

“I Hope I’m Not Disturbing You, Am I?” Another Operationalization of the Foot-in-the-Mouth Paradigm¹

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A study by Howard (1990) proposed a compliance technique built on a social routine. We tested a technique based on an alternative routine. Our hypothesis was that asking people about their availability before making a request would result in increased compliance. A group of 1,791 participants were asked to answer a questionnaire by phone for a consumer survey. The results showed that compliance rates were higher when the requester inquired about respondents' availability and waited for a response than when he pursued his set speech without waiting and inquiring about respondents' availability. The results are discussed based on 2 complementary consistency mechanisms (Aune & Basil, 1994; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971).

Previous studies on decision making or behavior have demonstrated that compliance with a request is rarely the result of rational reasoning. Besides the explicit arguments put forward by the requester, both verbal and non-verbal factors have been noted to have a considerable influence on behavior: factors such as wearing the same style of clothing as the approached person (Emswiller, Deaux, & Willits, 1971), having the same opinions (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Mildberg, 1987), touching the person's arm (Brockner, Pressman, Cabitt, & Moran, 1982), or even asking a person “How are you feeling this evening?” before asking him or her to comply with a request (Howard, 1990). The purpose of the present study is to test the effect on compliance of an alternative question to Howard's query.

Howard (1990) tested the following technique:

Before you ask anyone for a donation, you first ask them how they're feeling. After they tell you they're feeling good, and you

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tell them you're glad they're feeling good, they'll be more likely to contribute to helping someone who isn't. (p. 1185)

Howard's first experiment was aimed at inducing people to buy cookies to help an organization working to feed the hungry. The experiment took place over the telephone. In the control condition, the caller would introduce himself or herself, as well as the organization, and then ask if the person would be interested in buying the cookies that someone would be coming to sell in his or her neighborhood. In the experimental condition, the caller would introduce himself or herself, as well as the organization, and then ask the person "How are you feeling this evening?". After the person had answered, the caller would make the target request. The results showed a doubling of the compliance rate according to the condition: In the control condition, 10% of the people contacted agreed to buy the cookies; and 25% accepted to do so in the experimental condition.

Howard (1990) conducted two different variations of the experiment. He noted that the compliance rate was higher only when the person was allowed to answer the question; the effect was not obtained when the caller did not wait for an answer. Moreover, the compliance rate was also strongly related to the person's answer: When the participant gave an unfavorable answer, the compliance rate fell drastically.

In Howard's (1990) view, the efficiency of this foot-in-the-mouth (FITM) technique could be explained either in terms of persistence in a public commitment or in terms of a mood effect. According to Kiesler (1971), *commitment* is defined as the "pledging or binding of the individual to behavioral acts" (p. 30). The theory states that an action performed in specific conditions (notably, free choice, visibility) commits the person to a certain way of acting. In the same way, Tedeschi, Schlenker, and Bonoma (1971) suggested that when people perform an action or take a stand in front of other people, they tend to maintain that position in order to appear consistent. Consistency permits them to keep up a positive public image. Thus, having said that they were in a good mood, people would then behave in a coherent manner by helping people in need and by complying with the proposed request.

The second explanation put forward by Howard (1990) was based on a mood effect. Previous studies have demonstrated that people who are in a positive mood tend to help more than other people (Forgas, 1998; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984; Milberg & Clark, 1988). Howard postulated that "responding to the 'How are you feeling this evening?' question actually influenced the subjects' affective state, or at least made them more aware of that state" (p. 1194). This could make respondents more apt to comply with a charitable request.

Howard's (1990) study has prompted other authors to manipulate the paradigm, and to put forward new theoretical explanations. For Aune and Basil (1994), the effect of the paradigm could come from an increased perception of intimacy or closeness, created by the question itself. The perception of intimacy produced in the respondent a relational obligation to comply with the request (Roloff, 1987). In Aune and Basil's view, "not only was the donor required to be consistent with his or her publicly stated feeling state, but the donor had to behave in a manner consistent with the relationship implied by the requester" (p. 546). Thus, still using a charitable organization—but in a face-to-face context—Aune and Basil showed that participants were more apt to give money to the organization if the experimenter first inquired of participants whether they were students at this university, and after hearing the affirmative, introduced herself as being also a student at the university, than in the control condition where the request was directly made, or in the classic FITM condition where the question was about people's mood. Moreover, the results showed that in the two FITM conditions, the participant–requester relationship was felt to be closer and more personal than in the control condition.

