

The Combined Effect of the Foot-in-the-Door Technique and the “But You Are Free” Technique: An Evaluation on the Selective Sorting of Household Wastes

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Abstract

In a field experiment using the selective sorting of household wastes as the dependant variable, we have tested the combined effect of two techniques that induced compliance to a request: the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique and the “but you are free . . .” technique. Home-owners were asked to record on a form their entire household wastes for 1 month. In the FITD technique, participants were first asked to respond to a short survey on selective sorting habits. In the “but you are free . . .” condition, the request for participation included a sentence that stated that the participant was free to accept to participate or not: “Of course you are free to accept or to refuse.” In the combined FITD/“you are free . . .” condition, the first request was addressed to the participant and the sentence that stated that the participant was free appeared in the second request. In a control condition, the final request was addressed without any mention that the participant was free or not to accept. Results found that the combined FITD/“you are free . . .” condition was associated with greater compliance in completing the survey (78.0%) than the single FITD (60.0%) and the “but you are free . . .” condition (56.0%), whereas each of these three experimental conditions elicited greater compliance to complete the survey than in the control condition (40.0%). Commitment theory and practical interest of this combined technique for ecology are discussed.

Introduction

To gain compliance with a request, many techniques exist in social psychological research literature (see Pratkanis, 2007 for a review). One of the most famous techniques found more than 40 years ago is the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). This tactic consists of first asking a participant to carry out a small request, which most people readily perform, and then asking him/her to comply with a second larger request, which was the real objective of the requester. The final request was found to be complied with more favorably when it was preceded by a small request than when the final request was directly asked to the participants (control condition). In 1966, Freedman and Fraser convinced 43% of a group of housewives to allow a team of five or six investigators to stay at their homes for 2 hr to make an inventory of all the products used for cleaning and cooking. Three days before this visit, the women were asked to fill out a little questionnaire containing eight questions concerning their consumption. Without this preliminary request, only 22% of the persons accepted the visit of the investigators. This technique of preparing the subject by a small request before submitting the request sought after has been called the FITD technique. Various meta-analyses of numerous studies on this technique have shown its effects on compliance (Beaman et al., 1983; Burger, 1999; Dillard et al., 1984; Fern et al., 1986; Pascual & Guéguen, 2005). It is well known that this technique is particularly effective for influencing people to respond positively to various requests. Most of them are prosocial; examples of such requests are giving someone a dime (Guéguen & Fischer-Lokou, 1999; Harris, 1972), answering a questionnaire (Hornik et al., 1991), and persuading students to take a card designating them as an

organ donor (Carducci et al., 1989). However, the efficiency of FITD technique is not limited to prosocial requests. Dolin and Booth-Butterfield (1995) found that adult women who were assigned to an FITD treatment during a health fair at a shopping mall agreed more favorably to a request to schedule a gynecological examination. Goldman and Creason (1981) found that the FITD technique remained effective in convincing people to call individuals picked from the telephone directory and ask them to take a survey for the profit of a private organization. Guéguen and Jacob (2008) found that the FITD technique used in a selling context (a footwear store) was associated with greater compliance to the sale suggestion addressed by a seller.

The FITD technique is also effective in influencing energy consumption behavior. Katzev and Johnson (1983) have shown that the FITD technique was effective in having people decrease their energy consumption at home. In their experiment, homeowners were asked to curtail their consumption of electricity by 10%. In the FITD condition, this request was preceded by a more moderate request consisting of answering a short energy conservation questionnaire. Three control conditions were performed. In one control condition (CC1), homeowners simply received the questionnaire or simply received the conservation request (CC2), whereas in a third control condition (CC3), participants were never asked to comply to either request. Throughout a 12-week follow-up period, homeowners in the three request groups (FITD, CC1, and CC2) consumed less electricity than homeowners in the third control condition. It was also found that homeowners in the FITD condition consumed less electricity than homeowners in the three other conditions.

Thus, these studies show that the effect of the FITD technique is not limited to prosocial requests, and other requests can then be studied to evaluate the sphere of influence of the FITD technique.

