LaPierre begins his article with the cogent statement that ‘By definition, a social attitude is a behaviour pattern, anticipatory set or tendency, predisposition to specific adjustment to designated social situations, or, more simply, a conditioned response to social stimuli.’1 Alas, if that statement were only regularly honoured. Instead, as LaPierre goes on to note, ‘But by derivation social attitudes are seldom more than a verbal response to a symbolic situation’. Let us note that LaPierre was writing those statements 75 years ago. Nothing has changed, and social psychologists continue to observe and fret about the fact that ‘attitudes’ do not necessarily relate to ‘behaviour’. As LaPierre’s opening statement makes clear that that idea is nonsense because attitudes are behaviour. Or, perhaps a bit more accurately, attitudes are inferred from behaviour, and only from behaviour. The whole issue hinges on one’s ideas about just what constitutes ‘behaviour’ and whether one wants to divide behaviour into the two categories of ‘what people say’ and ‘what people do other than say things’.

LaPierre was on the right track 75 years ago, and Donald T. Campbell made the case explicit and compelling 46 years ago.2 It is unfortunate that LaPierre’s thinking has been so regularly misinterpreted and that Campbell’s thinking has been so little known. Campbell’s (should have been) seminal paper was a longish chapter in a distinguished, but often dense, multi-volume work, and in volume 6 at that. In his first major paper, published in 1950, Campbell did write ‘In the problem of assessing social attitudes, there is a very real need for instruments which do not destroy the natural form of the attitude in the process of describing it’.3 That statement, and the article for which it was the introduction, give clear evidence of Campbell’s view of attitudes as response dispositions and not simply as verbal acquiescences.

I first heard about the remarkable study by Richard LaPierre, due to become a classic, in an undergraduate class in social psychology. The time was the spring of 1950, the place was Ohio State University and the instructor for the class was Donald T. Campbell (Assistant Professor). The LaPierre study, which was well and enthusiastically described by Campbell, but which we were not required to read, made a strong impression on me. I doubt, however, that I fully understood its implications at the time. That Campbell regarded the study as important on several grounds must have been obvious to me, however, as I remember my own many citations of it in subsequent years.

In the summer of 1950, I was called into service as a reserve in the Marine Corps and ended up in Korea. Although I was able to return to Ohio State University by the fall quarter of 1951, Campbell had already left Ohio State University—to my disappointment—for the University of Chicago. I completed my graduate study at Ohio State University and, in 1956, went off to Pennsylvania State University as an Assistant Professor. In my teaching at Pennsylvania State University, I certainly made use of my knowledge of the LaPierre study in my own classes, but I confess that I still had not actually read it. Then, by a stroke of good fortune, in 1958, I received an offer of an assistant professorship at Northwestern University where, mirabilis dictu, I found myself a colleague of Donald T. Campbell! Even in retrospect, I can scarcely believe my good fortune.

Under the influence and tutelage of Campbell, I began to develop my already strong interest in research methodology and measurement. Specifically, though, I expanded my understanding of the difference between psychological constructs and the indicators on the basis of which we infer them. In the early 1960s, I began to be involved in the discussions and work that, in 1966, culminated in the publication of ‘Unobtrusive Measures’.4 The development of that book, the product of a collaborative team led by an organizational psychologist teaching in a journalism school, and including a social psychologist, a sociologist and a somewhat apostatic clinical psychologist, led me to a much deeper and elaborated understanding of the epistemology underlying measurement in the social sciences.

It was in the course of developing the thinking underlying unobtrusive/non-reactive measures that
the full importance of what LaPierre had done became apparent to me. Although I had previously appreciated the study and thought it very clever, the audacity, scope and conceptual implications of LaPierre’s work had, I came to realize, been more than a bit glossed over. Let me deal with the audacity first. In working on the book, I encountered a great many ‘clever’ studies, but most of those could probably be best described as tricky and more often than not as involving peripheral, minor human concerns. Moreover, many of them also required not much more than passive observation of what was going on anyway. LaPierre had the imagination and courage to ‘experiment’ with real life. Moreover, he took on an exceptionally sensitive issue for his study. Fortunately, the results were much more favourable to society than might have been expected at the time; imagine the furor if he had reported widespread discrimination and hostility towards his ‘personable and charming’ young Chinese couple! The scope of LaPierre’s investigation was also remarkable, covering as it did a large geographic area and large number of encounters. Even after 75 years, it stands (so far as I know) alone in terms of its magnitude. Similar studies—often carried out by investigative journalists rather than social scientists—are generally limited to a dozen or two cases in one locale. Of course, LaPierre’s study was opportunistic; he did not do all that travelling just to detect discrimination, but that opportunism was fundamental to the genius of his study. Would that we had more such opportunistic and peripatetic social scientists today.

