

# Hey Buddy, Can You Spare Seventeen Cents? Mindful Persuasion and the Pique Technique<sup>1</sup>

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According to the pique technique, a target is more likely to comply if mindless refusal is disrupted by a strange or unusual request. We demonstrated the use of this technique in two experiments. In Experiment 1, passersby on a local municipal wharf were approached by a confederate panhandler who made either one of two strange requests: "Can you spare 17¢ (or 37¢)?" or made either one of two typical requests "Can you spare a quarter (or any change)?" Subjects in the strange conditions were almost 60% more likely to give money than those receiving the typical plea. In addition, a strange request piqued interest as evidenced by increased verbal inquiries about the request. Experiment 2 replicated the first experiment in a laboratory setting and provides additional evidence (via a cognitive response analysis) that strange requests piqued subjects' interest in the appeal as well as increased liking for the panhandler.

The popular image of persuasion is that it occurs when we are in a mindless state. Television shows and movies such as *The Manchurian Candidate* often portray influence agents as clever Svengalis and mesmerizers capable of placing their targets in a mindless trance and controlling their wills. Persuasion is depicted as an irrational force that operates when our defenses are down and our mind is at least half-asleep (see Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992, for a discussion).

Considerable research shows that persuasion can occur when we are in a mindless state. For example, Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) found that subjects would mindlessly comply with a request to use a copy machine, if that request was accompanied by a reason, albeit a silly one. In their study, confederates asked to cut in front of subjects to make five copies of a page using one of three requests: just asking, asking with a legitimate reason (I'm in a rush), or asking with a reason that made little sense (I need to make copies).

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Regardless of the legitimacy of the reason, Langer et al. (1978) found significantly more subjects complying with the request when it was given with a reason. They interpret their results as demonstrating that subjects mindlessly followed a script that reads: "Favor X + Reason Y = Comply."

What happens, however, when the mindless response is noncompliance with a request? For example, consider the typical response to a panhandler's plea for spare change on a crowded street corner. In such situations, many targets have learned to avert their eyes and to continue mindlessly down the street with their hard-earned change still in their pockets and purses. The panhandler's request elicits what can be termed a refusal script.

One possible way to gain compliance in such a situation is to disrupt the refusal script by employing what we call the *pique* technique. The effective use of the pique technique involves making the request in an unusual and atypical manner so that the target's interest is piqued, the refusal script is disrupted, and the target is induced to think positively about compliance. For example, a restaurant server's "forgetful" script can be disrupted by asking for a "little coffee with my sugar." Advertising readership and effectiveness can be increased with curious headlines and intriguing pictures.<sup>3</sup> A journal reader's mindless "skim it" script can be disrupted by giving an article an atypical title, thereby gaining higher rates of compliance with the author's implied request to read the text.

#### Experiment 1: The Wharf Study

Our first experiment sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of the pique technique for increasing compliance with the panhandler's request. We implemented the pique technique by asking passersby for unusual or strange amounts of money (e.g., 17 or 37¢) as opposed to the typical request for a quarter or any spare change. If successful, such a strange request should disrupt the refusal scripts and pique the target's interest in just why this person needs exactly 17¢. Such mindful activity should lead the target to think about the request and the panhandler as a real person with real needs, thus making it harder to mindlessly refuse the request.

#### Method

**Subjects.** Two-hundred and eighty-nine adult passersby at a local municipal

<sup>3</sup>One of the first to identify the components of the pique technique was the advertiser and former vice-president of Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, John Caples. According to Caples (1974), one type of effective advertising provokes curiosity (through headlines or pictures) and combines it with a strong sales message (ensuring positive cognitive responses).

wharf were randomly assigned to a 2 (Specificity of Request: Typical or Strange) × 2 (Amount Requested: Low or High) design. Subjects were never aware that they had participated in the study. Data was collected during daylight hours on varying days of the week for a 3-week period in the fall of 1990.

**Confederates.** Three female confederates posed as panhandlers.<sup>4</sup> The confederates were all undergraduates (ages 20 to 21) who were instructed to wear "normal school clothes" such as bluejeans, tee shirts, and denim jackets and to avoid wearing conspicuous jewelry. Verbal report data and our "panhandlers'" reports suggest that passersby perceived our confederates as typical panhandlers. For example, several subjects said "get a job" and one even went so far as to say, "panhandling is illegal in Santa Cruz. We have a nice jail here you'd enjoy." In fact, the experiment experienced two false starts when our confederates quit because of hostility from subjects concerning their requests for money.

