

The Legitimization of Paltry Favors Effect: A Review and Meta-Analysis

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A meta-analysis was conducted on the legitimization of paltry favors (LPF) effect (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). A total of 19 studies met the inclusion criteria, with a combined sample of 2,730 subjects. Excluding studies in which the LPF request was delivered via mail and those studies that accepted pledges as the dependent variable resulted in a homogeneous set of effect sizes ($r = .18$, $OR = 2.41$). While the data provide clues as to possible mediating mechanisms, the cause of the effect is still not clear. Directions for future research are suggested.

Keywords: Compliance-Gaining; Even a Penny Will Help; Legitimization of Paltry Favors

Legitimizing paltry favors (LPF) as a means of gaining compliance was first studied by Cialdini and Schroeder in 1976. Confederates dressed as American Cancer Society solicitors added the phrase “even a penny will help” to a direct request, and compliance nearly doubled. Since then, many studies have been conducted on the LPF as a compliance gaining tactic, some designed to replicate the findings, some to test boundary conditions, some to examine potential moderators, and some to investigate possible cognitive mediators. This meta-analysis synthesizes this sometimes paradoxical body of literature.

The critical feature of an LPF request is a message validating small contributions, typically with the phrase “even a penny will help.” Researchers have tinkered with this basic technique in a number of ways. In the original LPF study, Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) also used the phrases “even a dollar will help” and “we’ve already received some contributions, ranging from a penny on up.” The effect has been

found with zlotys, the Polish currency most equivalent to a penny. In addition to changing the wording and monetary amount, the effect has been found with other target requests, such as “even a flyer will help” and “even a few minutes will help.” The organizations and causes for which confederates collected money also varied and included the American Cancer Society (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Weyant & Smith, 1987), Urszula Jaworska Foundation (Dolinski, Grzyb, Olejnik, Prusakowski, & Urban, 2005), Vermont Heart Fund (DeJong & Oopik, 1992), American Heart Association (Reingen, 1978), Humane Society (Reeves & Saucer, 1993), Afghan refugees and World Expo (Dolinski et al., 2005), The Good Friends Shelter Group (Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987), and university orientations for international students (Takada & Levine, 2007).

Despite the success of variants on the basic LPF technique, the results have not always been uniform. Some studies have found no or little effect, and some have even found a negative effect (DeJong & Oopik, 1992; Reeves & Saucer, 1993, Study 1, no commitment condition). The reason for the discrepant findings is unclear, but there are a number of moderators that could be the cause. For instance, the studies vary on the physical immediacy of the request (face-to-face requests v. mailed solicitations), the target behavior requested (money, pledges, or time commitments), demographic characteristics of the sample (e.g., age, sex of requester, sex of subject), wording of the request, and where the request was made.

In addition to the apparent variance in effects across studies, there is no consensus on the cognitive mechanisms that cause the effect. With a few exceptions, subsequent studies have focused on replicating the results and boundary testing, and not on investigating mediating mechanisms. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) eliminated perceived need as an explanation, and proposed that the results were potentially caused by self-presentation goals, barrier removal (taking away the ability to say no), guilt, or sympathy. DeJong and Oopik (1992) investigated the LPF in a mailed request and did not find effects, potentially evidence for the self-presentation explanation. Dolinski et al. (2005) implied that the technique may work because in many of the LPF experiments, the requestor engaged in dialogue with the subject before making the request; eliminating dialogue, however, did not eliminate the LPF effect.

Due to the discrepant results and the multiple potential moderators, a meta-analysis was conducted. Because to our knowledge no such analysis exists, it has the potential to provide answers not otherwise discernable and to set a future LPF research agenda.

Method

Meta-Analytic Technique

The Hunter and Schmidt (1990) variance-centered method of meta-analysis was employed to examine these data.¹ The first step in performing this meta-analysis was to locate pertinent studies. LPF studies were found through a number of methods. First, searches were conducted on PsychInfo, PubMed, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses using the terms

“legitimization of paltry favors,” “even a penny will help,” and “even a dollar will help.” The literature reviews and reference sections of these articles were then searched to see if any studies were missed.