In the literature, the FITD effect is theoretically explained by the self-perception theory (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Such a theory assumes that the preliminary request makes participants feel that they are helping other people and caring for others, and once this perception is activated, it favors compliance to the second request. The explanation based on self-perception is perhaps readily explained by the fact that a host of requests tested were prosocial in nature. For some scientists (Cialdini, 2008; Joule, 1987), the effect of the FITD technique is explained with the help of the commitment theory (Kiesler, 1971). When accepting to comply with a first request, an individual is committed to comply with a second later request to act consistently.

Another tactic that increases compliance to a request is the “but you are free . . .” technique. This technique is based on the assumption that telling someone verbally that he/she is free to accept or

refuse something will lead him/her to comply more favorably to the request. To test the specific influence of the semantic evocation of freedom, Guéguen and Pascual (2000) asked passers-by in a street to give them money. In the experimental condition, their request ended by the phrase “but you are free to accept or refuse,” whereas this phrase was not used in the control condition. They found that 10% of the solicited participants complied with the request in the control condition, whereas 47.5% accepted in the experimental condition. This technique, called by these authors as the “but you are free . . .” technique, leads to increasing compliance with a request, but also to increasing subject involvement. These authors have also found in their experiment that the average amount of donations granted by the subjects was higher in the experimental condition than in the control condition. Thus, this experiment seems to show, empirically, that the hypothetical statement of Joule and Beauvois (1998) saying that using a phrase that states that the participant is free or not to comply is associated with greater compliance with the request. Another experiment showed that the “. . . but you are free to accept or to refuse” technique was effective in leading someone to give money to a prosocial organization (Pascual & Guéguen, 2002). This technique is also effective to gain compliance with a request consisting of visiting a Web site of a humanitarian organization when it is made by e-mail. Guéguen et al. (2002) pointed out a higher compliance rate when the semantic evocation of freedom is included in the message, than when it is not. The above-cited studies show that some semantic aspects of the request have an effect on compliance. Again these results are congruent with the commitment theory. Kiesler and Sakumura (1966) and Kiesler (1971) have made the assumption that the degree of commitment may be manipulated by the degree of perceived choice when performing an act. The semantic evocation of freedom could increase this degree of perceived choice, which in return could increase the compliance to the approached behavior.

The FITD technique had something in common with the “but you are free . . .” technique. No pressure or external factors (e.g., incentives) were used to enhance participant’s compliance. Participants were free to accept or refuse each request. In most of the experimental studies conducted with the FITD technique, the request traditionally ended with sentences such as “it is up to you to see,” “up to you to choose,” and “I don’t want to force you.” Thus, it would be interesting to test the association of the “but you are free” sentence and the FITD technique to evaluate if greater compliance would be obtained than when each of the single techniques are used.

With the latter technique, using two initial requests rather than one was associated with greater compliance with a later request. Goldman et al. (1981) solicited people by phone to answer a survey

concerning radio programming, which consisted in keeping track of all the records participants listened to for the next 6 weeks. In the control condition, the request was directly addressed to the participants. In the single FITD condition, participants were first solicited to tell the solicitor the two radio stations that they listened to most often. After responding to this second request, the final request used in the control condition was addressed to the participants. In the double FITD condition, participants were first asked to give the names of the two radio stations that they listen to most often, and after that, the same participants were asked to listen to a one-half-hour radio program and to answer certain questions about it. Finally, after accepting, the final request, which was similar to the request used in the control condition and in the single FITD condition, was addressed to the participants. The single FITD condition was found to elicit more compliance with the final request than in the control condition, but the double FITD procedure elicited greater compliance than the single FITD procedure and the control condition. Thus, given the fact that both the FITD and the “but you are free . . .” techniques are theoretically explained by commitment, we hypothesized that the combination of both techniques would be associated with greater compliance to a request than when using only one technique. Thus, we hypothesized that an FITD technique associated with a “but you are free . . .” sentence would be associated with greater compliance compared with the single FITD condition (H1), the single “but you are free . . .” condition (H2), and the control condition (H3). Given the fact that it has been found that the FITD and the “but you are free . . .” techniques elicited greater compliance, we hypothesized that the single FITD technique (H4) and the “but you are free . . .” technique (H5) would be associated with greater compliance than the control condition.

Method

Participants

The participants were 200 homeowners (102 men and 98 women) of Vannes, France (80,000 inhabitants), aged approximately from 20 to 75 years. The participants were solicited while they were at home. Six participants were not present at home after three attempts when the second measure was collected.

