

The Effects of the Even-a-Few-Minutes-Would-Help Strategy, Perspective Taking, and Empathic Concern on the Successful Recruiting of Volunteers on Campus

Junko Takada & Timothy R. Levine

This paper assessed the effectiveness of the application of the even-a-penny-helps strategy to recruiting volunteers by changing the wording to “even a few minutes would help.” The moderating, mediating, and direct impact of perspective taking and empathic concern were also investigated. Across conditions, the data (n = 55) were consistent with a model in which perspective taking leads to empathic concern, which in turn, leads to increased volunteering. Whereas more people volunteered (23%) in the even-a-few-minutes group than a direct request control group (14%), the difference was not statistically significant. The effectiveness of the even-a-few-minutes strategy, however, was moderated by perspective taking. The even-a-few-minutes strategy (50%) was substantially more effective than a direct request (5%) for individuals high in perspective taking but counterproductive (6% compliance vs. 33% in the control group) when used on people scoring low on perspective taking.

Keywords: Compliance Gaining; Empathy; Even-a-Penny; Paltry Contributions

Even subtle differences in wording can result in surprisingly large differences in the probability of successfully gaining another’s compliance (e.g., Langer, Arthur, & Ben Zion, 1978). For instance, Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) examined the effectiveness

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of adding one sentence, “Even a penny helps,” to the end of a donation request. They found that linguistically minimizing the request made it more difficult to refuse, and that this technique did not diminish the amount of money that people donated. Perhaps a similar strategy would be effective in recruiting settings for volunteers on campus.

The purpose of this research is to test the effectiveness of a strategy for getting more university students involved in volunteering activities by replicating the Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) study with a volunteering request. In addition, perspective taking and empathic concern are considered as potential independent or moderating variables.

The Even-a-Penny Strategy

Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) sought to increase the frequency of monetary contributions to the American Cancer Society by adding the sentence, “even a penny will help.” The results showed that the frequency of donations was significantly increased by adding that sentence, and the size of the donations had not decreased. In all, 28.6% of the control subjects contributed, whereas 50% of the even-a-penny subjects donated. Further, the literature suggests that even-a-penny-helps may be more effective than alternatives such as foot-in-the-door or social proof (Reingen, 1978; Weyant, 1984).

Also known as legitimizing paltry contributions, the even-a-penny approach is thought to be effective for a number of reasons: it reduces the perceived imposition, it renders excuses more difficult, and compliance may result from impression management concerns (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987). Whereas the evidence consistent with effectiveness comes from requests involving monetary donations to charity, the mechanisms should operate in other pro-social situations where the request can be linguistically minimized and where image maintenance concerns are relevant. Thus, it is worthwhile to replicate previous studies with a recruiting volunteers request.

Empathy

Empathy is considered to be one of the most important predictors of pro-social behavior (Davis, 1994; Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim, & Sleight, 1988). Empathy is believed to have multiple dimensions, including perspective taking and empathic concern (Stiff et al., 1988). Perspective taking is the ability of an individual to understand another’s viewpoint (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Davis, 1983; Stiff et al., 1988), and empathic concern involves “a general concern and regard for the welfare of others” (Stiff et al., 1988, p. 199). Stiff et al. (1988) examined the relationships among different dimensions of empathy, communication, and prosocial behavior. Perspective taking leads to empathic concern, which in turn influences prosocial behavior, including volunteerism.

Research Predictions

The even-a-penny-helps finding has been replicated several times, but only in charity drive contexts. Thus, this technique might be investigated in other domains to see if it generalizes. By modifying the sentence into “Even a few minutes would help” (EAFMWH), the effectiveness of the strategy in recruiting volunteers may be assessed. Because the reasons legitimizing paltry contribution should extend to volunteering requests, it is expected that *targets are more likely to comply with a request when the sentence “Even a few minutes would help” is added in recruiting volunteers on campus than when the request is made without this phrase* (H1).