The second step was to develop inclusion criteria. For a study to be included in this meta-analysis, it had to fulfill four conditions. First, the study had to have a condition that legitimized a truly minimal contribution (e.g., Brockner, Guzzi, Kane, Levine, & Shaplen, 1984, was excluded because it used an “even a dollar will help” message induction). Second, it had to have a control condition that used a (relatively) direct request (e.g., Mark & Shotland, 1983, was eliminated because the control condition included pre-giving). Third, the unit of analysis had to be an individual decision to comply or not to comply (e.g., Perrine & Heather, 2000, was eliminated because the unit of analysis was the donation receptacle). Fourth, the experiment had to provide sufficient information for an effect size to be computed. A total of 19 studies from 11 articles were found that fulfilled these selection criteria, with year of publication ranging from 1976 to 2007. All located studies were published in English. All of the experiments included in the final analyses were performed outside of laboratories (i.e., in natural settings). Some of the participants in these studies may have been students, but certainly not all of them.

The third step was to transform quantitative information in each pertinent report to a common metric. In this meta-analysis we chose the familiar metric r , the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Fourth, the effects were weighted by sample size and averaged (mean). Fifth, the variability in effect sizes across studies (i.e., homogeneity) was assessed with the Hunter and Schmidt (1990) chi square test. Sixth, a sampling error analysis was performed to ascertain if the results were homogeneous across studies or if there was substantial heterogeneity. The latter case would indicate the presence of differential methodological artifacts, moderator variables, or both. The last step involved attempting to isolate important moderators if they existed.

Instrumentation

Examining this corpus for differences in study execution led to the measurement of a number of potential moderators (see Table 1). This set of measures included presentation mode (face-to-face v. other), sex of requestor, sex of subject, age of subject (adult v. other), phrasing of the request (e.g., “even a penny will help,” “taking contributions from a penny on up”), length of the message, type of request (prosocial or not), requesting organization (e.g., American Cancer Society, Humane Society), the number of confederates, whether or not the confederates were blind to condition and hypothesis, year of publication, and country in which the experiments were conducted (Poland vs. United States). Four researchers agreed on all coding decisions.

Results

There were 19 studies with a combined sample size of 2,730 for which a compliance effect size could be computed (see Table 2). The weighted correlation for this set of

Table 1 Descriptive Information for Studies Meeting Inclusion Criteria

| Study | Mode ¹ | DV ² | Sex of requestor ³ | Number of requestors | Place ⁴ | Blind to hypotheses ⁵ | Country | LPF message ⁶ | Control message ⁷ |
|---|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Cialdini & Schroeder (1976), Study 1 | FTF | I | B | 2 | H | NA | USA | 1 | 1 |
| Cialdini & Schroeder (1976), Study 2 | FTF | I | B | 2 | H | Y | USA | 2 | 1, 2 |
| DeJong & Oopik (1992) | M | I | I | NA | H | NA | USA | 1, 3 | 1, 3 |
| Dolinski et al. (2005), Study 1 | FTF | I | B | 1 | P | Y | Poland | 1, 4 | 1, 4 |
| Dolinski et al. (2005), Study 2 | FTF | I | B | 1 | P | Y | Poland | 1, 4 | 1, 4 |
| Dolinski et al. (2005), Study 3 | FTF | P | M | 1 | P | Y | Poland | 1, 4 | 1, 4 |
| Fraser & Hite (1989) | FTF | I | B | 1 | H | Y | USA | 1 | 1 |
| Fraser, Hite, & Sauer (1988) | FTF | I | B | 1 | H | Y | USA | 1 | 1 |
| Reeves, Macolini, & Martin (1987) | FTF | I | B | 2 | H | NA | USA | 1, 5 | 1, 2 |
| Reeves & Sauer (1993), Study 1, face-to-face condition | FTF | I | M | 2 | P | N | USA | 1, 5 | 1, 2 |
| Reeves & Sauer (1993), Study 1, commitment condition | FTF | P | M | 2 | P | N | USA | 1, 5 | 1, 2 |
| Reeves & Sauer (1993), Study 1, no commitment condition | FTF | P | M | 2 | P | N | USA | 1, 5 | 1, 2 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----|---|---|---|---|----|-----|------|------|
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 2, face-to-face condition | FTF | I | M | 2 | P | Y | USA | 1, 5 | 1, 2 |
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 2, commitment condition | FTF | P | M | 2 | P | Y | USA | 1, 5 | 1, 2 |
| Reingen (1978), Study 1 | FTF | I | B | 2 | P | Y | USA | 1 | 1 |
| Reingen (1978), Study 2 | FTF | I | M | 1 | P | Y | USA | 1 | 1 |
| Takada & Levine (2007) | FTF | I | F | 1 | P | Y | USA | 1 | 1 |
| Weyant (1984) | FTF | I | B | 2 | H | NA | USA | 1, 3 | 1, 3 |
| Weyant & Smith (1987), Study 1 | FTF | I | B | 2 | H | Y | USA | 1, 3 | 1, 3 |