Procedure

A young female confederate went to the home of each participant. The confederate was instructed to test each participant according to a random distribution of the four experimental conditions. After introducing herself, she stated “Good morning/evening Sir/Madam, I’m a student employed by the county to conduct a survey about the

selective sorting of household waste.” After that, one of the four experimental conditions was used. In the control condition, the confederate added “Would you agree to fill out a sorting book for 1 month in which the quantity of glass, plastic, and paper will be registered? As often as you put waste in the trash, you will have to note the date and the quantity of waste, by weighing your garbage bags or by counting the number of bottles.” In the single “but you are free . . .” condition, the confederate used the same sentence as in control condition but added at the end “. . . by counting the number of bottles. Of course you are free to accept or refuse.” In the single FITD condition, the confederate introduced herself and first asked the participant if he/she would agree to respond to a short survey (the confederate stated that only four short questions will be used) on selective sorting habits (i.e., Do you have a composting box for you green waste?). All of the homeowners but one accepted the first request. Thus, the short survey is administered to the participant. After which the confederate thanks the participant for his/her help and introduces the second request as in the control condition “We also conduct an evaluation about the quantity of household wastes at home. Would you agree to fill out a sorting book . . .” In the FITD “but you are free condition . . .” the same first request as in the FITD technique was used and the second request ended in the same way as in the single “But you are free . . .” condition.

If the participant refused, he/she was thanked by the confederate, who then left. If the participant agreed, then the confederate gave the sorting book to the participant. She said that she would come again in 1 month to pick up the sorting book. She thanked the participant and left his/her home. One month later, the confederate went back to the participant’s home to get the sorting book. The confederate thanked the participant again for his/her help and left him/her. After which, the confederate analyzed all the sorting books. We consider here the level of compliance of the participant by distinguishing four levels: totally compliant (completed sorting survey during 30 days), partially compliant (completed the survey 2–3 weeks), 3 = slightly compliant (completed <1 week), no compliant (any day).

Results

As the preliminary test showed neither the single effect of participants’ genders nor the interaction effect of participants’ genders and experimental conditions ($p > 0.20$), data were collapsed across participants’ gender. The percentages and number of participants who accepted to comply with the request of the confederate and who really carried out the behavior for 1 month are presented in Table 1.

Independent chi-squared tests analyzing the interaction between the experimental conditions and the participant’s compliance with

Table 1. Frequencies of Participants Who Complied with the Request in the Short and Long Terms

	EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION			
	CONTROL <i>N</i> = 50	FITD <i>N</i> = 50	"BUT YOU ARE FREE . . ." <i>N</i> = 50	FITD + "BUT YOU ARE FREE . . ." <i>N</i> = 50
Participants who first accepted to participate in the study	40.0% (20/50)	60.0% (30/50)	56.0% (28/50)	78.0% (39/50)
LEVEL OF COMPLIANCE	ONE PARTICIPANT NOT PRESENT AT HOME AFTER THREE ATTEMPTS <i>N</i> = 49	ONE PARTICIPANT NOT PRESENT AT HOME AFTER THREE ATTEMPTS <i>N</i> = 49	ONE PARTICIPANT NOT PRESENT AT HOME AFTER THREE ATTEMPTS <i>N</i> = 49	THREE PARTICIPANTS NOT PRESENT AT HOME AFTER THREE ATTEMPTS <i>N</i> = 47
Level 1: Completed the survey during 1 month	8.2% (4/49)	24.50% (12/49)	26.5% (13/49)	44.7% (21/47)
Level 2: Completed the survey for 2–3 weeks	4.1% (2/49)	12.2% (6/49)	10.2% (5/49)	6.4% (3/47)
Level 3: Completed the survey for <1 week	2.0% (1/49)	8.2% (4/49)	12.3% (6/49)	6.4% (3/47)
Level 4: Never completed the survey any day	85.7% (42/49)	55.1% (27/49)	51.0% (25/49)	42.5% (20/47)

FITD, foot-in-the-door.

