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SOCIAL LABELING AND THE FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR EFFECT*

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SUMMARY

The foot-in-the-door procedure, first experimentally proposed by Freedman and Fraser, increases compliance for a critical request by preceding it with an easier request. Self-perception theory has frequently been used to explain why the procedure is effective. Labeling of an individual's behavior by others also may influence that individual's self-concept. The present study combined a labeling technique with the foot-in-the-door procedure to see whether compliance would be altered. An easy request was first asked of individuals entering a university library, and after answering they were informed that their response was either helpful or not helpful. Control conditions were also carried out. With 120 university students serving as *S*s, the results showed that a positive label produced significantly greater compliance, and a negative label produced significantly lower compliance, when compared to the typical (nonlabel) foot-in-the-door procedure.

A. INTRODUCTION

A familiar and practical technique frequently utilized by salespeople for getting individuals to comply with a large request is first to have them grant a simple, innocuous request. This procedure generally referred to as the foot-in-the-door was first experimentally examined by Freedman and Fraser (3). Their results showed that the technique was remarkably strong and had considerable generality. They explained their findings with the use of self-perception theory (1). Thus, a person observes his own behavior while complying with an initial request. On the basis of that evidence, he decides that he is a helpful, cooperative person who will give aid to others.

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This altered self-perception leads him to continue to be helpful and to grant a second larger request.

Since the publication of the original foot-in-the-door study, additional research has examined conditions under which the procedure will, or will not, produce compliance, and variations which will lead to even greater levels of compliance. Goldman, Creason, and McCall (4) found that the level of compliance could be increased above that obtained in the typical "foot" procedure by interposing a middle level request between the initial and final request. Seligman, Bush, and Kirsch (10) reported that only large initial requests produced more subsequent compliance. Uranowitz (11) demonstrated that high or low external justification for performing an initial request affected the level of help offered in a subsequent situation.

Although self-perception theory, as presented by Bem (1), suggests that actual behavior and the situations in which the behavior occurs provide the strongest information concerning one's characteristics or traits, the theory also indicates that information or a label provided by others may make one aware of one's personal dispositions. Schur (9) asserts that society, by labeling certain individuals as deviant, encourages them to adopt a deviant role image, which then may bring about and sustain their deviant behavior. Miller, Brickman, and Bolen (8) demonstrated that attributing neatness and nonlittering traits to children results in cleaner school rooms and reduced littering behavior. A persuasive procedure was far less effective. In attempting to increase compliance to a request for contributions to health associations, Kraut (5) tested the impact of labels on self-perception. The results showed that those *S*s given a charitable label donated more to a second request for funds than *S*s who received no label, and that *S*s who did not contribute to the first request gave less to the second solicitation when they were labeled uncharitable.

The present study examines the effect of social labels in conjunction with the foot-in-the-door procedure. Labeling an individual's response to an initial easy level request should make him more aware of the consequence of that act, form more definite conclusions about himself, and subsequently behave in a more consistent manner when responding to a second request. Thus, it was predicted that *S*s given a "positive" label upon the completion of an initial request would comply more to a second request, and that *S*s given a "negative" label upon the completion of an initial request would comply less to a second request, when compared with the compliance of *S*s to second requests who have not received labels.

It should be noted that the review of the literature and the research conducted are American bound.

B. Method

1. *Subjects*

Ss were 120 people, mostly students, who were about to enter the general university library. Traffic into the library was slow but continuous. During the period when the study was carried out, it was possible to stop each person who approached the entrance to the library alone. The *Ss* were assigned to four conditions in a random order. On the completion of one rotation of the four conditions, they were again randomly ordered. This was continued until each condition contained 30 *Ss*.

2. *Experimental Conditions*

Four conditions were devised for the study: Condition 1 ("Foot") employed the usual foot-in-the-door technique, an initial easy level request followed by a second hard level request; Condition 2 ("Control") employed only the second request; Condition 3 ("Positive-foot") was similar to "Foot," with the addition that the *S* received a positively worded label when he completed the initial request; and Condition 4 ("Negative-foot") was also similar to "Foot," with the addition that the *S* received a negative worded label when he completed the initial request.

3. *Procedure*

An *S* was stopped by the first *C* and asked for directions to the Education Building, which was several blocks away. All *Ss* attempted to answer this first request. The conditions were then introduced and *Ss* were treated in one of four ways: Condition 1, the *C* replied, "O.K., thank you"; Condition 2, an *S* assigned to this treatment was not stopped before entering the library; Condition 3, these *Ss* with an enthusiastic voice were told, "Thank you very much. You have been very helpful, and I appreciate your taking the time to help me"; and Condition 4, the *C* stated with an annoyed voice, "You are not very helpful, and I can usually understand directions. I'll have to find someone who can be more helpful."

A second *C* was stationed just inside the lobby of the library and blind to the experimental condition that was being run. The *S* was approached by the second *C* who made the following request: "Hello. I am trying to

compile a list of people who would be willing to give two hours of their time next month to answer telephones for a charity telethon for crippled children. Would you be willing to do that?" If the *S* agreed, he or she was asked to give his or her name and telephone number and told that if he or she were needed they would be contacted to arrange a time.

C. Results

The dependent variable measure was the type of response *S*s gave to the second request. *S*s who agreed to help were assigned a score of one, and *S*s who declined were assigned a zero. Mean scores of .17, .40, .67 and .20 were obtained, respectively, for the "Control," "Foot," "Positive," and "Negative" conditions. According to Lunney (6), dichotomized data can be treated with analysis of variance procedures if the degrees of freedom are sufficiently large ($df > 20$), a requirement satisfied for the data collected. The results of an analysis of variance were highly significant, $F\ (3, 116) = 8.06$, $p < .001$. The mean for the "Foot" condition was significantly greater than the mean for the "Control" condition, indicating the typical foot-in-the-door effect, $t\ (116) = 1.99$, $p < .025$. The mean for the "Positive" condition was significantly greater than the mean for the "Foot" condition, $t\ (116) = 2.34$, $p < .02$; and the "Negative" condition was significantly less than the "Foot" condition, $t\ (116) = 1.73$, $p < .05$.[1]

D. Discussion

The present study demonstrated that assigning a label to the initial response of the foot-in-the-door procedure affected compliance on the subsequent request. *S*s who were informed that they were helpful on the initial easy task agreed to carry out a second more difficult task with greater frequency than a "Foot" condition where the helpful label was omitted. *S*s who were informed that they were not helpful on the first task complied less on the second task than the "Foot" condition.

DeJong (2) considered various explanations for the foot-in-the-door effect and concluded after examining the research findings that the self-perception explanation originally presented by Freedman and Fraser (3) received the most experimental support. However, individuals may not be fully aware of how they act, or may not correctly deduce the meaning of their actions. George Herbert Mead has stated that the meaning of one's gesture or response is given by others' responses to that gesture (7). It

[1] One-tail tests were used for all these mean comparisons.

would thus appear that individuals subjected to the foot-in-the-door procedure could have their self-concept of being helpful manipulated by the observations made by others. This would, thus, either enhance or minimize the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door procedure. The results of this study supported these formulations.

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