

Mindlessness or Mindfulness: A Partial Replication and Extension of Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz

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Four studies examined whether verbal behavior is mindful (cognitive) or mindless (automatic). All used Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz's (1978) experimental paradigm. Experimenters approached subjects at copying machines and asked to use it first. Their requests varied in the amount and kind of information given. Study 1 found less compliance when experimenters gave a controllable reason ("... because I don't want to wait") than an uncontrollable reason ("... because I feel really sick"). In Studies 2 and 3, requests for controllable reasons elicited less compliance than requests used in the Langer et al. study. Neither study replicated Langer et al.'s results. Furthermore, the controllable condition's lower compliance supports a cognitive approach to social interaction. In the fourth study subjects were given instructions intended to increase cognitive processing of the requests and the pattern of compliance indicated in-depth processing of the request. Results of the four studies provide evidence for cognitive processing rather than mindlessness in social interaction.

In contrast to most social psychological theories emphasizing cognitive processes, Langer and her colleagues characterize behavior as "mindless." Most people would probably agree that some activities, such as walking and typewriting, are overlearned and automatic. But Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) make a much stronger claim: "pseudothinking behavior is more the rule than the exception for practically all verbal as well as nonverbal behavior" (p. 638). If their claim is correct, our field has erred in emphasizing the cognitive.

Before relegating models of the thoughtful person to the minor leagues of social psychological theorizing, we should carefully examine the evidence for Langer et al.'s claim, particularly for mindlessness in "complex social interaction." A norm of mindlessness when people talk and interact with others contradicts the beliefs of most cognitive social

psychologists. A widely cited study in support of mindlessness of this sort involves compliance to a request (Langer et al., 1978, Experiment 1). Experimenters approached subjects about to use a copying machine and asked to use it first. The request varied in the amount and kind of information given. In one condition, experimenters simply made the request ("Excuse me, I have 5(20) pages. May I use the Xerox machine?"). In a second condition experimenters gave "real" information when stating the reason for the request ("Excuse me, I have 5(20) pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?"). In the "placebic information" condition the reason given contained redundant information ("Excuse me, I have 5(20) pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I have to make copies?").

Langer et al. reasoned that the placebic and request only conditions are equivalent in terms of the amount of information given. Therefore, if information is processed by subjects, compliance should be equal in the placebic and request only conditions but greater in the real-information condition. This pattern occurred when experimenters asked a large favor (Table 1). However, when the experimenter asked a small favor, giving a reason led to equal compliance (Table 1).

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Table 1
Percentage of Subjects Complying With Requests

Experiment	Conditions				
	No information	Placebic ^a information	Real ^b information	Controllable reason	Uncontrollable reason
Langer et al.					
Large favor	24% (25)	24% (25)	42% (24)	—	—
Small favor	60% (15)	93% (15)	94% (16)	—	—
Experiment 1	—	—	—	74% ^c (19)	95% ^d (19)
Experiment 2	93% (14)	100% (8)	90% (10)	70% ^e (10)	—
Experiment 3	83% (24)	67% (24)	79% (24)	54% ^c (24)	—
Experiment 4	58% (19)	52% (25)	92% (25)	—	—

^a“... because I have to make copies.”

^b“... because I'm in a rush.”

^c“... because I don't want to wait.”

^d“... because I feel really sick.”

^e“... because I want to go see my boyfriend.”

Subjects complied whether real information or placebo information was stated. Langer et al. concluded that people interact in an automatic, mindless fashion when an effortful response is not required.

These conclusions have received a great deal of attention. The study described above has frequently been detailed in widely circulated books and journals (e.g., Abelson, 1981; Brody, 1980; Wrightsman & Deaux, 1981). Yet Langer et al.'s interpretation of the results is problematical. Mindlessness is inferred on the basis of subject's behavior. Because Langer et al. consider compliance with placebo information irrational (in terms of the information given), they call it mindless. But, as Langer et al. recognize, “subjects may simply not be thinking about what one thinks they are thinking about.”

What might subjects be thinking about in this situation? Perhaps subjects processed the placebo information, realizing it made little sense. But the small favor is a minor imposition and the placebo information could be interpreted as a garbled attempt to give a good excuse. Rather than waste time investigating exactly what the placebo information meant, subjects may have decided to comply with the request. In the large favor condition, breaking into the line constitutes a greater imposition on the subject; subjects were less forgiving. Moreover, the experimenter's giving a vague excuse provides the subject with a

convenient justification to refuse the request. Assuming this pattern of inference would explain Langer et al.'s results without recourse to the mindlessness concept (cf., Harvey & Weary, 1981). In brief, the similar compliance rates that were observed in the placebo and in the real-information conditions need not be interpreted as an absence of cognitive processing.

