

SOCIAL LABELING AND COMPLIANCE: AN EVALUATION OF THE LINK BETWEEN THE LABEL AND THE REQUEST

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Research on the effect of a negative social labeling on compliance has shown divergent results. Sometimes, a negative labeling made after a first request leads to decreased compliance with a further request, while, in other cases, this labeling leads to increased compliance. These contradictory results could come from the presence or absence of a link between the label and the nature of the further request. An experiment was carried out in which subjects were the target of an initial negative label (unpleasant remark on the fact they ate horse meat presented on top of a shopping bag they had agreed to keep an eye on). Then, a few seconds later, they had the opportunity to carry out a prosocial behavior linked with the label (a petition in favor of animals) or without a link with it (a petition for the diminution of pollution). Results showed that compliance with the later request was affected by the initial labeling only when there was congruence between the request and the label.

Previous studies on the effect of a negative label on compliance have shown discrepancies in results. Steele (1975) was the first to point out that a negative label increased helping behavior. During an initial phone contact, the experimenter insinuated that the subject was individualistic and certainly did not care about what was taking place in the community. Two days after this phase of labeling, another experimenter phoned the same person and offered the possibility to give some time to a charity in the district. The figures reveal that this negative label led to an increase in the compliance rate: 93% in this experimental condition against 46% in a control group. For Steele the negative label decreased the subject's self-esteem. So, when the possibility of restoring it was given a little while later, it, quite naturally, led the subject to comply with the request made. This explanation in terms of restoration of self-esteem seems plausible but, regrettably, a negative label does not necessarily imply this positive effect on

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compliance with the request. For instance, Goldman, Seever, and Seever (1982) showed an inhibition of helping behavior following a negative label. These authors asked a first confederate to step up to students entering a library, and ask the way to such and such a place on the campus. In one of the conditions, the confederate thanked the subject warmly (*positive label*) whereas, in another one, the confederate behaved in a rude offensive way, questioning the helpfulness of the subject and his ability to give a direction correctly (*negative label*). In a third group, "thank you" was said just to be polite. The subject went into the library and was approached a few minutes later by a second confederate who asked if the subject would agree to give 2 hours' time for the benefit of a telethon which was taking place the month after. Finally, in a fourth group, the second request was made without any preliminaries. The results showed that in the positive label condition, the compliance rate with the last request was significantly higher than in the condition without labeling (67% against 40%) whereas these two groups distinguished themselves statistically from the group with a negative label (20%) and from the control group (17%). Thus, for Goldman et al. these results confirmed the self-perception theory explaining the "foot-in-the-door" effect (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) used here. The first request led the subject to perceive himself as a helpful person in the *positive label* condition and as a rather unhelpful person in the *negative* one. Once this self-perception had been activated, the subject behaved in a way congruent with this self-perception: the "helpful" line quite logically led the subject to comply with the request whereas the "non-helpful" line led to refusal of the second request. These results seem surprising because they are in sharp contrast with Steele's theory which stressed the fact that the *negative label* favored subsequent helping behavior.

There seems to be a total contradiction between these two studies. In fact, upon closer examination an important difference can be found in the very nature of the two requests used. In the study of Goldman et al. (1982) both requests did not concern the same object while in the study by Steele (1975) they did. Besides, a second experiment carried out by this author showed that the link between both requests played an important part. If the theme of the first request which served as an excuse to attribute the negative label was different from the theme of the later request, it led to a decrease in the compliance rate for the final request. All evidence tends to prove that if a final request does not contradict the label wrongly attributed during the initial request, the negative label has practically no effect. The restoration of self-esteem seems to be possible only when the subject is given an opportunity to adopt a behavior which directly contradicts the negative label. For example, if someone is wrongly labeled as unhelpful with children, a request aimed at helping children will be accepted more easily than a request without any link with this topic, such as the protection of animals, or pollution. An evaluation of the impact of the correspondence between the situation

of labeling and the nature of the final request was made in the experiment presented below.

HYPOTHESIS

Considering the results of the two studies mentioned above, more compliance with a request could be expected when the cause of the negative labeling attribution concerned the same theme as that of the final request. Conversely, in the case of a dissociation between the theme of the two requests, a non significant difference between the experimental and the control situation could be expected.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Sixty-nine men and 103 women (aged between 20-50) were selected at random in the street. The experiment took place in a very busy street of a tourist resort on particularly bright days. All those approached were walking in the street without a companion. Twelve people were eliminated from the experiment (5 men and 7 women) because they did not comply with the request of the first confederate in one of the two experimental conditions).

PROCEDURE

The experiment required three confederates, women between 20 and 22 years old, who intervened in a random way in each of the defined roles. A first confederate, carrying a heavy and voluminous shopping bag, approached a subject walking in front of her in the street. In evidence on top of the bag, there was a package labeled "Horse meat". The confederate asked the subject: *"Excuse me please Madam/Sir, my bag is heavy and I would like to buy a magazine in the bookshop opposite. Would you mind keeping an eye on my bag while I go and get it?"* If the subject agreed, the confederate expressed thanks, crossed the street and entered the bookshop situated 25 meters from there. If the subject refused, then the confederate, took the bag again and approached another person.