the request were performed. With the participants who first accepted to participate in the study, significant interaction was found [$\chi^2(1, N = 199) = 21.06, p < 0.001, r = 0.30$]. Pairwise comparisons revealed that the control condition was significantly different from the FITD condition [40.0% vs. 60.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 4.00, p < 0.05, \phi = 0.20$] and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [40.0% vs. 56.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 14.92, p < .001, \phi = 0.36$] but not with the “but you are free . . .” condition [40.0% vs. 60.0, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 2.56$, nonsignificant (ns), $\phi = 0.16$]. No statistical differences were found between the FITD condition and the “but you are free . . .” condition [60.0% vs. 56.0, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 0.16$, ns, $\phi = 0.04$] and between the FITD condition and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [60.0% vs. 78.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 3.78, p = .06, \phi = 0.19$]. However, a significant difference was found between the “but you are free . . .” condition and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [56.0% vs. 78.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 5.47, p < 0.02, \phi = 0.23$].

With the level of compliance in completing the survey as the dependent variable and the experimental condition as the independent variable, an independent chi-squared test was performed and revealed a significant interaction [$\chi^2(9, N = 194) = 27.27, p < 0.001, r = 0.35$]. Further comparisons revealed that the control condition was significantly different from the FITD condition [$\chi^2(3, N = 98) =$

11.06, $p < 0.02, r = 0.32$], the “but you are free . . .” condition [$\chi^2(3, N = 98) = 13.94, p < 0.005, r = 0.35$] and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [$\chi^2(3, N = 96) = 20.53, p < 0.001, r = 0.42$]. The FITD condition was not significantly different from the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [$\chi^2(3, N = 96) = 6.60$, ns, $r = 0.21$] and from the “but you are free . . .” condition [$\chi^2(3, N = 98) = 0.60$, ns, $r = 0.07$]. No significant difference was found between the “but you are free . . .” condition and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [$\chi^2(1, N = 96) = 3.90$, ns, $r = 0.20$].

When considering only fully compliant participants (participants who carried out the behavior for 1 month), a significant interaction was found [$\chi^2(1, N = 194) = 16.70, p < 0.001, r = 0.28$]. Additional comparisons revealed that the control condition was significantly different from the FITD condition [8.2% vs. 24.5%, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 4.78, p < 0.03, \phi = 0.22$], the “but you are free . . .” condition [8.2% vs. 26.5, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 5.76, p < 0.02, \phi = 0.24$], and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [8.2% vs. 44.7%, $\chi^2(1, N = 96) = 16.61, p < 0.001, \phi = 0.38$]. The FITD condition was significantly different from the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [24.5% vs. 44.7%, $\chi^2(1, N = 96) = 4.33, p < 0.05, \phi = 0.21$] but not from the “but you are free . . .” condition [24.5% vs. 26.5, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 0.05$, ns, $\phi = 0.02$]. No significant difference was found between the “but you

are free . . .” condition and the FITD + “but you are free . . .” condition [26.5% vs. 44.7%, $\chi^2(1, N=96) = 3.45, p < = 0.06, \phi = 0.19$].

Discussion

The data confirmed when making a request for participating in a costly survey, either (1) adding a phrase in the verbal solicitation stating the participant was free to accept or refuse, or (2) using a first small request before soliciting the participant was associated with greater compliance to complete the survey. It was also found that combining the two methods was associated with greater full compliance in completing the survey than using only a single method. The “but you are free . . .” and the FITD techniques proved to be associated with a long-term effect, given the fact that it persisted 30 days after the acceptance of the request. Again, combining the two techniques significantly enhances the rate of compliance in completing the survey, when compared with using a single method.

These results have some theoretical interest for social psychologists. First, the data revealed that both the “but you are free . . .” and the FITD techniques had long-term effects. Previous studies that have tested the “but you are free . . .” technique (Guéguen et al., 2002; Guéguen and Pascual, 2000, 2005) focused only on short-term requests (from 2 seconds to 1 or 2 min), but long-term effects had never been tested before. Our data confirmed the effect of the “but you are free . . .” technique to gain compliance with a survey request and this effect is not limited to short-term requests, as in the previous experiments. Thus, such a long-term effect seems to show that this technique would have a commitment property, leading the participant to maintain his/her behavior for a long time. Kiesler (1971) stated that when commitment between the individual and the act performed is established, we increase the probability that the individual maintains his/her behavior for the entire time. Kiesler and Sakumura (1966) and Kiesler (1971) have stated that to obtain a commitment from an individual to perform an expected act, it was necessary to increase the degree of commitment. There are several methods to increase commitment, but, for these authors, one of the most important would be to increase the degree of volition perceived by the individual in performing the expected behavior.