Is there a way to test mindfulness versus mindlessness using the same paradigm? One possibility is to manipulate different reasons for the favor than those manipulated by Langer et al.—reasons that we can be more confident will elicit different compliance in mindless than in mindful states. Whereas placebo information provides an ambiguous justification for a favor, an obviously bad justification should elicit about the same amount of compliance as a good justification, *if subjects are in a mindless state*. In a mindful state, on the other hand, a bad excuse should elicit a lower compliance rate than a good one.

Attribution research suggests that one distinction between good and bad excuses is in perceived controllability. An excuse can suggest one is compelled to perform an action or imply volitional control (Weiner, 1980). Lack of control mitigates responsibility for a transgression more than volitional control. Thus, when people ask favors for reasons they cannot control, their requests are more

frequently complied with than when reasons for the requested favor are controllable (Barnes, Ickes, & Kidd, 1979; Weiner, 1980). In the copying machine paradigm, requests to go first because of controllable reasons (e.g., "because I don't want to wait") should be complied with less—they do not mitigate responsibility for needing the favor. When a person lacks control over the reason for wanting to go first (e.g., "because I feel really sick"), compliance should be greater. This should hold true only if subjects are processing information (mindfully). If, on the other hand, subjects are mindless, giving a controllable reason should elicit the same compliance as an uncontrollable reason.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, the copying machine paradigm was used but requests for using the machine first were either for a controllable reason or an uncontrollable reason. If subjects are behaving mindlessly, they should comply equally to the requests. If subjects are behaving mindfully, compliance should be greater when an uncontrollable reason is given. There is the qualification that the request not be stated in a structurally novel way. Stating a controllable reason is novel in that people typically state uncontrollable reasons for their negative actions (Folkles, 1982). But Langer et al. maintain that as long as the request fits a "Favor X + Reason Y " structure, semantic novelty is unimportant.

Method

Subjects were 82 persons using copying machines in University of California, Los Angeles, libraries. Of these, 38 were asked a small favor (subjects had more than 5 pages to copy). Because mindlessness is postulated only in the small favor (low effort) conditions, requests were to copy only 5 pages.

Experimenters were 2 undergraduate females and 1 undergraduate male. Before running any subjects, they read the Langer et al. article. They understood that Langer et al. would predict no differences in the study they were to conduct. Furthermore, they were blind to the alternative, attributional prediction of differences. Thus, any experimenter bias should have led to equal compliance levels (mindlessness). (Langer et al. found no difference in the pattern of compliance between the blind experimenter and the informed experimenter.)

The procedures of the Langer et al. Experiment 1 were followed, except only two requests were made. In the controllable condition, experimenters asked to "... use

the Xerox machine, because I don't want to wait". In the uncontrollable condition experimenters explained "... because I feel really sick". The experimenters repeatedly rehearsed the requests so that they were stated in the same manner; facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice, and posture were uniform.

Results and Discussion

Results were consistent with attributional predictions. More subjects complied with the request when justified by the uncontrollable reason (18 of 19 subjects) than the controllable reason (13 of 19 subjects). The difference is significant when using a one-tailed a priori contrast with arc sine transformation, $t(36) = 3.27$, $p < .05$. The small difference between conditions occurs partly because of high compliance from most subjects; only a minority refused a small request.

Experiment 2

A second experiment was undertaken to replicate Experiment 1's lower compliance for controllable reasons as well as the results of Langer et al.'s small favor conditions.

Method

Subjects were 42 people copying more than 4 pages at the University of Sussex library, Brighton, England. The procedures of Langer et al.'s Experiment 1 were followed with a few modifications. The 3 female undergraduate experimenters were informed of both cognitive and mindlessness hypotheses. Although they read the Langer et al. article, they were unaware of the replication experiment described above. Additionally, the experimenters requested to copy 4 pages. There were four conditions: no information, placebic information, real information, and controllable reason. In the latter condition the experimenters stated, "Excuse me, I have 4 pages. May I use the Xerox machine because I want to go see my boyfriend?"

Results and Discussion

The results provide support for the cognitive position. Consistent with an attributional approach, the a priori contrast shows less compliance in the controllable reason condition than in the combined placebic and real-information conditions (70% vs. 94%), $t(38) = 2.49$, $p < .05$, one-tailed. Unlike Langer et al., the a priori contrast between the no-information and the combined placebic and real-information condition is not significant

(93% vs. 94%), $t(38) = .24$, *ns* (see Table 1). Nor is the direction of differences similar to Langer et al.

Experiment 3

Another experiment was conducted with a larger number of subjects to replicate the above findings.

Method

Subjects were 96 persons copying more than 5 pages in the University of California, Los Angeles, libraries. The 4 experimenters (2 male and 2 female undergraduates) stated they had 5 copies to make. In the controllable reason condition the excuse given was ". . . because I don't want to wait."

Experimenters were informed of the alternative hypotheses and read the Langer et al. article but were unaware of Experiments 1 and 2. Additionally, experimenters were specifically instructed to state the request in a neutral manner and to avoid excessively pleading nonverbal behavior. Dramatic nonverbal behavior could overwhelm the content of the request, resulting in equal compliance across conditions. Care was also taken to ensure requests were stated slowly enough so subjects could comprehend them. Equal compliance across conditions would occur if requests were stated so quickly that subjects could not recognize the script (as in mindlessness) or process the controllability information (as in mindfulness).