Considering the relationships between the EAFMWH strategy, empathy, and compliance, two rival models are proposed: a two-process model and a moderator model. In the two-process model, empathy and the EAFMWH strategy are independent predictors of volunteering. In this model, perspective taking leads to empathic concern, and empathic concern leads to volunteering as specified by Stiff et al. (1988). The EAFMWH strategy would directly lead to volunteering independently of target empathy.

An alternative model is a moderator model, which specifies an interaction effect between the use of the EAFMWH strategy and empathic concern. Specifically, compliance might be expected in three of the four combinations. Students with high empathic concern may be more likely to engage in volunteering activities regardless of the sentence “even a few minutes would help” because they are likely to volunteer anyway. Students with low empathic concern are less likely to engage in volunteering activities, but, the EAFMWH technique may generate compliance in otherwise reluctant individuals because it makes resistance more difficult. Stated differently, the EAFMWH strategy might be predicted to be relatively more effective on people who have less empathic concern because these are the people who are unlikely to comply otherwise. The absence of the EAFMWH strategy and low empathic concern might be expected to produce little or no compliance.

Method

Participants

One hundred and seven people who were walking on the university campus during school hours were approached. Only people who appeared to be students were approached. Of those, 63 people (58.9%) listened to the solicitor’s request. Of those, 55 agreed to participate and signed the consent forms.¹ Twenty-two males (40%) and 33 females (60%) gave consent. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 ($M = 21.64$, $SD = 2.26$).

Design, Procedure, and Measures

This experiment was a two independent groups (i.e., EAFMWH and control) experiment with two measured independent variables (perspective taking and empathic concern). Agreement to volunteer or not was the dependent variable.

Two female students' solicitors who were blind to the hypotheses were trained as requesters. Before approaching potential participants, each participant was randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition. A solicitor then approached a person who was walking on the university campus during school hours. The solicitor introduced herself and said:

I am recruiting volunteers for administrating orientation programs for new international students. Volunteers are involved in a range of activities, for example, picking students up from the airport, taking them to campus tours, coordinating orientations, or being at reception center to welcome new students and check them in. Would you be interested in being a volunteer for one of those activities?

In addition, for half of potential participants, the request included one more sentence, "Even a few minutes would help."

Following the request, the solicitor told them that the request was part of an experiment, and they were asked for informed consent. If consent was granted, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning measures of perspective taking, empathic concern, and demographics. If consent was refused, their responses were discarded. If a participant complied with the request, the same procedures were followed, except that the participant was also given a volunteer form from the office for international students and scholars and information on volunteering.

The questionnaire consisted of measures of perspective taking, empathic concern, and demographic questions. The perspective taking and empathic concern scales each contained six Likert-type items with five-point response formats. Both scales were developed by Stiff et al. (1988) who provided evidence of acceptable reliability (.69 to .87) and unidimensionality. The alpha coefficient for perspective taking in the current study was .70. One empathic concern item was deleted because it was negatively correlated with other items. The alpha coefficient for empathic concern was .72. The distributions of both scale averages approximated normality. The demographic questions address the respondent's age and sex.

Results

Of the 55 participants who consented, 29 people (52.7%) heard the control question and 26 people (47.3%) heard the "even a few minutes would help" addition. In the control group, 25 people (86.2%) rejected the requests and 4 people (13.8%) complied with the requests. In the EAFMWH group, 20 people (76.9%) rejected the requests and 6 people (23.1%) complied with the requests. The difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 0.79$, $p = \text{ns}$, $\phi = .12$. Therefore, the data were not consistent with hypothesis 1 even though compliance rate was in the predicted direction.

To initially test the two-process model, a binary logistic regression was computed with perspective taking and empathic concern as independent variables and compliance as the dependent variable. As anticipated, perspective taking did not significantly contribute to the prediction of compliance, $b = -0.07$, $p = \text{ns}$, but empathic concern did, $b = 2.74$, $p < .05$. Because a caused string was anticipated, correlations

were computed among compliance, perspective taking, and empathic concern. Perspective taking and empathic concern were significantly correlated, $r(53) = .44$, $p < .01$, empathic concern was also significantly correlated with compliance, $r(53) = .42$, $p < .01$, but perspective taking was not significantly correlated with compliance, $r(53) = .17$, $p = ns$. This pattern of correlations is consistent with perspective taking leading to empathic concern and empathic concern leading to compliance. The predicted indirect effect for perspective taking on compliance was .18, and was within sampling error of the observed effect (RMSE = .01).

