Placebo Response and Acquiescence*

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(Received November 9, 1962)

Introduction

A considerable literature concerning the conditions likely to enhance placebo effects has accumulated (BEECHER 1959). There has also been interest in the individual or personality variables that are linked with degree of response to inert substances. A number of traits or attitudes have shown up in different studies as being related to placebo response. Suggestibility and dependence have been especially prominently mentioned in this respect (BEECHER 1959; LASAGNA et al. 1954; KORNETSKY et al. 1957; ROSENTHAL and FRANK 1956). It was the intent of the present project to determine whether such variables play a significant role in reactions to a placebo. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the more an individual adopts a passive, acquiescent ("I want to please you") set toward his environs the greater will be his response to an inert substance which he has been told is a drug that will produce effects upon his body.

Methods and Procedure

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 33 men and 39 women who were undergraduate college students. They were recruited by offering them a fee "to participate in a psychological study". No other details of the study were revealed prior to the subject coming to the laboratory. The median age of the group was 20.

The subjects were recruited from a range of different departments on a large university campus (Syracuse University) and with rare exceptions were not acquainted with each other. This minimized the possibility that details of the experimental procedure would be communicated to them in advance of their participation in the experiment. With this same point in mind, each subject was cautioned upon completion of his work not to reveal to anyone else the details of what he

* This study was partially supported by grant M-5761 from the National Institute of Mental Health.
had done. Medical students and those with majors in areas requiring some knowledge of drugs were excluded in order to insure a relatively uniform level of naivete concerning drug effects.

**Measure of Acquiescence**

The evaluation of the degree to which the subject was identified with a dependent, passive, "I want to please you" attitude was undertaken by means of the Bass Social Acquiescence Scale (Bass 1956). This scale consists of 56 proverbs covering a wide range of topics (e.g., Love is the greatest of Arts; Obedience is the mother of success; Wild colts make good horses). The subject indicates his reaction to each by checking one of three categories: agreement, disagreement, can't decide. His score is equal to the number of statements with which he expresses agreement. Bass has shown that the greater the number of statements accepted by an individual the more likely he is to be characterized by an acquiescent set which involves conformance, being "nice", and pleasing others. Murray (1961) has similarly demonstrated that the higher the acquiescence score the greater there is an "inordinate need to win acceptance by others through excessive conformity".

**Response to Placebo**

When the subject came to the laboratory, he was told that he was to participate in a drug study which would involve his swallowing a capsule containing a small quantity of a drug. He was informed that the drug was completely harmless but that it could produce a variety of symptoms and sensations. None of this population of subjects who were asked refused to take the capsule. After a subject indicated his assent to taking a drug, an electrode connected to a polygraph was attached to his finger and it was mentioned that his physiological reactions to the drug would be measured. Actually, the polygraph did not take any recordings. Its presence was intended simply to enhance the dramatic qualities of the situation and to make the whole procedure look more genuine. After the attachment of the electrode, the subject was requested to swallow a capsule (containing inert substance) with the aid of a small glass of water. Thereupon, he was told to lean back in his chair and to begin reporting the effects of the drug upon his body as they occurred. Nothing further was said to him unless he gave no report for two minutes. In that case he was asked, "Do you notice anything?". If there was no report after four minutes, the same question was raised. If there was no report for ten minutes, he was told that he was now approaching the period when the drug would have its maximum effect and that he should therefore "get set" to describe his body experiences. All symptom reports were written down as verbatim as