**Procedure.** Confederates approached each subject and made one of four requests of subjects: (a) "Can you spare 17¢ (a strange request for a low amount)?," (b) "Can you spare 37¢ (a strange request for a high amount)?," (c) "Can you spare a quarter (a typical request for a low amount)?," and (d) "Can you spare any change (a typical request for a high amount)?"

The confederates always worked in pairs, with one acting as panhandler and the other as recorder. The recorder randomly selected approaching adult pedestrians for the panhandler to solicit by choosing every *n*th person (which varied depending upon the foot traffic on that particular day). The selection was verbally communicated to the panhandler while the target was still far enough away to be unable to hear. The recorder and panhandler were situated such that they appeared unassociated. They were positioned 6 ft apart and the recorder appeared to be reading a book and wore portable stereo earphones. The panhandler was further instructed to direct her gaze away from the recorder. The noise level at the wharf was such that normal conversation was not detectable beyond 10 ft; thus the panhandler and recorder could effectively communicate without the target's knowledge as long as the target was far enough away. The second confederate recorded the target's sex, whether the target complied, whether the target inquired about the need for the money, and how much money the target donated.

<sup>4</sup>All proceeds from the data collection were donated to the Santa Cruz AIDS Project. In compliance with state and local ordinances prohibiting panhandling, all panhandlers carried badges indicating that they were collecting for the AIDS project; however, these badges were not visible to the target.

Table 1

*Compliance and Inquiry Rates as a Function of Treatment for Experiment 1*

|                       | Strange request |          | Typical request |          |
|-----------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
|                       | Low 17¢         | High 37¢ | Low quarter     | High any |
| Percent of compliance | 42.5            | 30.6     | 30.6            | 15.3     |
| Average gift          | \$0.32          | \$0.41   | \$0.41          | \$0.63   |
| Percent of inquiries  | 8.2             | 13.9     | 1.4             | 0.0      |
| N                     | 73              | 72       | 72              | 72       |

*Results and Discussion*

Table 1 presents the compliance rate, average gift size, and inquiry rate for each of the four treatments. The data were analyzed using a 2 (Strange vs. Typical)  $\times$  2 (Small vs. Large Request) ANOVA.

*Compliance data.* The compliance rate in the strange-request conditions was significantly higher (36.6%) than in the typical-request conditions (22.9%),  $F(1, 285) = 6.63, p < .05$ . Additionally, requests of lower amounts produced greater compliance (36.6%) than did requests of higher amounts (22.9%),  $F(1, 285) = 6.59, p < .05$ . There was no significant interaction between request type and size of request ( $F < 1$ ). The average gift size did not vary as a function of the type of request or size of request (both  $F_s < 1$ ), indicating that targets did not lower the amount of gift giving to just 17¢ or 37¢ and continued to give their spare change. In addition, panhandlers collected more money in the strange requests (\$18.76) than in the typical request (\$15.95) treatment.

*Intervening thought processes.* The data also support the hypothesis that the strange requests resulted in more mindful cognitions about the appeal. Subjects in the two strange-request conditions asked significantly more questions regarding the need for the money (11.0%) than did those in the typical-request conditions (0.7%),  $F(1, 285) = 14.46, p < .001$ .

*Summary.* The data from Experiment 1 show that: (a) Compliance can be increased in a situation where refusals are mindless by using a strange request to make the target mindful of the appeal; (b) asking for a strange amount induces subjects to make more inquiries and to be more thoughtful about the appeal; and (c) smaller requests may aid compliance by legitimizing smaller

gifts. This latter result is consistent with Cialdini and Schroeder's (1976) finding that compliance rates can be increased by stating that even a penny will help.

## Experiment 2: The Classroom Study

Experiment 2 addresses the question of possible intervening processes in the pique technique. In other words, why does the pique technique work? In this experiment, subjects were asked to provide their cognitive responses (thought listing) concerning the panhandling request. By coding cognitive responses, we can determine if the strange requests do indeed pique the target's interest and curiosity. In addition, we also sought to determine if the pique technique changed perceptions of the panhandler. The pique technique does not require that the target like or change his or her perception of the panhandler (only that the refusal script be disrupted and the target's curiosity piqued). Indeed, the dictionary definition of "pique" indicates that it is often, but not necessarily, accompanied by mild irritation and resentment. On the other hand, it is possible that increased thought would make the panhandler more likable (Wilder, 1986; Zimbardo, 1970).