Nawrat (1997) proposed an FITM explanation through dialogue involvement, according to which the efficiency of the paradigm came from a stronger perception of a relationship between the requester and requestee, created by their brief interaction. In Nawrat's experiment, the requester approached the person by introducing himself as working for a charitable organization, and began the interaction about "how the donor was doing" before asking for a donation. The results showed that regardless of the requestee's answer (i.e., whether he or she was doing good or bad), the intention to make a donation increased in comparison to that of the control condition, in which there had been no previous conversation.

Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak (2001) adopted Nawrat's (1997) explanation of dialogue involvement and conducted a series of experiments. Their results showed that the FITM effect could be obtained even if the participant answered that he or she was not feeling good (Experiment 1), with an obviously commercial request (Experiment 2); and whether or not the request led participants to feel close to the requester (Experiments 3, 4, and 5). For these authors, the simple use of a dialogue mode could explain the FITM effect. Because dialogue is the preferred type of communication between friends (as compared to monologues used among strangers), it would, of itself, create a feeling of intimacy or friendly communication. According to Dolinski et al., the dialogue mode "predisposes people to switch to the script of the interaction with an acquaintance, repeatedly rehearsed throughout their past life experience" (p. 1404) and makes the person more apt to comply with the target request: "when a request is made by an acquaintance, one normally

complies with the request” (p. 1404). Thus, in Dolinski et al.’s view, if explanations in terms of consistency (Tedeschi et al., 1971), mood (Howard, 1990), or relational obligations (Aune & Basil, 1994) do explain the results obtained by these authors, respectively, involvement in dialogue is the only way to explain all of the results found in the literature.

However, Dolinski et al.’s (2001) experiments took place in Poland. First, as the authors indicated, in Poland the cultural norm of favorably answering the question “How are you feeling today?” no matter what one’s mood actually is does not exist. Second, “declaring a negative or neutral mood does not necessarily mean that the person is really feeling bad” (p. 1398). In the North American culture, it is normative to declare that one is feeling good. When people declare the opposite to someone they don’t know, it may mean that they are trying to resist the other’s influence.

In a culture (e.g., Poland) where it is not a non-normative action to declare feeling bad, people cannot use this type of shield. Therefore, the fact that the respondents in the experimental condition were more likely to accept the request, no matter their mood, than were those in the control condition, excludes the mood explanation, but not the consistency explanation. Maybe, according to Aune and Basil (1994), the sole fact of answering the question (thus, taking part in the conversation) represented an act with which the respondent afterward felt he had to behave in a coherent manner.

If we observe all the experiments and results of the literature with this view, the mechanism of consistency seems to appear in each one under a different guise: When people began by declaring they felt good, they acted afterward by helping poor people or a charitable organization (Howard, 1990); when they felt close to the requester they acted by helping the requester (Aune & Basil, 1994); and finally, when someone approached them as a friend (using a dialogue mode), and they accepted this approach (by taking part in the dialogue), they still acted in a coherent manner, by helping the person (Dolinski et al., 2001). Thus, contrary to what Dolinski et al. suggested, we think that the two explanations—involvement in a dialogue and consistency—are complementary in interpreting their results. Using a dialogue may involve a respondent, who then behaves consistently with this involvement.

Hence, we attempted to use the consistency mechanism in the form proposed by Tedeschi et al. (1971). Howard (1990) indicated that the question “How are you feeling today?” is often answered in an automatic and mindless fashion” (p. 1186). In France, this question implies a quasi-automatic social ritual, forwarding contact between two people who know each other. Thus, the answer to the question does not refer so much to the well-being of the person answering the question as it does to the fact that the person accepts to exchange, to communicate with the person asking the question.

Another question fulfills a similar function. The statements “I’m not disturbing you, am I?” or “I hope I’m not disturbing you” are used between colleagues or between friends wishing to initiate a contact. Similar to the question used by Howard, “I’m not disturbing you, am I?” usually generates a favorable answer—“Not at all”/“I’m listening”—by which the approached person shows his or her agreement to converse.

Based on what has been presented, we attempted to extend the FITM technique by using a new operationalization—this time by inquiring not about mood, but about availability—and then by making a noncharitable request: whether or not the person approached would be willing to answer a lengthy questionnaire for a consumer survey. It should be noted that the effect of the paradigm with a noncharitable request was tested only in Poland by Dolinski et al. (2001). Howard (1990) indicated that the effect could be limited by a request in which “the respondents do not perceive that requestor has personal gain associated with their compliance” (p. 1195).

Our hypothesis postulates an effect similar to Howard’s (1990): an increase in the compliance rate with the target request when it is preceded by the question “I’m not disturbing you, am I?” and when the person is given the opportunity to answer. People answering by a favorable statement (as it is normative to do) will more frequently accept the target request in order to appear consistent. Moreover, we postulate that this approach will be efficient only when respondents give a favorable answer.

