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George R. Pullman
Morningside College

Earle E. Emme
Morningside College

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CHANGES IN THE ATTITUDES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN RELIGION AND POLITICS

GEORGE R. PULLMAN AND EARLE E. EMME

PURPOSE: It is the purpose of this paper to determine whether or not the attitudes of college students change in the fields of Religion and Politics as a result of having taken courses pertaining thereto or as a result of the college experience as a whole.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION: Information was obtained through a summarization of research on the subject and by an investigation of recent psychological magazines and bulletins.

CHARACTERISTIC ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS BEFORE ENTERING COLLEGE.

Children tend to imitate and become like their parents and other associates, taking over the culture of the group because they see a resemblance between themselves and others (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 189). Adolescence is a crystallization of attitudes toward the larger world—attitudes toward sex, race, religion, economics, and social status; differences in attitudes toward institutions such as the school, the family, church, clubs, etc.; and identification with the morality of the group or deviation from it (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 619). Many changes, therefore, are brought about by mere age or maturation (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 919).

Belief is closely associated with desire. When asked to rate the relative importance of seven factors which influenced "the average college student" in arriving at his opinions and to rate the same factors as to the influence upon their own opinions—most subjects regarded their fellows as being swayed more by "teaching and training" than they themselves were, but themselves as influenced more by "personal reasoning" and "personal experience." Such evidence further betrays the intimacy of emotion and belief; and further assures us that certainty of opinion is a function not of information, but of desire (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 940).

Occupational trend has a definite relationship to the attitudes of college students (Duffy, 1940, p. 603). Evaluative attitudes are definitely, though perhaps not closely, related to academic achievement (Duffy, 1940, p. 609). Student vocational choice seems to

be more closely related to social, moral, and religious attitudes than is the time spent in college (Nelson, 1940, p. 282).

Fraternities and the ROTC also have decided influence upon the attitudes of their members (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, pp. 989, 990).

PROCEDURE FOR TESTING.

The procedure of testing for attitude changes in connection with educational institutions requires that the subjects be tested simultaneously at different educational levels. This procedure is completely valid only upon the assumption that the to-be-compared educational levels are within the same community, and that the sampling at one level is as representative as at another. One is often left wondering whether attitude changes coincident with a given period of education are not simply the consequences of additional months or years of living in a particular cultural environment rather than the results of the school experience itself (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 978). Study can also be made by analyzing the educational backgrounds of groups selected on the basis of present attitudes (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 987).

ATTITUDE CHANGES IN RELIGION.

The most religious attitudes are found among students who have chosen the ministry, home-making, medicine, music, and teaching. The less religious attitudes are found among those choosing aviation, journalism, law, and commerce. Students choosing the ministry are most favorable toward the institution attended (Nelson, 1940, pp. 279-282). In a study made of students working part time in college, the N.Y.A. records show that the aid group are more favorable toward Sunday observance (Nelson, 1940, p. 361). Research findings also indicate that women possess more favorable attitudes toward Sunday observance, the church, the reality of God, and God as an influence on conduct (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, pp. 915-916, and Nelson, 1940, pp. 325-423).

Small but consistent differences occur between the Freshman and Senior years in college. Seniors accept fewer conservative moral and religious beliefs, believe fewer superstitions and more in evolution (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 983). Freshmen show more contradictions than seniors. Seniors tend to be more liberal. In a recent study, 79 subjects state they have less religious faith at the time of the study than they did when they

entered college, 49 report more. The former group was found to be slightly less conservative on the Harper Test (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 983). Upperclassmen show reliably less belief in a personal God and prayer, more in an impersonal God than underclassmen. They are also more critical of the church and of institutional practices than when they entered college, but little change is noted in the need for religion or interest in the church. The majority maintain the same belief as when entering college (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 985).

Five-step attitude tests were administered before and after the speeches of four speakers at the Young People's Religious Union (Unitarian) summer conference. Shifts were studied by a technique based on that of Murphy and Likert: The number of actual shifts was divided by the number of possible shifts in a given direction and the fraction thus obtained was subtracted from a similarly obtained fraction based upon actual and possible shift. A result of .00 would indicate complete change. Changes on neutral questions produced by the four speakers were, respectively, .11, .45, .26, and .19. The results are further analyzed in terms of the speaking ability of the lecturers and the extent to which their subject matter agreed or disagreed with the formulated beliefs of the audience. The relatively small amount of change is stressed in the conclusions. It is felt that the content of the questions where great changes were produced is of primary importance. A speaker in whom the audience has confidence easily produces changes where the previous opinions are not emotionally toned or dogmatic. However, the utility of statistical analysis is questioned and the use of opinion-auto-biographies to correlate with such analysis is urged (Dexter, 1939, pp. 76-83).

