobile by taking a tough bargaining stance in prior negotiations with the salesperson. In addition to their practical value, the results also provided evidence for the external validity of earlier, laboratory work. Some implications for a socially responsible social psychology of consumer issues are discussed.

In a recent article (Jacoby, 1975), a past president of APA's Division of Consumer Psychology reported a rapidly increasing trend for social psychology to be employed in the study of the consumer. Jacoby noted social psychology's impressive impact on his field and was able to document its

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influence by citing 60 articles appearing in the *Journal of Marketing Research* between 1970 and 1973 with titles like "The application of attitude immunization techniques in marketing," "Effects of distraction and commitment on the persuasiveness of television advertizing," and "Purchase decisions and group influence." Additionally, Jacoby issued a call to social psychologists for a still larger and more systematic inquiry into the psychology of the consumer. It is not our purpose in this article to suggest that such questions are illegitimate for social psychological research; we believe quite the reverse. However, the work of social psychologists involving consumer issues has been decidedly one-sided. Nearly invariably, it has been designed to provide data that are of use to merchandizers, manufacturers, and advertizers rather than individual consumers. It is our feeling that research designed to improve the economic lot of the consumer ought to be undertaken as well if social psychology is to be socially responsible in this area.

The issue of social responsibility is an especially controversial one within psychology at present. Various writers have commented on a growing crisis and need for reorientation in psychology generally, and in experimental social psychology particularly (e.g., Elms, 1975; Helmreich, 1975; Lipsey, 1974; McGuire, 1967, 1969, 1973; Ring, 1967; Smith, 1972, 1973; Walker, 1969). A recurrent theme in such commentaries is the relevance of scientific psychology to beneficial social action. It is felt that psychology as a discipline has not lived up to its potential to address social issues and reduce social problems. A national survey of nearly 3,000 faculty and graduate students of university psychology departments (Lipsey, 1974) documents the scope of the perceived crisis. The issue of relevance was by far the most cited as "the single most important issue confronting psychology today." It is instructive that the great majority of respondents indicated support for the contention that "academic psychology should be concerned with contemporary problems" but felt that academic psychology was not making "a significant contribution to the needed solutions." Lipsey (1974) concluded from these results:

Clearly, then, there was a great deal of dissatisfaction with what psychology was doing about social problems, and most students and faculty felt that the blame belonged within psychology itself (p. 543).

Experimental social psychologists, rooted in the heritage of Kurt Lewin and his concept of experimental, action-oriented research, have found it especially difficult to reconcile the Lewinian ideal of socially responsive research with the limited impact of their field upon areas of societal concern. Terms such as "malaise," "discontent," and "sense of failed purpose" have been used to describe the feelings of many social psychologists in this regard.

Perhaps the case of consumer research is instructive as to the source of

some of the dissatisfaction. Certainly, one of the most significant social movements of the times is the consumer movement. Thousands of citizens have banded together in numerous groups and behind various champions to demand greater consumer rights, protection, and information. Many newspapers, as well as radio and television stations, have employed staffs whose sole purpose is to investigate and attempt to redress consumer grievances. The best evidence of the strength of this movement may be its effect on government. Federal, state, and local government offices of consumer affairs have appeared nationwide. A government officer entrusted with consumer protection exists in every state. Political lobbies have even been established to apply constant pressures to legislative bodies. In each instance above, the general purpose of the group or agency is the same—to promote consumer welfare. But what of social psychology? What has been its contribution to such a purpose? For the most part, it has not been supportive. Those studies performed by social psychologists that have dealt with consumer issues have investigated and demonstrated how merchandizing and fund-raising organizations may more profitably approach the average citizen (e.g., Brock, 1965; Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Cohen, Fishbein, & Athola, 1972; Doob, Carlsmith, Freedman, Lanauer, & Tom, 1969; Pliner, Hart, Kohl, & Saari, 1974; Varela, 1971; Worchel, Lee, & Adewole, 1975). Such a unilateral approach to the dynamics of the consumer-business interaction, in the face of a burgeoning societal concern for consumerism, underscores the dismay of those who have seen the promise of a socially responsive scientific psychology go unfulfilled.

