

The Effects of Monetary Incentives and Labeling on the Foot-in-the-Door Effect: Evidence for a Self-Perception Process

Jerry M. Burger

*Department of Psychology
Santa Clara University*

David F. Caldwell

*Management Department
Santa Clara University*

We tested the self-perception explanation of the foot-in-the-door effect by manipulating self-perceived helpfulness and assessing self-concept. Participants given \$1 to sign a homelessness petition were less likely to see themselves as altruistic than participants not given the monetary incentive. The paid participants also complied less often with a request to work on a canned food drive 2 days later than unpaid participants. In contrast, participants told they were helpful individuals were more likely to see themselves as altruistic and were more likely to volunteer for the food drive than unlabeled participants. Mediation analyses provide evidence that changes in self-concept underlie a successful foot-in-the-door manipulation and support the self-perception explanation for the foot-in-the-door effect.

Few studies in social psychology demonstrate the power of seemingly minor manipulations as well as the original foot-in-the-door investigations by Freedman and Fraser (1966). For decades, social psychology textbooks have described how experimenters dramatically increase sales, donations, and rates of volunteering by first securing agreement to presumably trivial requests. More than 100 foot-in-the-door studies have been published over the past three decades, as have several reviews and partial reviews (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Steblay, 1983; Burger, 1999; DeJong, 1979; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986; Weyant, 1996; Yu & Cooper, 1983). Nonetheless, questions remain about the strength of the procedure and the explanations for the effect.

In its simplest form, the foot-in-the-door effect can be demonstrated with two conditions. In the experimental condition, investigators present participants with a small request that virtually everyone agrees to. At some later point participants are presented with a second, larger request. This second request is referred to as the target request, because securing agreement to this request is the real purpose of the procedure. In some cases a different experimenter presents

the two requests, but sometimes the same person is used. A control condition receives only the target request. The foot-in-the-door effect is demonstrated when participants in the experimental condition comply with the target request more often than participants in the control condition.

Although reviewers find evidence for the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door procedure, they do not always agree on the explanation for the effect (Beaman et al., 1983; DeJong, 1979; Dillard et al., 1984; Fern et al., 1986). The most popular explanation for the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door procedure is that participants engage in a process similar to that described in Bem's (1972) self-perception theory (DeJong, 1979; Gorassini & Olson, 1995). Self-perception theory maintains that people often determine what their attitude must be by observing their own behavior. In the foot-in-the-door situation, participants presented with the target request ask themselves if they are the kind of person who engages in this type of behavior or supports these types of causes. If they have recently complied to a small request, they may conclude that they are that kind of person, and therefore they are more likely to agree with the larger request.

Although researchers have produced some evidence to support the self-perception interpretation for the foot-in-the-door effect (DeJong, 1979; Snyder & Cunningham, 1975), other investigators have challenged the explanation (Beaman et al., 1983; Dillard et al., 1984; Gorassini & Olson, 1995).

Requests for reprints should be sent to Jerry M. Burger, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA 95053. E-mail: jburger@scu.edu

These dissenting researchers have argued that studies sometimes fail to find support for predictions derived from self-perception theory, or that the process can account for only part of the variance in foot-in-the-door investigations.

Recently, Burger (1999) conducted a series of meta-analyses to delineate several psychological processes that influence a participant's response to a foot-in-the-door manipulation. The analyses supported the conclusion that self-perception is one of these processes. For example, Burger found the more involving the initial task, the stronger the foot-in-the-door effect. According to a self-perception analysis, involving tasks are more salient and thus more likely to be recalled when participants later reflect on their own behavior. Similarly, the review found that researchers are more likely to produce a foot-in-the-door effect when participants actually perform the initial request. Again, performed behaviors provide strong and salient information indicating that the participant is the kind of person who goes along with such tasks. Finally, Burger found consistent evidence that people who say no to the initial request are less likely to agree with the target request than a control group. Within a self-perception interpretation, these individuals look at their own behavior and conclude that they are not the kind of person who goes along with these kinds of requests. In short, although other processes are operating, a reasonable case can be made for the self-perception explanation for the foot-in-the-door effect.