Method

Context

The present experiment was conducted as a part of a large consumer survey for a regional newspaper in South Brittany, France. The study is aimed at inducing individuals to answer a questionnaire about a newspaper called *Le Télégramme*. The questionnaire included 32 questions.

Participants

The participants were drawn from the town’s telephone directory. There were 1,791 participants (1,097 women, 694 men), who were randomly assigned to one of the study conditions. The callers were 105 male and female students from a technical college in Vannes (Brittany, France), who ranged in age from 19 to 25 years.

Procedure

In Experimental Condition 1, the participants were contacted by telephone at their place of residence. The caller would say “Hello, I’m a student at the technical college in Vannes. I hope I’m not disturbing you, am I?” The caller would then wait for the answer and continue:

You probably know the regional daily paper *Le Télégramme*, at least by name. Well, for our studies, we are carrying out a survey on this newspaper. Would you have a few minutes to answer by phone? There are only yes-or-no questions, so it should go very fast.

If the person agreed, the caller would start asking the questions.

In Experimental Condition 2, the caller would introduce himself or herself in the same way, and would ask the question “I hope I’m not disturbing you, am I?” but would then continue without waiting for an answer.

Finally, in the control condition, after introducing himself or herself, the caller would go directly to the survey, saying “You probably know the regional daily newspaper . . .”.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable corresponds to the compliance rate with the request. It was measured by the number of people who agreed to answer the questionnaire.

Operational Hypothesis

We expect that the compliance rate with the target request will be higher in the condition using “I hope I’m not disturbing you, am I?” followed by the opportunity to answer, than in the control condition or in the condition using “I hope I’m not disturbing you, am I?” but without waiting for an answer. Moreover, the compliance rate in this condition will be higher than in the two other conditions only when respondents give a favorable answer; when an unfavorable answer is given, the compliance rate will not differ from the control condition or the condition in which the callers do not wait for the answer.

Results

Statistical analyses based on chi-square and *Z* tests were conducted on our data. Experimental Condition 1 (i.e., “I hope I’m not disturbing you, am

I?" plus waiting for the answer) included 587 participants. Among the participants, 12 persons (2%) gave clearly unfavorable answers (e.g., "Yes, you are"; "Yes, I don't have the time right now"; "I'm in a hurry"; "I have to leave"). The remainder (575 people) gave favorable or neutral answers (e.g., "No"; "No, you aren't disturbing me"; "Not much"; "No, not really"; "It depends"). Only 1 of the participants who gave an unfavorable answer agreed to answer the survey. The 12 participants who gave unfavorable answers were included in the statistical analyses. Experimental Condition 2 (i.e., "I hope I'm not disturbing you, am I?" and not waiting for the answer) included 608 participants. Finally, the control condition included 596 participants.

According to our first hypothesis, the results from an overall chi-square statistic show a significant difference between the three conditions, $\chi^2(2, N = 1791) = 12.54, p < .01$. Concerning condition comparisons, results from *Z*-test analyses show that participants in Condition 1 (i.e., "I hope I'm not disturbing you, am I?" and waiting for the person to answer) showed a greater willingness to answer the survey than did those in the control condition, $Z(1, N = 1183) = 3.33, p < .001$; or those in Condition 2 (i.e., "I hope I'm not disturbing you, am I?" and not waiting for the answer), $Z(1, N = 1195) = 2.55, p < .01$. Furthermore, no difference was noted between Condition 2 and the control condition, $Z(1, N = 1204) = 0.80, ns$.

According to our second hypothesis, the results from an overall chi-square statistic including in Condition 1 only participants who gave a favorable or neutral answer show a significant difference, $\chi^2(2, N = 1779) = 13.55, p < .001$. The results from *Z*-test analyses show that the compliance rate of participants in Condition 1 who gave a favorable or neutral answer is significantly higher than those in the control condition, $Z(1, N = 1171) = 3.45, p < .001$; or those in Condition 2, $Z(1, N = 1183) = 2.68, p < .01$. Conversely, the results from an overall chi-square statistic including in Condition 1 only participants who gave an unfavorable answer do not show a significant difference, $\chi^2(2, N = 1216) = 1.43, ns$ (see Table 1).

Discussion

The findings reported here suggest that an automatic and a priori insignificant response made by people can influence their own compliance behavior. The results show that inquiring about the availability of respondents and waiting for their response significantly increases the chance that they will take part in a consumer survey by telephone, compared to an inquiry about their availability without waiting for the answer, or with not asking respondents about their availability. This pattern of results is congruent with our first hypothesis, and the purpose of our study (i.e., replicating Howard's, 1990, results) seems to have been achieved.