#### *Why?*

But why should it be that, almost without exception, when academic social psychologists have investigated consumer related issues and settings, they have provided data that are in the direct interests of merchandizing and fund-raising organizations rather than the individual citizen? The political and ideological leanings of academic psychologists hardly seem especially pro-business. Another answer, however, seems more plausible—monetary support. While consumer advocates have urged psychologists to apply their skills to the furtherance of consumer welfare (e.g., Nader, 1976), they have not appeared to be willing or able to support such work financially. The business community, on the other hand, has been quite active in bearing the costs of research directed toward business goals. Further, investigations of this sort conducted by academicians are frequently rewarded by lucrative and even prestigious consulting arrangements. The factor of financial support, then, cannot be ignored here. Nonetheless, it is our feeling that greater explanatory weight is carried by a more subtle factor—methodological approach. The multiple group experimental paradigm is easily the dominant one within contemporary academic

social psychology. One requirement of such an experimental approach is fairly large sample sizes. Large samples are needed (a) to increase confidence that the process of random assignment of subjects to conditions has been effective in equalizing the groups prior to treatment, (b) to allow for the inclusion of control conditions to reduce the likelihood of artifactual influences, and (c) to allow for the applicability of inferential statistics as the primary tool of data interpretation. Given these methodological requisites, it is perhaps not very surprising that the consumer has been so often the target rather than the beneficiary of the consumer research of the experimental social psychologist. When one's subjects are automobile dealers, or corporation executives, or supermarket managers, it becomes difficult to build cell sizes to desired levels. It is simply easier to obtain the required sample sizes when one's subjects are "average citizens." The natural consequence is that the research is performed *on* the individual consumer. Thus, the questions addressed are those concerned with the psychological workings of the consumer, and the information obtained can be employed by those interested in the consumer dollar.

#### *An example*

It is our feeling, however, that such impediments to the performance of "consumeristic" social psychology can be overcome. Certainly, if social psychology is to act with social responsibility in the consumer area, it would seem that an increased attempt should be made. It is the purpose of this article, then, to second Jacoby's (1975) call for social psychologists to increase their involvement with consumer issues but to urge that such involvement be more evenhandedly oriented to business and consumer interests. One instance of a heavily researched domain within social psychology having high potential for consumer-oriented research is that of bargaining tactics. As an illustration of how "consumeristic" social psychology might be performed, a study was conducted in a context that would provide a field replication of the prior research on one such tactic and would provide practical information to consumers involved in price deliberations in natural settings.

A number of laboratory studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of a tough negotiation strategy in several bargaining situations (Bartos, 1967; Chertkoff & Conley, 1967; Komorita & Brenner, 1968; Liebert, Smith, Hill & Kieffer, 1968; Siegel & Fouraker, 1960; Yukl, 1974a, 1974b). Over a variety of operationalizations of a bargainer's toughness in a negotiation (e.g., an extreme initial demand, infrequent concessions), a tough (hard) bargaining stance has produced highly favorable payoffs. This finding seems best explained in terms of Siegal and Fouraker's aspiration level hypothesis. It appears that in the face of a tough bargaining line, an opponent lowers his or her level of aspiration (i.e., the amount of gain one reasonably seeks)

concerning the negotiation outcome. Consequently, the opponent is willing to accept a smaller share of the payoff, leaving a larger share for the tough bargainer (Siegal & Fouraker, 1960; Yukl, 1974a, 1974b).

Despite the consistency in the results of the above-described studies, doubts can be raised about the generalizability of the findings to nonlaboratory, natural bargaining settings. For example, while a number of experiments have shown a tough bargaining strategy to be effective in laboratory-simulated car sales contexts (Chertkoff & Conley, 1967; Liebert et al., 1968; Yukl, 1974a, 1974b), no data have been collected in an actual car sales setting. In the typical laboratory simulation, the opponents are college students who have relatively little formal negotiation experience, who are playing for experimental points or very small amounts of real money, and who understand that their bargaining behaviors are being scrutinized by a psychologist. In a naturally-occurring automobile sales interaction, however, one's opponent is often a professional salesman with years of bargaining experience, the potential personal profit margin for the opponents is frequently several hundred dollars, and there is no pressure for opponents to behave in ways that fit with an experimenter's expectancies or values. It was the purpose of this study to test the effectiveness of a tough negotiation strategy in a genuine car sales setting. In performing such a field replication of earlier, laboratory work, it would be possible to assess the external validity of that work in a way that also established the applicability of social psychological research to consumer concerns.