Nonetheless, there remains one glaring hole in this case. To date, researchers have failed to find direct evidence for a shift in participants' self-concepts following a foot-in-the-door manipulation. That is, although the general pattern of results is consistent with the notion that foot-in-the-door participants often alter the way they think of themselves, there is no direct assessment of self-concept to back up this interpretation. There are a handful of foot-in-the-door investigations that attempted to measure self-concept as well as compliance behavior in the same participants (Gorassini & Olson, 1995; Rittle, 1981; Scott, 1977).¹ Typically these investigators asked participants to rate themselves on self-descriptors such as *helpful* or *altruistic*. However, none of these researchers found evidence for a change in self-concept and compliance following a foot-in-the-door manipulation. There are several possible reasons for this failure to produce the anticipated results. For example, in one case the investigator relied on a single-item self-concept measure (Rittle). Such measures typically are poor because of low reliability. In other cases researchers may have encountered a ceiling effect. That is, if control condition participants report that they

are highly altruistic, it may not be possible to demonstrate a statistically significant increase with the measure in the experimental conditions. For example, Gorassini and Olsen (1995) asked participants to respond in a yes/no manner whether each of eight "helpfulness" adjectives described them. Unfortunately, the average participant in the control conditions responded in the "helpful" direction on nearly seven of the eight items. Not surprisingly, the average score in the foot-in-the-door condition, although higher, was not significantly different than the control condition score. To avoid some of the potential measurement problems encountered in earlier studies, we were careful to construct internally consistent measures with a possible range of scores sufficient to reduce the possibility of a ceiling effect.

In our study we examined the self-perception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door procedure in two ways. First, we measured the participants' self-concept as it relates to the target behavior immediately after participants completed the first phase of the experiment. If agreeing to the initial request alters the way people think about themselves, we would expect foot-in-the-door participants to describe themselves differently than participants who did not receive the initial request. In short, we sought to provide direct evidence of a shift in self-perception heretofore missing in the literature. Second, we added conditions to the design that theoretically should change the extent to which participants engage in a self-perception process. Specifically, in one condition we attempted to undermine the self-perception process by paying participants to engage in the initial task. In another condition we sought to enhance the self-perception process by telling participants that they were helpful.

If participants' responses to a foot-in-the-door manipulation are in part determined by a self-perception process, then we should find less compliance to the target request when participants are given an external justification for their compliance with the initial request. According to the self-perception explanation, foot-in-the-door participants alter their self-concept when their earlier behavior is most easily explained in terms of how helpful they must be. However, if participants look at their behavior and see another obvious explanation for their decision to go along with the initial request, we would expect little change in self-concept.

This latter hypothesis was tested in a study in which shoppers leaving a department store were asked to watch a confederate's bags for a few minutes while he went back inside (Uranowitz, 1975). Self-perception was manipulated by providing some participants with an external attribution for agreeing to help (the confederate had left his wallet behind), whereas others were told the confederate had lost merely a dollar. A minute or two later, participants encountered a woman who appeared to not notice that she had dropped a small bag. Consistent with the self-perception analysis, participants who had no external justification for their earlier altruism came to the woman's aid more often

¹We found one additional investigation that examined changes in attitude following a foot-in-the-door manipulation (Dillard, 1990). However, the investigator did not also measure compliance in the same participants. Moreover, control participants providing attitude data in this study did not actually receive a foot-in-the-door request, but were asked to imagine that they had received the request and had complied.

than an appropriate control group. When participants could explain their earlier helping behavior in terms other than their self-concept ("Wouldn't anyone help in that situation?"), no increase in helpful behavior was found.