Twenty seconds after the first confederate had entered the bookshop, a second confederate, who was standing at a distance, set off towards the subject. Once there, the confederate stopped, looked at the shopping bag, then looked the subject straight in the eye, and then looked at the shopping bag again. The confederate then pointed to the bag and said to the subject *"It is really appalling to eat horse meat. When I think that it is thanks to the horse that we have evolved so much. You should be ashamed"*. Then, without waiting for the subject's reaction, the confederate walked away at a smart pace. About 20 seconds later, the first confederate came out of the bookshop holding a magazine and went back to the

subject, took the bag, expressed warm thanks and set off again in the opposite direction. At the end of the street, a third confederate – who had been watching the scene since the beginning – approached the subject. In the first experimental condition (*same requests theme*), the confederate said to the subject “*Excuse me Madam/Sir, would you agree to sign a petition in favor of the animal cause. We do hope the government will make more effort to have abandoned or ill-treated animals looked after properly*”. In the second experimental condition (*different requests theme*), the confederate said in the same tone “*Excuse me Madam/Sir, would you agree to sign a petition in favor of the limitation of the traffic in the city-center. We do hope that the government will make more effort to decrease pollution in big cities*”. Those two justifications were used because a previous evaluation had shown that they offered the same rates of compliance when they were directly proposed to the subjects in the street. The confederate then asked if the subject would like to sign. If the subject agreed, a pen was handed over with a clipboard on which there was a sheet of paper with the signatures, names, and addresses of eight fictitious persons. In the two control conditions, the same procedure was used with the subjects but the initial phase of labeling was not carried out.

RESULTS

Because no difference was observed between the behavior of the men and the women who took part in this experiment relative to the experimental conditions the data, presented in Table 1 below, have been aggregated.

A log-linear analysis of the 2 (*theme of petition: animals/pollution*) x 2 (*labeling: negative labeling/no labeling*) plan and using the answer of the subject as a dependent variable (Logit model) showed a main effect of the labeling conditions ($X^2(1, N=160) = 9.23, p < .003$) and of the petition theme ($X^2(1, N=160) = 5.73, p < .02$). An interaction effect between these 2 variables was also observed ($X^2(4, N=160) = 17.21, p < .005$). However, this effect was explained only by the group placed in the labeling condition with a petition in favor of animals. The 2 by 2 comparisons showed that this group distinguished itself markedly from all

TABLE 1
COMPLIANCE WITH THE REQUEST ACCORDING TO THE CONDITIONS OF LABELING AND THE PETITION'S THEME (IN %)

	Petition theme		Total
	Animals	Pollution	
Labeling	70.0	40.0	55.0
No labeling	35.0	27.5	31.3
Total	52.5	33.8	

¹There are 40 subjects per case

the others, whereas no difference in the compliance rate was observed among the three other groups.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in the first experimental condition confirmed those obtained by Steele (1975). Compared to a control situation, a *negative label* increased the compliance with a later request. However, this effect was observed only when the theme of the final request was linked with the cause of the attribution of the label. Contrary to Goldman, Seever and Seever (1982), no inhibition effect of the negative label was observed when no link existed between the two requests. This difference could have resulted from the cost equivalence between the two requests in this experiment, whereas the costs were gradual in the study of Goldman et al..

The fact must also be underlined that, in this experiment, the label was not attributed once the subject had done someone a favor. Beyond that, it was attributed on the basis of erroneous information. So, contrary to the study of Goldman et al., the subject had no opportunity to qualify as an inefficient person who had proved unable to help somebody. The subject's behavior was judged as negative only by the second confederate (having bought some horse meat to eat) when, in actual fact, the subject was not the perpetrator of this behavior. It was then difficult to produce a subject's self-perception which would lead to a perception of self as an unhelpful person. As in the study of Goldman et al., the subject would thus be led to behave in a way congruent with this self-perception and so, to comply less favorably with the final request.

The results of this study actually seem to reinforce the theory of Steele (1975). A negative labeling resulted in negative effect on the subject's self-esteem but in keeping with a specific trait. The subject was then motivated to disavow the negative attribution made to him and the desire to prove a love of animals might be particularly strong. If the possibility to restore this self-esteem was offered later on, then the subject was more likely to comply with the request made by the last confederate.

If the opportunity to prove a love of animals or to do something for the cause of animals was not offered, the effect of the negative label endured and led the subject to refuse the last request. Such results mean that some hypotheses about the effect of negative labeling can be left aside. Obviously, an interpretation in terms of guilt felt after the initial labeling did not provide an explanation for why there was a positive effect on help in one case and not in the other. The same was true as regards the feeling of injustice experienced after the attribution of the labeling which should eventually have affected the behavior in the same way, whatever the nature of the final request. A hypothesis in terms of negative self-

perception did not provide an explanation for the differences in behavior depending on the request either. Obviously, at this stage, the subject's self-esteem should have been restored first and then tested, which was not done in this experiment. So further research will be necessary to explore this hypothesis. If the self-esteem evaluation were to be made after the presentation of the final request, it would certainly bring important new elements to light.

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