¹Presentation mode: FTF = face to face, M = mailed.

²Dependent variable: I = immediate, P = pledge.

³Sex of requestor: M = male, F = female, B = both male and female, I = impersonal request.

⁴Place request made: H = subject's home, P = public.

⁵Whether confederate was blind to condition.

⁶LPF Message: 1 = variant of "even a penny will help," 2 = "contributions from a penny on up," 3 = included pre-giving, 4 = included dialogue induction, 5 = included normative information.

⁷Control message: 1 = simple direct request, 2 = included normative information, 3 = included pre-giving, 4 = included dialogue induction.

Table 2 Compliance Effects for Studies Meeting Initial Inclusion Criteria by Moderator

| Study | Control | | LPF | | Compliance effect | |
|---|---------|--------------------|------|--------------------|-------------------|------|
| | % | subjects/ <i>n</i> | % | subjects/ <i>n</i> | <i>r</i> | OR |
| Face to face, dependent variable collected immediately | | | | | | |
| Cialdini & Schroeder (1976), Study 1 | 28.6 | 12/42 | 50.0 | 21/42 | 0.22 | 2.50 |
| Cialdini & Schroeder (1976), Study 2 | 32.3 | 10/31 | 58.1 | 18/31 | 0.29 | 3.37 |
| Dolinski et al. (2005), Study 1 | 50.0 | 30/60 | 68.3 | 41/60 | 0.19 | 2.16 |
| Dolinski et al. (2005), Study 2 | 31.7 | 38/120 | 41.7 | 50/120 | 0.10 | 1.54 |
| Fraser & Hite (1989) | 23.8 | 19/80 | 30.0 | 24/80 | 0.07 | 1.38 |
| Fraser, Hite, & Sauer (1988) | 15.0 | 24/160 | 34.0 | 54/160 | 0.22 | 2.89 |
| Reeves, Macolini, & Martin (1987) | 30.0 | 9/30 | 56.7 | 17/30 | 0.27 | 3.05 |
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 1, face-to-face condition | 40.0 | 6/15 | 66.7 | 10/15 | 0.27 | 3.00 |
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 2, face-to-face condition | 34.4 | 11/32 | 66.7 | 20/30 | 0.32 | 3.82 |
| Reingen (1978), Study 1 | 19.0 | 6/32 | 47.0 | 15/32 | 0.30 | 3.82 |
| Reingen (1978), Study 2 | 11.0 | 3/28 | 39.0 | 11/28 | 0.33 | 5.39 |
| Takada & Levine (2007) | 13.8 | 4/29 | 23.1 | 6/26 | 0.12 | 1.88 |
| Weyant (1984) | 39.0 | 23/59 | 57.0 | 30/53 | 0.18 | 2.04 |
| Weyant & Smith (1987), Study 1 | 36.0 | 34/94 | 39.0 | 37/95 | 0.03 | 1.13 |
| Combined (weighted by sample size where applicable) | 28.2 | 229/812 | 44.2 | 354/802 | 0.18 | 2.41 |
| Mailed request DeJong & Oopik (1992) | 7.0 | 24/340 | 4.0 | 14/348 | -0.07 | 0.55 |
| Pledge as dependent variable | | | | | | |
| Dolinski et al. (2005), Study 3 | 30.8 | 37/120 | 43.3 | 52/120 | 0.13 | 1.72 |
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 1, commitment condition | 33.3 | 5/15 | 80.0 | 12/15 | 0.47 | 8.00 |
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 1, no commitment condition | 86.7 | 13/15 | 66.7 | 10/15 | -0.24 | 0.31 |
| Reeves & Saucer (1993), Study 2, commitment condition | 35.5 | 11/31 | 61.1 | 22/36 | 0.26 | 2.86 |
| Combined (weighted by sample size where applicable) | 36.5 | 66/181 | 51.6 | 96/186 | 0.11 | 2.27 |