Another way to disrupt the self-perception process is to pay participants for complying with the initial request. Several foot-in-the-door investigators have included a condition in which participants were paid to perform the initial request as well as a condition in which participants were not paid (DeJong & Funder, 1977; Reingen & Kernan, 1977; Scott, 1977; Stimpson & Waranusuntikule, 1987; Zuckerman, Lazzaro, & Waldgeir, 1979). The general pattern of findings from these investigations is consistent with the self-perception analysis presented here. With the exception of the DeJong and Funder studies, paid participants were less likely to agree to the target request than those who were not paid. Of course, none of these investigations measured self-concept directly.

The self-perception explanation also predicts an increase in compliance to the target request when the requester labels the participants as helpful people. According to the self-perception analysis, people alter their self-concept when they look back at relevant behavior and conclude that they must be the kind of person who engages in that behavior. In the foot-in-the-door situation, this process may be helped by information that reinforces the individual's personal attribution for the earlier behavior. Several studies find that labeling people *helpful* or *altruistic* increases the likelihood that they will help someone in need (Batson, Harris, McCaul, Davis, & Schmidt, 1979; Kraut, 1973; Strenta & DeJong, 1981; Thomas & Batson, 1981). When applied to the foot-in-the-door procedure, it could be expected that a requester's comments indicating that the participant is helpful would enhance the participant's change in self-concept. That is, after the participant agrees to the initial request, the requester could thank the participant excessively and say something to the effect that the participant must be a helpful person. Past research suggests that this type of enhancement procedure intensifies the self-perception process. In his review, Burger (1999) identified five studies that included a foot-in-the-door condition in which participants were labeled as helpful or cooperative and one foot-in-the-door condition without this enhancement manipulation (Crano & Sivacek, 1982; Goldman, Seever, & Seever, 1982; Gorassini & Olson, 1995; Hornik, 1988; Stimpson & Waranusuntikule, 1987). The overall pattern of results for these studies suggests that the foot-in-the-door effect is stronger when enhanced with the labeling manipulation.

In sum, we examined the self-perception explanation for the foot-in-the-door effect by creating three foot-in-the-door conditions. In addition to the traditional procedure, we created conditions designed to increase or decrease the perception that one is helpful. We expected changes in self-concept and compliance to the target request to reflect these changes in self-perception.

METHOD

Participants

Two-hundred-eleven undergraduates (77 men and 154 women) served as participants in exchange for class credit. Two participants could not be reached for the second part of the study, thus reducing the final sample to 209.

Procedure

Approximately 1 minute after the participant entered the experimental room, a confederate posing as another participant arrived. The experimenter explained to the participant and the confederate that they would be completing a series of personality measures. The experimenter then said that he or she needed to make more copies of some tests and would return in a few minutes to begin the study.

Participants had been randomly preassigned to one of four conditions. In the foot-in-the-door condition, the confederate waited approximately 30 sec before presenting the initial request. The confederate explained he or she was working with a student organization to make elected officials aware of the homelessness problem. The confederate showed the participant a petition sheet and explained that the organization was collecting signatures to send to Senator Feinstein. The confederate said, "We're asking students to write a one- or two-sentence message about homelessness and sign their names. It can be anything, really. You can see what a couple of other people wrote already." Two of the spaces on the petition were filled in, giving the participant a general idea of the length and tone of the message. The confederate asked only once if the participant would take a minute to add a message and signature.

Participants in the payment condition received an identical request from the confederate, except that they were told the organization was paying students \$1 each to contribute to the petition. To make the payment salient, the confederate clipped \$1 to the top of the clipboard that held the petition. The confederate unclipped the money and gave it to the participant upon completion of the initial request.

Participants in the enhancement condition were presented with the same initial request as the foot-in-the-door participants. However, after agreeing to the initial request, these participants were thanked and told by the requester, "It's great to see someone who cares about people in need." These participants also were given a small, inexpensive bookmark containing a quote from Adlai Stevenson about hunger. The requester explained, "We're giving these to signers to thank them for their help." Although the bookmark was of little value and most likely never used (unlike the dollar in the payment condition), we hoped it would serve to highlight the requester's message. Participants in the control condition were joined by confederates who

merely sat silently in the experiment room until the experimenter returned.