The conceptual implications of LaPierre’s work are, obviously, what is important, or should be, to science. LaPierre laid the foundation for Campbell’s later argument that: (i) a social attitude is a behavioural disposition to respond in a consistent way to a social stimulus in the same way that, let us say, a habit of taking an aisle seat in a lecture hall or auditorium is a disposition to respond in a consistent way; (ii) a social attitude is likely to be manifested in a variety of ways, just as is any habit or other disposition; and (iii) a failure to respond in a manifestly consistent way to different indicators of an attitude is likely to be indicative of a middling-level disposition rather than ‘inconsistency’ (a middling-level disposition towards aisle seats might lead a person to seek an aisle seat if one is readily available, but not lead the person to tramp all the way from the rear of a hall to the front row to get one). Why should it be so difficult for social psychologists to accept the idea of variability in dispositions as an explanation for strange and bothersome ‘inconsistency’ is difficult to grasp. One social psychology text summed up LaPierre’s findings by saying, ‘It was, therefore, quite apparent from LaPierre’s findings that, contrary to common intuition, attitudes did not predict behavior at all’. That may be, if one takes the position that a verbal statement is an attitude and everything else is behaviour and if one confines the conclusion to the specifics of LaPierre’s study. The verbal indicator of attitude could not ‘predict’ behaviour because there was no variance in the behaviour. Had the same general method been followed in a study of ‘attitudes’ towards Black people in Alabama/Mississippi, the conclusion certainly would have been that attitudes are very closely related to behaviour. Virtually all proprietors would have stated that they would refuse to serve Black people, and virtually all proprietors would, in fact, have refused that service. LaPierre noted that, ‘It is highly probable that when the “Southern Gentleman” says he will not permit Negroes to reside in his neighborhood we have a verbal response to a symbolic situation which reflects the “attitude” which would become operative in an actual situation’.

Meertens and Pettigrew\(^5\) report on extensive analyses of multi-national data by means of which they aimed to demonstrate the reality of ‘subtle’ prejudice (not so incidentally, they cite neither LaPierre nor Campbell). Their work is impressive, rather a tour de force in data analysis, and they conclude, not surprisingly, that subtle prejudice is real. For example, the item:

‘I would not mind if a suitably qualified West Indian person was appointed as my boss’ (strongly agree to strongly disagree) (reversed scoring).

This is considered a ‘blatant’ prejudice item. And the item:

‘It is just a matter of some people not trying hard enough. If West Indians would only try harder they could be as well-off as British people’ (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

This is considered a ‘subtle’ item. The items show expected differences in endorsements by different persons and in patterns of their correlations with other variables, so that Meertens and Pettigrew conclude that subtle prejudice does exist and that it can be differentiated from blatant prejudice. Unfortunately, they do not consider the possibility that what they term ‘subtle’ is not so subtle at all; it is simply a weaker disposition. It is interesting that Pettigrew himself noted many years ago that in some instances a verbal statement of a prejudice may be a strong indicator of prejudice, whereas in other instances it may not be. In the US Congress today, it is very difficult to know how many legislators really feel about gun control or abortion because making pro-gun control or pro-abortion statements is politically hazardous. It is surpassingly common to hear references to someone ‘feeling strongly’ about some issue; what else can that be but an attitude? And once one admits that attitudes may vary in strength, then it follows inexorably that behavioural manifestations may vary. Currently, social psychology is caught up in a fervour of enthusiasm for ‘implicit attitude’, rather
similar to the notion of ‘subtle’ attitudes. Attitudes cannot be implicit; they can only be inferred from behaviour. It is possible that ‘indicators’ of attitudes could be implicit, e.g. requiring special instrumentation for their detection, e.g. just as brain waves or blood pressure are implicit. But in order to be interesting, implicit indicators of attitudes must be related to some explicit indicators of attitudes. If implicit indicators are related to obvious indicators of attitudes, then the implicit indicators are probably not needed. In line with Campbell’s thinking and, implicitly, with LaPierre’s, if a disposition is strong, it will probably manifest itself to weaker stimuli. If, on the other hand, implicit indicators are linked only to other ‘nearly implicit’ indicators, then they may be taken as evidence of a middling or even weak disposition.