In the present study, bargaining tough with a new car salesman involved asking him for a series of offers on a certain automobile and refusing each as unsatisfactory. The effects of this tough strategy were then assessed by having the same customer ask the same salesman for a set of offers on another car. It was felt that the initial hard bargaining line of the customer would cause the salesman to lower his level of aspiration (i.e., the amount of profit reasonably sought) in negotiations with the customer. The lowered profit to which the salesman aspired would be manifest as a better set of price offers on the second automobile. Contrasted with the tough bargaining procedure was a condition in which the customer took a soft line in bargaining on the initial automobile and then asked for a set of offers on the second car. Finally, the design included a control condition in which no preliminary bargaining occurred prior to negotiation on the car common to all conditions.

#### Method

##### *Subjects*

The subjects were 21 salesmen at various Chevrolet new car showrooms in two large urban areas.

*Procedure*

One of the two male experimenters in their midtwenties entered a showroom and examined the floor models until approached by a salesman.<sup>2</sup> At this point the experimenter's behavior varied, depending on the condition to which the salesman had been randomly assigned.

*No initial bargaining control.* In the control condition, the experimenter introduced himself, indicated an interest in a new (1974) Monte Carlo model Chevrolet, and requested price offers from the salesman. Specifically, he said:

Hi. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm interested in a Monte Carlo Sports Coupe with AM radio, automatic transmission, and in blue, with matching cloth interior. What kind of deal can you give me on that? (Upon receipt of the salesman's first price, the experimenter asked for a second, better offer:) Can you give me a better price than that?

The salesman's offers in response to the experimenter's first and second (final) price requests were recorded and constituted the major dependent measures of the study.

*Soft initial bargaining.* In this condition, the experimenter introduced himself, expressed an interest in a new Impala model Chevrolet,<sup>3</sup> and asked for a price. Upon receipt of the price for the Impala, the experimenter indicated that he thought the price satisfactory but expressed an interest in also considering a Monte Carlo. The experimenter then engaged the salesman in a negotiation identical in form to that of the control condition. Specifically, the interaction for this condition proceeded as follows:

Hi, My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm interested in an Impala Sports Coupe with an AM radio, steel belted radials, and in blue, with matching cloth interior. What kind of deal can you give me on that? That sounds like a good price for that car. I'm also looking at the Monte Carlo Sports Coupe. . . (The remainder of the script for this condition was identical to that of the control condition.)

<sup>2</sup>A car salesman's livelihood depends upon his ability to approach true customers and persuade them to purchase automobiles. An overriding ethical consideration employed when conducting the present experiment, then, was to minimize the interference with the salesman's livelihood. Prospective subjects were selected only if there was an obvious lack of sales and business activity in the showroom. Debriefings (which typically consisted of informing the salesman that the effects of a customer's bargaining strategy on the price quoted for cars were being investigated) were conducted briefly and only if the lull in the showroom activity persisted. The modal response from subjects was a lack of interest, although the responses ranged from mild disapproval to tidings of good fortune in the project.

<sup>3</sup>The Impala was chosen as the model for initial negotiation because it was somewhat less expensive than the Monte Carlo, thereby reducing the chance that the salesman would be more interested in selling the Impala rather than the Monte Carlo to the customer.