studies was .11 (unweighted mean = .18) with a weighted variance of .019 (unweighted variance = .026). The weighted odds ratio was 1.92 (unweighted OR = 2.71). The variance that would be expected from sampling error alone, given a set of 19 studies with 2,730 participants, is .007, a figure that is significantly less than the obtained variance ($\chi^2(18, N = 2730) = 53.15, p < .001$).²

A search for variables that could account for the dispersion yielded two potential moderators. First, the vast majority of the experiments involved face-to-face solicitation ($M = .17$, $OR = 2.38$, $K = 18$, $N = 2,042$). The one experiment that employed a mail solicitation produced an effect size substantially variant from the face-to-face solicitations ($M = -.07$, $OR = .55$, $N = 688$). Because in only one experiment was the solicitation not made face-to-face, it is possible that this study was aberrant in some other way. Thus, firm conclusions concerning the moderating effect of presentation mode must await subsequent research. Second, most experiments involved collecting money directly from the participants, but five experiments employed pledges as the dependent variable. The latter produced larger, but not significantly different, effects than did the former (pledge, $M = .15$, $OR = 2.27$, $N = 422$ v. money, $M = .11$, $OR = 1.85$, $N = 2,308$; $z = 0.75$, ns ; $r = .09$), although the relationship is reversed (and still not significant) when the lone mail solicitation is not included in the analysis (see below).

Eliminating the experiment in which the solicitation was made by mail and the five experiments that employed pledges as the dependent variable yielded a set of 13 experiments ($N = 1,620$). The weighted mean effect size in these experiments was $r = .18$ ($OR = 2.41$, weighted variance = .009). The variance expected from sampling error alone is .008. Testing the null hypothesis that the weighted variance did not differ substantially from zero indicated that the null hypothesis could not be rejected ($\chi^2(12, N = 1,620) = 15.57$, $p = .21$). Thus, the data are consistent with the hypothesis that this set of 13 experiments produces a set of homogeneous effect sizes. The null hypothesis that the weighted variance did not differ substantially from zero for the group of five pledge experiments could also not be rejected ($\chi^2(4, N = 422) = 8.88$, $p = .06$).

A number of additional moderators were examined, but none accounted for a statistically significant amount of variance. These included presentation mode, sex of requestor, sex of subject, age of subject, phrasing of the request, length of the message, type of request, requesting organization, the number of confederates, whether or not the confederates were blind to condition and hypothesis, year of publication, and country in which the experiment(s) was conducted.

Finally, a file drawer analysis was conducted. The results indicated that 34 studies of $N = 125$ (the mean sample size of this database), each producing an effect size of zero, would be necessary to reduce the mean effect size to .05. A total of 221 studies of the same mean sample size, each producing an effect size of zero, would be necessary to reduce the mean effect size to .01.