LaPierre paid considerable attention in his discussion of his work to contextual variables as determinants of behaviours evinced towards his young Chinese couple. They were personable and charming, spoke excellent English, were in the company of a Caucasian gentleman, and arrived by automobile, and so on. Moreover, the study was carried out during the Great Depression when times were hard, and business owners were probably eager for patronage. It would, then, likely have been very difficult for an individual owner of a motel or of a restaurant to face down LaPierre and his companions and refuse them accommodation or service. Just as it is very difficult for a Congressional representative from Texas to take a public position in favour of gun control. Answering a hypothetical question by mail, without any description of participants, would probably be a much easier situation in which to say that service would be refused.

In their everyday lives, ordinary, everyday people know that verbal statements cannot always be expected to be congruent with other behaviours. We know from our own experience that we may say things that belie what we will do subsequently in other ways. And it works both ways. We may express a favourable opinion of a restaurant and never go there again; it may be too difficult to tell a friend that we do not like its favourite place. On the other hand, we may be silent or even assenting, if one of our own friends strongly disparages a movie we liked. But in both instances, were our attitude (disposition) stronger, we might find ourselves speaking out in a way more consistent with other behaviours. If a person feels strongly about a matter, that person may speak out strongly even when it is not in his or her best interests to do so. Or we may not act in some matter if we do not feel strongly, i.e. have a strong attitude about it.

Unfortunately, LaPierre himself backed off somewhat from his original definition of attitude in opinion that ‘political’ and ‘religious’ attitudes might only be expressed in verbal statements, specifically stating that the statement can be considered to be the attitude. I think that is not so, and Campbell would have rejected that idea also. In ‘real life’, we certainly do not take verbal statements of political and religious attitudes at face value. If people express liberal political views, but do not speak out for liberal candidates, do not bother to vote when elections are critically close, never make political contributions and so on, we suspect …what? That their political attitudes are lukewarm. We might as well come to a similar conclusion about someone who professes to be religious but never shows any ‘other’ signs of religiosity.

In fact, to be appropriately precise here, LaPierre never actually assessed ‘attitude’ in any realistic sense. The one item he used was ‘Will you accept a member of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?’ That is not an attitude per se, although it could under the right circumstances be one indicator of an attitude. Ordinarily, we would expect an attitude measure to include items related to how respondents feel about, in this case, Chinese people, e.g. ‘Are you generally favourably disposed toward Chinese people? Would you be interested to have a Chinese person as a friend?’ etc. The question LaPierre asked comes closer to representing an inquiry into intentions rather than attitudes, and we might as well conclude that his study shows that intentions do not predict behaviour. That conclusion would not sit well with proponents of such views as theory of reasoned action, but neither should the conclusion often drawn from LaPierre’s work sit well with any view of attitudes as behavioural dispositions. Many reasons can be adduced for why a business person might or might not be glad to have a member of a minority group as a customer, and not all of those reasons might have much to do with attitudes towards minorities. The ‘southern gentleman’ to whom LaPierre referred might not have wanted Negroes in his establishment because of the reaction that it would have produced from his other clientele. There is no reason that attitudes should predict behaviour if the behaviour is not particularly relevant to the attitude in question. Social scientists interested in attitude need to pay more attention to the circumstances under which verbal statements of attitude are elicited and try to discern when verbal statements are dependable and develop a theory to account for that. Sometimes verbal statements of attitudes will agree with other indicators of the attitude, and sometimes they will not. It is important to know when those sometimes are. In the meantime, social scientists should make assiduous efforts to assess attitudes by multiple measures that do not share the same sources of potential bias.

LaPierre’s study is cited as one of the 40 experiments that changed psychology. It deserves that designation. Unfortunately for the field, the LaPierre study did not change psychology enough. To close with the words of LaPierre: ‘Only a verbal reaction to an entirely symbolic
situation can be secured by the questionnaire ... If social attitudes are to be conceptualized as partially integrated habit sets which will become operative under specific circumstances and lead to a particular pattern of adjustment they must, in the main, be derived from a study of humans behaving in actual social situations. They must not be imputed on the basis of questionnaire data’.

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References