*Tough initial bargaining.* The procedures of this condition were somewhat similar to those of the soft initial bargaining condition in that the experimenter began by bargaining for the Impala and then moved to negotiations on the Monte Carlo. However, the nature of the bargaining interaction on the Impala differed in the tough initial bargaining condition from that of the soft initial bargaining condition. Rather than indicating that the salesman's offer for the Impala was a good one, the experimenter in the tough initial bargaining condition rejected the salesman's offer (and any subsequent, lower offers the salesman made) before beginning negotiations on the Monte Carlo. Specifically, the experimenter in this condition said:

Hi. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm interested in an Impala Sports Coupe with AM radio, steel belted radials, and in blue, with matching interior. What kind of deal can you give me on that? Give me a better price than that. (Whether or not the salesman provided a lower price, the experimenter responded:) I need a lower price than that for an Impala. (Whether or not the salesman provided a lower price, the experimenter responded:) That's a lot. I'm also looking at the Monte Carlo Sports Coupe . . . (The remainder of the script for this condition was identical to that of the control condition.)

*Predictions.* The major prediction of practical and theoretical interest was that the tough initial bargaining procedure would elicit the best price offers from the salesmen on the Monte Carlo model automobile. This expectation was based on aspiration level theory (Siegel & Fouraker, 1960) and on evidence from a number of studies (e.g., Chertkoff & Conley, 1967; Yukl, 1974a, 1974b) that an initial, tough negotiation strategy leads an opponent to lower his or her level of aspiration and, hence, make greater bargaining concessions in negotiations with the tough bargainer. A secondary prediction, that the soft initial bargaining condition would elicit higher price offers on the Monte Carlo than the control condition, was also made. While there was little practical or empirical basis for such a hypothesis, aspiration level theory would lead to this expectation.

## Results

### Results

The design was conceptualized as having one between subjects factor, bargaining condition, with 3 levels (tough, soft, and no initial bargaining) and one repeated measures factor, salesman's offer on the Monte Carlo, with 2 levels (first and second (final) offer). The data for both price offers on the Monte Carlo are presented in Table 1.

The hypotheses of the study were tested via a pair of orthogonal planned comparisons. The first comparison examined the predicted superiority of the tough initial bargaining condition by testing that condition against the

TABLE 1  
PRICE OFFERS MADE BY SALESMEN ON THE  
MONTE CARLO MODEL AUTOMOBILE

Bargaining conditon	Offer (\$)	
	First	Final
Tough initial bargaining	3,942.20	3,802.50
Soft initial bargaining	4,011.39	3,955.85
No initial bargaining	4,161.29	3,963.66

combination of their other two. A significant effect resulted,  $F(1,18) = 6.12$ ,  $p < .024$ , indicating that the tough initial bargaining procedure produced the most favorable price offers for the customer on the Monte Carlo. Further, the repeated measures factor did not interact with this effect,  $F(1,18) < 1$ , indicating that the superiority of the tough bargaining procedure showed itself on both the first and the last price offer the salesman made. A check of the means in Table 1 confirms the lack of an interaction. The tough initial bargaining condition produced a first price offer on the Monte Carlo that was \$144.14 lower than the average of the other two conditions; this difference increased slightly to \$157.25 when the practically important final offer is considered.

The second hypothesis, that a soft initial negotiation strategy would elicit higher price offers on the Monte Carlo than no initial negotiation at all, was tested via a planned comparison contrasting the soft initial bargaining condition and the no initial bargaining control. Contrary to expectation, no reliable difference was found,  $F(1,18) = 1.26$ . In fact, the means as shown in Table 1 were in the opposite direction to prediction, although by the crucial last offer the means became nearly identical. Again, there was no significant interaction with the repeated measures factor,  $F(1,18) = 2.24$ ,  $p < .15$ .

A final result of interest was the significant main effect on the repeated measures variable,  $F(1,18) = 11.41$ ,  $p < .003$ , indicating that a salesman's second (final) offer on the Monte Carlo was different from his first offer. Table 1 shows the average decrease from a salesman's first to second offer on the Monte Carlo to be \$130.95. This finding was paralleled in the negotiations involving the Impala model; in the tough bargaining procedure, when the customer pressed a salesman for a second offer, the price was reduced by a mean of \$126.00. Such a price reduction did not take place, however, when the salesman was asked to make a third offer on the Impala. Only one

salesman reduced the price further, and that price decrease was only \$28.86. It appears that these salesmen did not provide price reductions beyond their second offers. This result suggests that, in negotiations on the Monte Carlo, a salesman's second price offer may legitimately be seen as his last offer.