To investigate the moderator model, separate binary logistic regressions were computed in both the control and the EAFMWH conditions. In the control group, perspective taking did not significantly contribute to the prediction of compliance, $b = -1.79$, $p = ns$; however, empathic concern significantly contributed to the prediction of compliance, $b = 3.04$, $p < .05$. In the EAFMWH condition, perspective taking again did not significantly contribute to the prediction of compliance, $b = 2.05$, $p = ns$, but neither did empathic concern, $b = 1.41$, $p = ns$. The slope for perspective taking was negative in the control group but positive in the EAFMWH condition, suggesting a cross-over interaction involving perspective taking and strategy use on compliance. The two slopes were significantly different, $t(51) = 2.34$, $p < .05$, indicating a significant interaction. For visual depiction, perspective taking was recoded with a median split into high and low. The perspective taking by message strategy interaction was significant, $F(1, 51) = 12.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$. The interaction is depicted in Figure 1.

On the volunteering form, participants who agreed to volunteer were asked to fill out how much time they would volunteer. The mean number of minutes ($N = 4$, $M = 195$ minutes per week, $SD = 165.23$) volunteered in the control group was greater, but not significantly so, than that of in the EAFMWH group ($N = 6$,

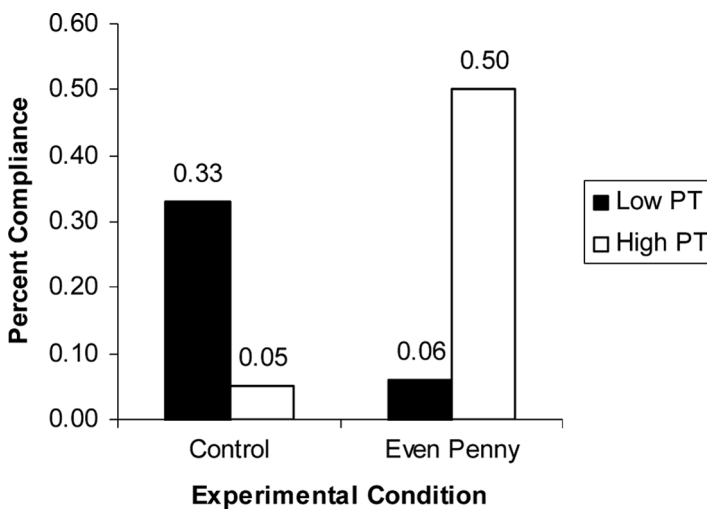


Figure 1 Compliance as a Function of Message Strategy and Perspective Taking.

$M = 140$ minutes per week, $SD = 97.98$), $t(8) = -0.67$, $p = ns$. Correlations among perspective taking, empathic concern, and time were computed. Neither the correlation between perspective taking and time, $r(8) = -.20$, $p = ns$, nor the correlation between empathic concern and time, $r(8) = .24$, $p = ns$, were statistically significant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of a strategy for getting more university students involved in volunteering activities by adding the sentence, "even a few minutes would help." To uncover the relationship between EAFMWH and empathy, two rival models were proposed.

The effectiveness of the sentence, "even a few minutes would help," was greater than the request without that sentence, but the difference (9.3%) was not statistically significant. Nevertheless, the improvement in compliance from 13.8% to 23.1% represents approximately a 40% increase in compliance, which is similar to that reported in previous research (cf., Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Reeves et al., 1987). The combination of the small sample size and the low base compliance rates may account for the lack of significance, and the results should not be interpreted as inconsistent with the previous literature. Further, even if statistically significant, the effect would be qualified by a statistically significant and stronger cross-over interaction.