Results and Discussion

The results are similar to Experiments 1 and 2. Fewer subjects complied when a controllable reason was given than when placebic or real information was given (54% vs. 73%), $t(92) = 1.8$, $p < .05$, one-tailed. The lower compliance in the controllable condition suggests cognitive processing. As in Experiment 2, compliance did not differ between the no-information condition and the combined placebic and real-information conditions (83% vs. 73%), $t(92) = .79$, *ns* (Table 1). Thus, neither Experiment 2 nor 3 replicates Langer et al.'s results. The difference between the no-information and placebic information conditions and the real-information condition did not approach significance in either experiment. Nor was mean compliance in the predicted direction.

The failure to replicate Langer et al.'s results may be surprising. "Most psychologists have an exaggerated belief in the likelihood of replicating an obtained finding" (Tversky

& Kahneman, 1971, p. 105) and "in the validity of conclusions based on small samples" (p. 106). On the other hand, unexpectedly high compliance rates in the no-information condition (93% and 83% in Experiments 2 and 3, respectively) may have constituted a ceiling effect. Such a ceiling effect would make it impossible to generate an enhanced rate of compliance through the introduction of real information or placebic information.

If, however, the present results do not derive from a ceiling effect then we must account for the surprising fact that subjects seem to comply similarly when given no excuse and real information. The real information ("... because I'm in a rush") seems intuitively more compelling than the control condition (no excuse at all), but does not present as compelling an excuse as "... because I feel really sick." Putting aside ceiling effect considerations, we can perhaps understand the observed pattern of compliance if we assume that subjects process information in the small request condition but do not process the available information thoroughly. Thus subjects responded similarly to no-information, real-information, and placebic conditions because they considered the favor too small to justify in-depth processing. In contrast, the controllable reason information is more easily processed because it is more clearly a bad excuse.

Experiment 4

Experiment 4 examined compliance under conditions encouraging complex information processing. If subjects are not processing at a complex level in the small-effort conditions tested above, then a different pattern of compliance should emerge when conditions facilitate complex information processing. The pattern should correspond to Langer et al.'s high-effort condition (Table 1). Compliance should be similar in the no-information and placebic conditions but higher in the real-information condition. In contrast, asking a small favor should lead to a high level of compliance across all conditions.

The Langer et al. conditions were manipulated using a role-play methodology. Although there are disadvantages to a role-play

methodology, it was considered most feasible. To encourage complex processing, Experiment 4 subjects were instructed to "think carefully about this decision" of whether to comply with the request. In addition subjects were asked to justify their decision to comply or not to comply with the request. Accounting for one's actions to an individual with unknown views increases complex information processing (Tetlock, 1983).

Method

Subjects were 69 UCLA undergraduates (47 females, 22 males) taking a course in social psychology. Each received a questionnaire explaining that two questions would be asked, the first asking "what action you would take in a certain situation" and the second asking "you to explain why you would take that action." Then the following situation was described:

Imagine yourself in the following situation. You are in a UCLA library and decide to copy 10 pages from a book. This floor of the library has only one copying machine but when you arrive no one is using the machine. You place the material on the machine. Just before you deposit the money someone approaches you and says, "Excuse me, I have 5 pages."

This description included one of the three requests conditions from the Langer et al. experiment (no information, placebo, or real). Subjects were then asked "What would you do?" and were instructed to "think carefully before answering." Subjects put a check by "I would let the person use the machine" or "I would not let the person use the machine." The second question asked to "please explain in detail why you would or would not let the person use the copying machine."

Results and Discussion

The pattern of compliance indicates complex processing of requests consistent with the Langer et al. large favor condition (Table 1). Compliance was similar in the no-information and the placebo information conditions (58% vs. 52%, respectively) and was higher in the real-information condition (92%), $t(66) = 6.71, p < .05$, one-tailed.

General Discussion

These studies provide evidence for cognitive processing in a situation that had previously appeared to elicit mindless behavior. Demonstrating cognitive processing is difficult us-

ing the copying machine paradigm because the majority of subjects comply with a small request; variation between conditions occurs only for a minority of subjects. The obvious solution is to increase the size of the request, thereby lowering overall compliance. Yet, the more effortful response would be accompanied by increased cognitive processing, according to a mindlessness perspective.

Confidence that cognitions influence behavior is gained more from the consistently lower compliance in the controllable condition than from the size of the differences. Despite evidence for cognitive processing in Studies 1, 2, and 3, Study 4 suggests that processing in response to small favors may be less complete than it might be under more ideal circumstances. Although everyday social interactions may often be less than completely mindful, they do not appear to be as mindless (automatic) as might have been surmised from the results reported by Langer et al. (1978).

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