With the FITD technique, previous research found that this technique remained effective after 7–10 days between the first and the second request (Beaman et al., 1974; Cann et al., 1975). However, the effect remained effective after 19 days between the first and the second request, but only when the requesters were reminded of opportunities they may have had to participate in the first request

(Beaman et al., 1988). In our experiment, we found that the FITD remained effective after 30 days. Again, such a long-term effect is compatible with the commitment theory proposed by some authors to explain the effect of the FITD effect (Cialdini, 2008; Joule et al., 2007). The first request led the participant to establish a commitment between him/herself and the selective sorting of household waste. Once the participant is engaged in this process, greater pressure occurs, which pushes him/her to act consistently with the first behavior and probably the same pressure remains day after day when the participant filled out his/her sorting book. When considering full compliance with the request, we found that the FITD technique associated with the “but you are free . . .” sentence during the second request was associated with higher compliance with the survey request than in the single FITD condition or the single “but you are free . . .” condition. This effect is in accordance with the results of Goldman and Creason (1981), who found that a “two FITD” (2FITD) procedure using two initial requests rather than one as in the classical FITD procedure was associated with greater compliance with the final request than when using the single FITD procedure. Goldman and Creason (1981), greater compliance was found in the 2FITD procedure because greater commitment to produce the final request was created, but the repetition of the two later requests: compliance for two previous requests is better than one to elicit greater compliance to a further request. In our experiment, it seems that the combined effect of two different compliance gaining procedures led to create higher pressure to comply with the survey request as in the 2FITD procedure used by Goldman and Creason (1981). Such a combined approach is congruent with a strategy that Howard (1995) called the “chaining” approach, which consisted in studying the combined effect of different compliance techniques. For this author, this approach is consistent with the commitment theory that stated that some level of commitment is necessary to obtain a long-term variation in people’s behavior. Thus, in our experiment, as in the study by Goldman et al. (1981), it seems that another commitment stage was found when combining two different techniques or when repeating a technique twice rather than once. As requested by Howard (1995), it would be interesting in future studies to explore this combined effect of various compliance-gaining procedures to determine at what stage, and why, large behavioral changes appear. Our results confirm the power of some verbal contents on compliance with a survey request. Many techniques that enhance compliance to a request exist in social psychology literature (Pratkanis, 2007). However, some techniques did not appear to be effective with some behavior. Cialdini and Ascani (1976) have found that a single FITD procedure was not effective for gaining compliance with a request to give blood. In a

request for participating in the survey conducted by phone, Furse et al. (1981) found no effect of the FITD technique. Thus, in these later studies the effect is perhaps explained by the fact that the pressure to comply was not sufficient to increase participants' compliance. In such circumstances, the use of a combined effect of two or more compliance procedures could be necessary to obtain significant modification on the participant's behavior.

Apart from this "chaining" approach, the results found here have some practical interest. Two compliance techniques, particularly their combination, were found to be really effective in obtaining long-term effects of some behaviors associated with ecology. It would be interesting for managers specialized in the waste treatment to use these approaches to change people's behavior. Many psychological methods associated with change in people behavior are available (for review, see Pratkanis, 2007) and could be used to encourage people to display new behaviors (here, complete a survey on sorting behavior) relevant with ecology. By this way, it is probably possible to create a kind of ecobehavioral engineering that could help practitioners to promote changes in people's behavior.

Of course, this study has some limitations. The sample sizes were low ($N = 50$ in each condition) and a replication with larger samples is now necessary. In this experiment, we found that the compliance techniques used were associated with a higher rate of participants who completed the journal entries for a month. However, completing the journal does not necessarily mean that the participants recycled their household wastes or that the effect of these techniques remains the same after >1 month. Thus, forthcoming studies will have to measure this behavioral compliance through the long-term effect of these techniques. A recent study by Dufourcq-Brana et al. (2006) found that the "but you are free . . ." technique was associated with a greater real recycling behavior of household wastes. In their experiment, two times per week the plastic bags that contained the participants' household wastes were opened and examined. However, the long-term effect of this technique was not examined. Thus, the durability of such behavior over time remains questionable and needs further examination.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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