Orthodox students are the most likely, and the liberal theists and atheists least likely to change in their religious attitudes as a result of the college experience (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 985). The amount of religious training bore little relationship to present interest or belief. There is a discrepancy between belief and practice (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 1002). Religious attitudes also tend to characterize other attitudes (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 1002).

ATTITUDE CHANGES IN POLITICS.

There is a trend toward liberalism, as a general rule, at the college level with effects being more pronounced among students from rural and small-town backgrounds and among those enrolled

in social science courses (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 981, and Garrison, 1938, pp. 490-494).

Good students have higher theoretical scores and lower political value scores than poor students (Duffy, 1940, p. 601).

Students who have chosen as their vocation: banking, dentistry, music, and government service are conservative, whereas more liberal attitudes are found among those planning on journalism, social work, law, and agriculture (Nelson, 1940, pp. 279-282). History groups were found to have the most interest in politics while the household arts and nursing groups were found to be least favorable toward it (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, pp. 985, 988). A year's course in American History gave reliable changes in classes where the teacher was aware of the experiment (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 951).

Student attitudes change in the direction of propaganda heard. Such changes have been found to be reliable by all groups HEARING speeches, and by most groups reading them; but little difference exists between "emotional" and "rational" appeals (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 957). Students also showed little change on remote items (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 959). In a recent experiment, regarding the propagandizing of students on political affairs, the emotional appeals were far more effective than the non-emotional. The totals for all groups showed a tendency to accept stereotyped statements from both sides (Menefee, 1940, pp. 393-404). Oral presentation is found to be more effective than written (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 965).

Topics which showed the greatest absolute amount of change in courses of Sociology are questions of fact. Responses closely tied up with emotion and prejudices (conservatism in general, anti-socialist and anti-labor sentiment, and race prejudice) changed drastically when full discussion was allowed (Menefee, 1938, pp. 545-556).

In 1936, students' political preference in the presidential election was studied in relationship to many other factors. It correlated highest with national and local political sympathies, father's preference in 1936, and attitudes toward the New Deal, in lesser degree with many other factors; and hardly at all with attitudes toward morality, newspapers read, class in college, and father's occupation (Fay, 1940, pp. 107-119) (Young and Oberdorfer, 1938, pp. 442-456). Subjects were also tested when they recorded

their favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward a number of terms such as Uncle Sam, Labor, and the New Deal, then reacted to cartoon caricatures of the same subject matter. Significant shifts in attitude generally occurred with strongly complimentary or uncomplimentary cartoons of subjects about which the group opinion was neutral or divided (Asher, and Sargent, 1939, p. 638). Motion pictures effect changes. However, there is little change on remote items (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 957).

Under the conditions of another recent experiment, the attitude of male college students toward communism, the U. S. Constitution, law and censorship was studied and found to be more liberal than that of the female students. Among the findings were: a consistent trend toward liberalism from freshman to senior year, less tolerance among fraternity members and pledges toward communism than among unorganized students (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 983; Fay, 1939, pp. 378-390).

A modification of Vetter's social and political attitudes test was given to 52 freshmen, 18 sophomores, 36 juniors, and 64 seniors at North Carolina State College. The results reveal higher scores for the seniors, indicating the possession of a more liberal attitude (Garrison, 1938, pp. 490-494). There are sex differences, but they vary with economic status (Murphy, Gardner, Newcomb, 1937, p. 917).

One hundred-forty four Freshmen students of the University of Louisville were given interest and belief tests before and after they had taken a social science survey course. The tests given following the course showed that with respect to war and negroes, the students became more liberal. They were more favorable toward democracy and opposed imprisonment of Nazi and Fascist organizers. In 20 out of 26 comparisons dealing with specific attitudes or beliefs the scores were more uniform on the second than on the first test (Whisler, 1940, pp. 387-396).

A freshman class in a course in American Institutions, consisting of 565 men and women, showed, at the opening of the semester, general attitudes opposed to much change in the present standards of government. A second administration of the questionnaire at the end of the semester, showed some shift of opinion on all questions, and, with the exception of two questions relating to the Supreme Court, the shifts were all in the direction of a favorable change (Fitch and Remmers, 1941, pp. 187-194).

CONCLUSIONS.

The following conclusions are suggested as a result of the study:

1. Reliable changes in attitudes are brought about generally in the direction of liberalism accompanied by the college experience.
2. Teachers effect changes more directly than do the courses themselves.
3. Oral presentation is more effective than written.
4. Students show a more reliable change in attitude with questions based on facts rather than emotion.
5. Although the attitudes of college students do not change appreciably in the fields of Religion and Politics as a result of their college experience, such courses are deemed valuable in that they encourage students to think for themselves—thereby gaining an understanding of the attitudes that they possess.

MORNINGSIDE COLLEGE,
SIOUX CITY, IOWA

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