Given the need to collect cognitive responses, we moved the location of the study from the wharf to the classroom. The lab is useful for this investigation because the mindless refusal is a scripted behavior. People can typically report on the contents of their scripts (i.e., what happens after a waiter takes your order?) and on what their reactions might be if the script is broken (i.e., what would you think if a waiter brought a dessert before you ordered a meal?).

*Method*

*Subjects.* One hundred and fifty-nine undergraduate psychology students served as volunteer subjects.

*Procedure.* As part of a classroom exercise, subjects completed a three-page questionnaire designed to simulate Experiment 1. Subjects were first asked to imagine a panhandling scenario. All subjects received the same scenario with the exception of the amount requested, which could be either 17¢, a quarter, 37¢, or any change (as in Experiment 1).

On the first page the following scenario was presented:

Imagine that it's a sunny warm day and you decide to take a walk down the Santa Cruz Wharf by yourself. Imagine that someone approaches you and asks if you can spare [amount requested]. Please describe, in the space provided, exactly

how you would respond to this request including what you would say (if anything) to the person.

Below this scenario subjects were instructed: "Please indicate precisely how much you would give the person (if you would not give anything, simply put a zero in the space)."

On the next page of the booklet subjects were asked to "describe any thoughts that went through your head as you considered the request." Subjects were given six boxes and instructed to limit one thought to each box. The final page asked subjects to rate the panhandler on five dimensions using a seven point scale (attractive-unattractive, unlikable-likable, needy-unneedy, similar to me-not similar to me, irritation-empathy). Values on the attractive-unattractive, needy-unneedy, and similar to me-not similar to me scales were reversed so that, consistent with the other two scales, higher scores indicated more of the positive trait. Subjects completed the forms in approximately 10 min and were then debriefed.

Cognitive responses were coded by two of the experimenters (MDS and CL) in three ways: (a) total number of thoughts listed, (b) general thoughts indicating mindfulness of the panhandler and his or her situation and, (c) evidence of specific thoughts about the amount of the request made by the panhandler. The coding scheme counted a wide range of thoughts as mindful, including inquiries into the panhandler's appearance or personal life. Examples considered mindful include: "What does the person need the money for?", "What does the person look like?", and "How did he come to be needy?" Interrater reliability was calculated for a subset of the subjects ( $N = 39$ ) and was found to be adequate (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .894$ ). Cognitive responses were also coded for evidence of thoughts limited to the request. Specifically coded were thoughts that asked the question "What does the panhandler need X amount of money for?" and "Why did he ask for X?" Given the specificity of responses (and the likelihood that a subject would not repeatedly ask this question), we report this data as the percentage of subjects who ask about the request. Interrater reliability was calculated for a subset of the subjects ( $N = 39$ ) and was found to match exactly.

#### Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the compliance rate, average gift size, and cognitive responses for each of the four treatments. The data were analyzed using a 2 (Strange vs. Typical)  $\times$  2 (Small vs. Large Request) ANOVA. Note that the data from 10 subjects were not included in some analyses because they did not respond to some of the questions.

Table 2

Compliance Rates and Cognitive Responses as a Function of Treatment for Experiment 2

|   | Strange request |          | Typical request |          |
|---|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
|   | Low 17¢         | High 37¢ | Low quarter     | High any |
| Percent of compliance                                     | 75.0            | 74.3     | 64.1            | 43.6     |
| Average gift  | \$0.41          | \$0.30   | \$0.31          | \$0.35   |
| Average thoughts listed                                   | 4.29            | 4.58     | 4.12            | 4.10     |
| Average general mindful thoughts                          | 1.18            | 1.60     | 1.30            | 0.95     |
| Percent of subjects making specific inquiry about request | 48.7            | 57.5     | 32.5            | 20.5     |
| <i>N</i>  | 39              | 40       | 40              | 40       |

*Compliance data.* The compliance data in Experiment 2 bore a striking similarity to compliance in Experiment 1 with two notable exceptions. As in Experiment 1, strange requests (17 and 37¢) produced a significantly higher compliance rate (55.8%) than did the typical requests (44.2%),  $F(1, 145) = 7.29, p < .01$ . In contrast to Experiment 1, overall self-reported compliance rates of Experiment 2 were higher (63.8%) than the actual compliance rates of Experiment 1 (29.8%). In addition, there was no significant difference in compliance rates for the high versus low amount requested conditions,  $F(1, 145) = 2.07, ns$ . There was also no significant interaction found between request type and size of request,  $F(1, 145) = 1.65, ns$ . As in Experiment 1, average gift size did not vary as a function of the type of request or size of request (both  $F_s < 1$ ).