The experimenter stood just out of view during the presentation of the initial request. The experimenter reentered the room a few seconds after the request was completed, or, to equate the amount of time, after approximately 2 minutes in the control condition. The experimenter gave the participant and confederate each a booklet to complete. The booklet contained several personality scales. Three of the four scales were presented in random order. The third scale in the booklet always was a measure designed especially for this study. This scale asked participants to indicate on 7-point scales, ranging from 1 (*never engage in this behavior*) to 7 (*very frequently engage in this behavior*), the extent to which they were "the kind of person who typically engages in each of these behaviors or is likely to engage in these behaviors." Scattered among the 50 items on the scale were 10 concerned with feeling compassion and helping with worthy causes. The 10 items were *volunteer time to help a worthy cause, support a worthy social cause, show concern for needy people, do volunteer work, do something to help people in need, give money to social issues I believe in, feel sympathy when I read about homeless people, feel compassion for those less fortunate than myself, consider what I might do to help other people, and do some kind of nonpaid service work*. The confederate appeared to complete the scales at approximately the same time as the participant. When both had finished, the experimenter thanked and dismissed them.

Two days later, a second experimenter telephoned the participant. (Phone numbers were obtained from the sign-up sheet). In a few cases, the participant could not be reached on that day, but was always contacted via telephone the next day. The second experimenter was blind to condition. The second experimenter delivered the target request:

I'm working with a group of students organizing a food drive to help local homeless shelters. We need some people to sort and box canned goods this weekend. At this point we can be

a little flexible with the time schedules. Can you spare 2 hours either this coming Saturday or Sunday to help out?

If the participant agreed to the request, he or she was thanked and told someone would call to schedule a time. The participant also was told that if no one called in the next 2 days it meant they had more volunteers than they could use.

RESULTS

Because we generated the 10 self-concept items specifically for this study, we first performed a principal component analysis with a varimax rotation to identify the underlying structure of the measure ($N = 211$). As shown in Table 1, the analysis identified three interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The three factors explained 72% of the variance. We labeled these factors *volunteering, feeling compassion, and providing support*. We calculated scale scores for each of three factors by summing responses to the items with the highest loadings (all greater than .45) for each factor. As shown in Table 2, the scales appear to have adequate variability and do not appear to suffer from the ceiling effect problem found in earlier research. Finally, each of the scales has acceptable internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha.²

The mean scores for the self-concept scales for each of the four conditions are shown in Table 3. For each scale, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by specific comparisons between cells.³ Significant overall differences were found among the conditions on the Providing Support scale, $F(3, 206) = 8.38, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$. Differences

²We also looked at gender differences and found only that women scored higher ($M = 18.39$) on the Volunteering scale than men ($M = 15.73$), $t(207) = 3.34, p = .001$. No other gender effects were found when that variable was examined in any of the analyses.

³We also conducted the analyses using weighted factor scores and found virtually identical results.

TABLE 1
Factor Loadings for 10 Self-Concept Items

	<i>Factor</i>		
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
Volunteer time to help a worthy cause	.83	.21	.01
Support a worthy social cause	.24	.14	.78
Show concern for needy people	.32	.51	.36
Do volunteer work	.86	.15	.20
Do something to help people in need	.62	.22	.52
Give money to social issues I believe in	.06	.09	.89
Feel sympathy when I read about homeless people	.01	.88	.10
Feel compassion for those less fortunate than myself	.16	.88	.04
Consider what I might do to help other people	.43	.48	.31
Do some kind of nonpaid service work	.86	.01	.20

Note. Italicized loadings are those included in that scale's composite score.

TABLE 2
Characteristics of Scales

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Possible Range of Scores</i>	<i>Internal Consistency Coefficient</i>	<i>r With Feeling Compassion</i>	<i>r With Providing Support</i>	<i>r With Response Measure</i>
Volunteering	17.69	5.22	4–28	.88	.29	.43	.15
Feeling compassion	21.96	3.69	4–28	.76	—	.26	.11
Providing support	7.66	2.93	2–14	.71	—	—	.25

Note. Response measure coded 1 = no to request, 2 = yes to request.