#### Discussion

The finding of strongest conceptual and practical significance of this study was the clear superiority of a preliminary, tough bargaining approach in producing subsequent price concessions from a car salesman. This result, predicted from level of aspiration theory and previous laboratory experimentation, provides evidence for the external validity of that earlier laboratory work and a demonstration of the *direct* applicability of social psychological theory and research to consumer-oriented interests.

It is not an unimportant facet of the tough strategy's superiority that it was more than merely statistical. Social psychological research has been faulted for too often concerning itself with differences that, while statistically significant, are so small as to be meaningless in the description of naturally-occurring human behavior (e.g., Bickman, 1976; Helmreich, 1975; Smith, 1972). Such was not the case in the present instance, in which the tough initial bargaining procedure produced a \$161.00 final price savings over the control procedure (the more ecologically valid of the other two conditions). It would seem that a hard preliminary bargaining line can lead not only to statistically reliable differences under artificially controlled laboratory conditions but can produce large and pragmatically meaningful savings in real bargaining contexts.

One puzzling aspect of the data was the failure of the soft initial bargaining condition to differ from the control condition. Level of aspiration theory would clearly predict such a difference. A number of possible explanations for the lack of effect exist. The one we favor is that despite the customer's favorable verbal comment in the soft initial bargaining procedure, he did not accept the salesman's offer on the Impala; instead, he turned his attention to the Monte Carlo. This behavioral rejection of the salesman's Impala price offer may have counteracted the effects of the customer's positive verbal statement concerning that offer. Thus, the customer may not have been perceived as an especially soft bargainer.

#### Conclusion

Earlier in this article we discussed a crisis within scientific psychology, especially social psychology, that centered around the perception that the discipline was not adequately contributing to the welfare of the individual in

society. With regard to the economic welfare of the individual consumer, social psychological research was found to be unresponsive. We do not wish to suggest that, in order to be socially responsible, social psychology should contribute only to the consumer interest. But a more even-handed approach to consumer research does seem appropriate for a discipline clearly anxious about its relevance to issues of social concern. Neither do we wish to be misinterpreted as presenting the study reported here as a model for "consumeristic" social psychology. Rather, we would hope that it would be viewed as one demonstration that, despite the existence of certain problems of convenience and efficiency, such research can be adequately conducted to provide information with genuine potential for consumer benefit.

Implicit in what we have suggested in this article is the application of an advocate model to consumer research not unlike that of our judicial system in which both parties have access to expert counsel. The extent to which an academic psychologist may wish to undertake work that would be of primary benefit to consumer as opposed to business interests would depend on a number of factors, ranging from personal preference to the state of the economy to the nature of the psychological question of interest. We are not suggesting that any *individual* investigator of consumer issues should do at least some research likely to aid the consumer; that would not be necessary. Rather, it is our feeling that a socially responsive *discipline* would be one in which some portion of consumer-relevant work had an orientation consistent with the widespread social movement for consumerism. We would not wish to generalize the advocacy model to other social issues where one side is associated with a position clearly deleterious to the society. We would not, for example, support a discipline that sought to abet both those wishing to inflame interracial violence as well as those wishing to reduce it.

Even within the consumer area, however, questions can be raised about the public's view of an academic discipline that rendered its services to both parties. Were these services to be offered only for payment, a distasteful mercenary image could evolve. Typically, however, the consumer-relevant research done by academic social psychologists has not been funded by vested interests. Instead, its largely business orientation seems to have been a by-product of certain methodological considerations. The public perception of social psychology is unlikely to worsen, then, from a more even-handed approach to consumer issues. It seems quite likely that positive image credits will be won both from the discipline's increased effort on behalf of the individual citizen and from a credible appearance of impartiality. There is, however, a more bothersome issue of public image for a discipline that advises both the business and consumer communities concerning how to increase their outcomes through manipulation of social variables: Competition rather than cooperation may come to be seen as the accepted and even advocated form of

human interaction. In this regard, it is hoped that some research can be conducted detailing ways in which mutual, rather than unilateral, benefits could be achieved through cooperation in the consumer area.

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