Table 1

Number of Participants Who Did or Did Not Comply and Compliance Rate Depending on Condition

Condition	Number of participants who did comply	Number of participants who did not comply	Total number of participants
Condition 1: "I hope I'm not disturbing you, am I?" and waiting for the answer	148 (25.2%)	439	587
Favorable or neutral answer	147 (25.6%)	428	575
Unfavorable answer	1 (8.3%)	11	12
Condition 2: "I hope I'm not disturbing you, am I?" and not waiting for the answer	116 (19.1%)	492	608
Control condition	103 (17.3%)	493	596

The results were obtained by testing an alternative interrogative statement to Howard's (1990) query, using the same characteristic: Both questions were used in a greeting ritual, and most often produced a quasi-automatic and favorable response. In our study, effective responses to this question showed its high normativeness: Only 12 participants out of 587 (2%) answered that they were not available. Concerning our second hypothesis, referring to Howard (Experiment 3), we postulated an increase in the compliance rate when people gave favorable answer, and a decrease in the compliance rate when the answer was unfavorable. The results seem congruent with this hypothesis: People who gave favorable or neutral answers showed greater willingness to comply with the target request than did people in the control condition or in the condition in which the callers did not wait for the answer.

Conversely, people who gave an unfavorable answer did not differ in their willingness to comply with those of the two other conditions. But because of the small number of participants who gave unfavorable answer in Condition 1 ($N = 12$), one could argue that statistical analysis is not reliable. We encourage future research, so as to measure this variable more precisely by categorizing respondents' answers further than the two levels used here, or to develop a method that generates a greater number of unfavorable responses.

Asking people about their availability and waiting for their responses produced an increase in the rate of compliance with a noncharitable request, even when all respondents, no matter their answer, were taken into account. Two kinds of explanations, based on a consistency mechanism, can be advanced. In the present experiment, we used a question about availability in order to induce people to answer a questionnaire. A person who wishes to appear consistent could hardly refuse to answer the questionnaire after having stated that he or she was available. The question we used was directly related to our target request, as Howard's (1990) question about mood was also related to his: He inquired about people's mood prior to asking them to contribute to a charitable cause. The results of these two studies are in agreement with Tedeschi et al.'s (1971) consistency postulate, and also with commitment theory (Joule & Beauvois, 1998; Kiesler, 1971), which states that an action (especially a public action) will commit the person carrying out the action to a certain behavior, and will make him or her more likely to follow through with this course of action. For this reason, we could postulate that the approach question and the target request must be related to produce the foot-in-the-mouth effect.

However, the consistency mechanism may manifest itself under a different or more global guise. Howard's (1990) mood question and our availability question are both in common use among people who know each other. According to Dolinski et al. (2001), the dialogue mode predisposes people to interact with a stranger as if he were a friend, and thus to try to help him. In the view of Aune and Basil (1994), an increased perception of a relationship between the requester and the requestee creates relational obligations, and induces people to act in a manner that is coherent with this closeness. Based on this, asking people about their mood or their availability may also predispose them to interact with the requester as if he were an acquaintance, to feel close to him, and thus induce in them a greater willingness to comply with the request in order to behave in a coherent manner.

A replication of this experiment and the establishment of precise categories of responses could help to clarify the most valid explanation. If a favorable answer to the availability question is normative, and thus an unfavorable answer is highly difficult to give (only 2% of the participants answered in this way), neutral responses such as "It depends" could be a way to protect oneself from the influence of the requester (who is actually an unknown person, inquiring as if he were known) without appearing too deviant. Therefore, in the case of a neutral response, we should obtain a compliance rate comparable to that of the control condition. People giving an answer like "It depends" are not involved in Tedeschi et al.'s (1971) consistency mechanism because, congruent with the statement, their availability and thus their behavior "depends" on the request.

Howard (1990; Experiment 3) did categorize participants' responses into three levels. The results showed that a *medium* favorability condition produced less compliance than did a *high* favorability condition, but the compliance rate was still significantly higher than in the *control* condition. Consequently, one can imagine that the two consistency mechanisms may manifest themselves in a complementary guise. To take this idea further, using an approach bringing into play the two consistency mechanisms could produce an increased effect. However, Dolinski et al.'s (2001) results did not show this kind of interaction effect. It may be that Poland's cultural norms do not allow this. Future studies should test this hypothesis in the French or North American culture.

In conclusion, the present study shows yet again the considerable amount of influence that seemingly secondary elements can have on decision making. Moreover, it suggests a new practical operationalization of the foot-in-the-mouth paradigm, and shows that the effect is robust across time and culture. These results open the way for future theoretical studies and concrete applications in the domains of marketing or opinion surveys.

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