TABLE 3
Self-Concept Scores and Responses to the Target Request

	<i>Payment</i>		<i>FITD</i>		<i>Enhancement</i>		<i>Control</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Volunteering	18.07	4.65	17.57	5.57	18.04	4.41	17.46	5.50
Feeling compassion	21.38	2.13	22.87	1.69	21.91	1.54	21.37	2.57
Providing support	7.96	2.50	7.69	2.99	9.96	2.77	6.65	2.73
Percent agreeing to request	38.6	—	51.4	—	65.2	—	32.4	—

Note. FITD = Foot-in-the-door.

on the Feeling Compassion scale fell just short of statistical significance, $F(3, 206) = 2.49, p < .06, \eta^2 = .04$. Specific contrasts for the Providing Support scale showed support for the general predictions. Participants in the three conditions receiving the initial request scored higher on this measure than participants in the control condition, $t(206) = 4.42, p < .01$. In addition, participants in the enhancement condition scored higher than participants in the payment and foot-in-the-door conditions, $t(206) = 3.35, p < .01$. Finally, participants in the payment condition scored somewhat lower on the scale than participants in the other conditions receiving the manipulation, $t(206) = 1.63, p < .10$.

As shown in Table 3, the results for the compliance behavior followed the same general pattern as the Providing Support self-concept scores. The initial analysis indicated a significant overall effect, $\chi^2(3, N = 209) = 10.08, p < .02, \phi = .22$. An examination of individual cell comparisons found that the pattern of results generally fell in line with our hypotheses. Participants who received some form of initial request were more likely to agree to the second request than those who did not, $\chi^2(1, N = 209) = 5.57, p < .02, \phi = .16$. In addition, participants in the payment condition tended to be less likely to agree to the second request than participants in the foot-in-the-door condition, but this effect fell short of statistical significance, $\chi^2(1, N = 118) = 3.10, p < .08, \phi = .16$. Participants in the enhanced condition also tended to be more likely to agree to the second request than participants in the foot-in-the-door and payment conditions, but this effect also fell short of statistical significance, $\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 2.67, p < .10, \phi = .14$. Of particular interest, participants in the enhanced condition were more likely to agree to the second request than participants in the payment condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 4.27, p < .04, \phi = .25$.

The results thus appear to support our hypotheses. As indicated on the Providing Support measure, participants altered the extent to which they thought of themselves as helpful people along the lines expected from self-perception theory. Moreover, these changes in self-concept reflect the extent to which participants agreed to the target request. We sought additional support for this self-perception interpretation through a series of regression analyses. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), mediation is demonstrated when each of the following are found: (a) an independent variable is related to a mediator variable; (b) the mediator variable is related to the dependent variable; and (c) a previous significant relation between the independent variable and dependent variable is no longer significant when the mediator variable is included in the analysis. Baron and Kenny suggested researchers test for mediation using a series of linear regression analyses. However, this procedure is problematic when the dependent variable is dichotomous (MacKinnon & Dwyer, 1993). Therefore, we used logistic regression, which assumes a dichotomous dependent variable and allows for ease in handling categorical independent variables. Logistic regression is similar to discriminant analysis in that it can be used to predict group membership based on a set of independent variables or covariates (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989). The procedure is well suited for handling a dichotomous outcome variable and a mix of categorical and continuous variables (Tansey, White, Long, & Smith, 1996). One of the advantages of logistic regression is that logistic regression provides tests for interpreting the magnitude of the coefficients of the individual variables. In particular, Wald statistics provide information about the magnitude of the impact of a change in the independent variable on the relative probabilities of the dependent variable (Tansey et al.).