*Intervening thought processes.* The cognitive response measure allows an investigation of the nature of mindfulness created by the pique technique. One possible hypothesis is that strange requests would produce a greater frequency of thoughts. This was not the case as the total number of cognitive responses did not vary as a function of type of request ( $M = 4.43$ , strange requests;  $M = 4.11$ , typical requests),  $F(1, 153) = 1.56, ns$ . There was also no effect due to size of request ( $M = 4.34$ , high requests;  $M = 4.21$ , low requests) or for the interaction (both  $F_s < 1$ ).

Another possibility is that strange requests elicit more general mindful cognitions. However, subjects in the strange conditions did not record more mindful cognitions than subjects in typical conditions,  $M = 1.39$ , strange requests;  $M = 1.13$ , typical request,  $F(1, 154) = 1.81$ , *ns*. There was also no effect for size of request,  $M = 1.28$ , high requests;  $M = 1.24$ , low requests ( $F < 1$ ) or the interaction,  $F(1, 154) = 3.81$ , *ns*.

A third possibility is that strange requests focus thoughts on the request itself (i.e., "Why does he or she need the money?"). The cognitive response data support this hypothesis. Subjects in the strange conditions were more likely to record thoughts that questioned the request (53%) than those subjects receiving a typical request (27%),  $F(1, 154) = 12.40$ ,  $p < .001$ . Again, there was no significant effect for size of request ( $F < 1$ ) or for the interaction,  $F(1, 154) = 1.89$ , *ns*.

*Perceptions of the panhandler.* Analysis of the five perception scales revealed only one significant effect. Panhandlers were perceived as more likable in the strange request condition ( $M = 4.31$ ) than in the typical request condition ( $M = 3.75$ ),  $F(1, 149) = 7.29$ ,  $p < .01$ . For the remainder of the perceptual variables, no significant relationships to the type of request made, size of request, or their interaction were obtained (all  $ps > .1$ ).

*Summary.* Experiment 2, conducted in a classroom setting, found that: (a) Subjects were more likely to comply with a strange compared to a typical request—a replication of the Experiment 1 findings; (b) a strange request did not induce more overall thoughts but did induce more specific thoughts about the request; (c) a strange request increased liking for the panhandler; (d) subjects said they were more likely to give than they actually did in Experiment 1 (probably because it is easier to give imaginary money); and (e) unlike Experiment 1, requests for smaller amounts did not result in more compliance. This failure to replicate the paltry sum effect of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) is expected if this tactic works through dissonance or other motivational processes not easily experienced in a role-play setting.

#### Discussion

The power of the pique technique for inducing compliance was demonstrated in two experiments. Experiment 1 found that a strange (compared to a typical) request increased compliance by almost 60%; Experiment 2 found that a strange request increased compliance by over 25%. Both studies found that targets gave the same amount of money regardless of the nature of the request, resulting in more overall giving when the appeal was a strange as compared to typical one.

How does the pique technique get its power to persuade? The pique technique is effective because it disrupts a mindless "refusal" script. A common

response to a panhandler—and to many other forms of recognized persuasion—is to derogate the source and mindlessly move on to other business. The pique technique disrupts this refusal script by arousing the target's curiosity and focusing attention onto the "strange and unique" appeal (and away from counterarguing the appeal). Increased thought about the appeal is associated with increased liking for the panhandler—a factor that also contributes to compliance (Cialdini, 1984).

When will the pique technique work? Three conditions for an effective pique technique can be identified in the present research. (It is the task of future research to demonstrate further limitations and generalizations of the technique.) First, the pique technique works primarily in situations that involve mindless refusals by the target. Second, the appeal must be strange and must attract the target's attention. Finally, the strange appeal should disrupt counterarguing and induce positive thoughts about compliance. (For example, a panhandler spitting at a target would meet the first two conditions, but would likely result in negative cognitive responses and thus little compliance.)

The effectiveness of the pique technique does remind us of an important principle of persuasion: The successful persuasion tactic is one that directs and channels thoughts so that the target thinks in a manner agreeable to the communicator's point of view; the successful tactic disrupts any negative thoughts and promotes positive thoughts about the proposed course of action (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992, p. 24). What is important for compliance and persuasion is not whether the target is or is not in a mindless state, but how the persuasive appeal interacts with the social situation to produce and direct the target's cognitive responses (Greenwald, 1968; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

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