Whereas the increase rate of compliance was comparable with previous studies, the base compliance rates were lower. That is, compliance rates in both conditions were slightly less than half that of previous studies, suggesting that volunteer requests pose a bigger imposition than requests for small financial donations. This does not suggest that the strategy is inappropriate to volunteering contexts. Rather, the results are inconclusive (but promising) in this regard.

As expected, the degree of empathic concern was the key to predicting the effectiveness of the request. None of the people who were low in empathic concern complied with the request regardless of the request type or the degree of perspective taking. Caring about others seems to be necessary but not sufficient for volunteering.

Stiff et al.'s (1988) model was consistent with the data when averaging across message conditions. Perspective taking was significantly correlated with empathic concern, and empathic concern was correlated with compliance. The data, however, were not consistent with the model within message conditions. In the control group, none of the variables was significantly correlated with each other. In addition, perspective taking was negatively correlated with compliance. In the EAFMWH group, compliance, perspective taking, and empathic concern were all significantly and positively correlated with each other. Inconsistent with the model, perspective taking was especially highly correlated with compliance.

A moderator model was therefore consistent with the data, but the nature of the interaction was unanticipated. For people who report being high in perspective taking, the EAFMWH strategy is more effective than the absence of this strategy.

On the other hand, when people have little ability to understand another's viewpoint (i.e., score low on perspective taking), the EAFMWH strategy was counterproductive. This cross-over interaction is important and intriguing.

People who see themselves as high perspective taking may feel obligated to comply with a pro-social request, and this may be especially likely when the imposition is minimized. Alternatively, individuals high in perspective taking may be more sensitive to the impression management demands and find it more difficult to say no. People low in perspective taking, however, may resent the psychological pressure added by "even a few minutes would help," thereby decreasing the likelihood of compliance.

The reported volunteering time in the control group was greater than that in the treatment group, although the difference was not statistically significant. This result of this study was not consistent with Cialdini and Schroeder (1976), in which the amount of money donated from the treatment group was bigger than that of control group. The lack of statistical significance, however, makes the result inconclusive.

The primary limitations of this study were the small sample size coupled with a low baseline compliance rate. Perhaps as a consequence, no significant difference between the control and EAFMWH groups was found, although the compliance rate was in the predicted direction. Nevertheless, the sample size was sufficient to produce a significant cross-over interaction, and the sample size is not atypical of behavioral field studies of compliance. Other limitations include that only female requesters were used, and the sex of the requestor was not crossed with target person sex.

In conclusion, the results showed that adding the phrase "even a few minutes would help" was more effective, but not significantly so, than a direct request. More importantly, the effectiveness of the strategy was limited to those scoring high perspective taking and high empathic concern. Generally, only people scoring highly in empathic concern volunteered, and the effectiveness of the EAFMWH increased as the target perspective taking score increased. The finding that the EAFMWH is moderated by perspective taking and empathic concern represents a potentially important advance in the understanding of sequential request message strategies.

Note

- [1] Due to response rate and mortality concerns, additional data on perspective taking and empathic concern were collected from a class as a comparison group. Forty students (14 males, 25 females, 1 sex not disclosed) agreed to fill in the questionnaires. For perspective taking, the 55 participants in the experiment ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.74$) did not differ from the 40 classroom participants ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.55$), $t(93) = -0.28$, $p = ns$. Similarly, scores on empathic concern in the experiment ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .68$) were similar to those observed in the classroom ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.53$), $t(93) = 0.63$, $p = ns$. The participants from the experiment ranged in age from 18 to 28 ($M = 21.64$, $SD = 2.26$), and the ages in the classroom ranged from 20 to 25 ($M = 21.68$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(93) = -0.09$, $p = ns$. The statistical power for the tests above was approximately .68 for medium effects and .97 for large effects. As an additional check, independent sample t -tests were conducted to test if perspective taking and empathic concern scores differed between the experiment

and the control groups. Neither perspective taking scores, $t(53) = 1.65$, $p = \text{ns}$, nor empathic concern, $t(53) = 0.36$, $p = \text{ns}$, were significantly different. Thus, there is no evidence of selection or selection by mortality threats to validity.

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