The Providing Support measure fit the criteria for mediation. Therefore, we conducted a logistic regression mediation analysis for this measure. First, we examined the relation between condition (the independent variable) and helping behavior (the dependent variable). Second, we repeated the logistic regression analysis with both condition and the Providing Support measure (mediator) predicting helping. Evidence for mediation is demonstrated if the parameter estimate of condition is significant in the first analysis but drops to a nonsignificant level in the second analysis, and if the Providing Support parameter is significant in the second analysis.

The first equation was statistically significant. The overall Wald *b* statistic for condition variable was 9.73, (3) $p < .02$. The coefficients of the individual conditions were consistent with the data reported in Table 3. In the second equation, the Wald *b* statistic for condition dropped to 5.37 ($p > .05$) and the Wald *b* statistic for Providing Support was 8.01 (1) $p < .01$. Thus, the analysis provides support for the notion that changes in self-concept mediate the foot-in-the-door effect.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest self-perception is one of the psychological processes that contributes to the effectiveness of a foot-in-the-door manipulation. According to the self-perception explanation, people who agree with the small request are more likely than others to see themselves as the kind of person who goes along with these types of requests or supports these types of causes. When later asked to perform a related but larger request, this change in self-concept leads to an increased likelihood of agreeing with the large request. By measuring self-concept after participants agreed to the initial request, we found direct evidence for the connection between self-concept and compliance. To this point, this evidence has been the missing piece of information in the debate over the self-perception explanation for the foot-in-the-door effect.

We found additional support for the self-perception explanation when we introduced procedures to either undermine or enhance the self-perception process. Participants provided with a reasonable alternative interpretation for their initial compliance did not show evidence of self-concept change or the subsequent increase in compliance to the target request. Labeling participants as helpful people led to a greater change in self-concept and increased compliance with the second request, as compared to unlabeled participants. Both of these findings are consistent with the self-perception explanation.

We also took care to use procedures that would argue against alternative interpretations of our findings. For example, in both studies we buried the 10 self-concept items within a larger scale of 50 questions that was buried within a package of questionnaires. It thus seems unlikely that participants could have recognized the true purpose of the investigation

from the 10 items. We also were careful to use multiple-item, internally consistent measures of self-concept that were not likely to lead to problems with a ceiling effect.

When we combine our data with findings from earlier studies, a strong case emerges that a process similar to that described in Bem's (1972) self-perception theory is operating in successful demonstrations of the foot-in-the-door technique. But why do researchers sometimes produce results inconsistent with a self-perception analysis? One reason may be that the procedures used to create a foot-in-the-door manipulation often trigger other processes that counteract or overwhelm the self-perception process. In fact, Burger (1999) argued that self-perception may be one of the weakest processes operating in some foot-in-the-door settings. For example, researchers sometimes tell participants that most people do not agree with the initial request. From a self-perception analysis, we would expect this information to increase compliance to the target request. That is, these participants should attribute their initial agreement to their especially high level of helpfulness, thus enhancing the change in self-concept. However, the information also tells participants that the normative response is to not support these kinds of causes or engage in these kinds of behaviors. Consequently, studies find foot-in-the-door manipulations are not effective when participants believe few others go along with the initial request (DeJong, 1981). Apparently the tendency to conform to perceived norms (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991) overwhelms the relatively weak self-perception process in this situation.

Finally, although it appears that changes in self-concept mediate to some degree the foot-in-the-door effect, questions remain about the nature of those changes. For example, does agreeing to the small request alter the way people think about themselves ("I'm a helpful person"), their behaviors ("I get actively involved in good causes"), or specific issues ("I feel strongly about helping the homeless")? Although we found evidence for self-perception changes with our Providing Support measure, we had no *a priori* reason for why that aspect of self-concept would mediate the effect when the other two measures did not.

Freedman and Fraser (1966) were the first to speculate that the foot-in-the-door participant's increased compliance is the result of a change in self-concept. They said the participant "may become, in his own eyes, the kind of person who does this sort of thing, who agrees to requests made by strangers, who takes action on things he believes in, who cooperates with good causes" (p. 201). Although the puzzle is not yet completely solved, our data suggest Freedman and Fraser probably were on to something.

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