Discussion

Summary of the LPF Studies

Despite the fact that only 19 studies met the inclusion criteria, there is still sufficient evidence from the literature to draw conclusions regarding the legitimization of paltry favors technique. The analysis found that adding the LPF phrase produced more compliance than the direct request control. Two moderators were found.

One moderator was the use of a face-to-face solicitation. When the compliance-gaining attempt was not face-to-face, the technique was not successful. But, one must be cautious in drawing firm conclusions; in only one experiment was the solicitation not made face-to-face. The other moderator was whether pledges or immediate donations were requested. After eliminating the study that was not a face-to-face solicitation, pledges produced smaller compliance effect sizes than immediate monetary donations. When the studies that contained these two moderators were eliminated, a homogeneous effect of $r = .18$ was found for LPF on compliance. An effect size of this magnitude is comparable to effect sizes reported for other compliance gaining techniques, such as the foot-in-the-door (FITD) and the door-in-the-face (DITF; Burger, 1999; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998).

Two studies found interaction effects that cannot be examined using meta-analytic techniques without additional studies. Takada and Levine (2007) found that people who were high in perspective-taking were more likely than those low in perspective-taking to comply with an LPF request but less likely to comply with the control request. Fraser, Hite, and Sauer (1988) found that when a large donation suggestion was mentioned before the LPF request, the LPF technique did not increase compliance rates above the control rate. No other studies that examined potential moderators found significant evidence for them. For example, Fraser and Hite (1989) found that adding a statement that there was an organization that would make a matching offer did not affect compliance rates, while Reingen (1978) found that combining the LPF with the DITF or FITD technique did not produce more compliance than the LPF alone.

Two studies examined possible mediators for the LPF effect. Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) proposed that the targets of an LPF request would conclude that if a charity was asking for pennies, they must have a high need for donations. Cialdini and Schroeder's subsequent experiments eliminated this explanation. Dolinski et al. (2005) proposed that the LPF increased compliance by creating a dialogue with the target. Here also, the results of the subsequent experiments produced no evidence consistent with this hypothesis; therefore, at this juncture in the development of the LPF literature, there is little evidence to support specific mediational mechanisms for the observed effect. A number of possible explanatory mechanisms remain to be considered in future studies. Perhaps the LPF message removes a reason to say no to the request or that self-presentation goals lead targets to want to avoid being perceived negatively by those soliciting their compliance or those observing the compliance gaining interaction; the extent to which these reasons are actually different is also undetermined. It is also possible that the LPF leads to targets anticipating negative affect if they do not contribute. Finally, it is also possible that the most obvious explanation is true, namely that the LPF condition legitimizes the contribution of small sums, making subjects feel comfortable donating what they can afford rather than what they think the charity might expect. While it was not possible to calculate the mean effect size for average donation, evidence from individual studies indicates that the average donation does not differ substantially based on condition, making the legitimization argument less likely. Nevertheless, more research is needed before hard conclusions can be drawn.

Limitations and a Comment on Conducting Compliance Gaining Experiments

A limitation of this body of research stems from the nature of the control group employed typically in LPF experiments. As Mark and Shotland (1983) pointed out, the generalization of the results of the typical LPF experiment to a phenomenon such as donating to charities is marred by the fact that charities rarely employ only a direct request in their campaigns. Instead, their typical message is likely much more persuasive than the direct request control message, and, consequently, the effects of the extant LPF literature may overestimate the benefit of the technique in applied contexts. Of course, this limitation can be addressed by subsequent research.

Moreover, it is important to note that the LPF technique may have limited applications. In the set of studies reviewed here, the topic was prosocial in each case. It is unclear how the technique could be adopted to compliance gaining situations in which the request is not clearly prosocial or is decidedly antisocial.

Finally, it is worth noting that, although meta-analysis can be used to examine moderator effects, and may uncover evidence of interesting, important, and non-obvious moderators, it may also fail to discover other, equally interesting, important, and nonobvious moderators. For instance, many individual differences (e.g., self-esteem, dogmatism, and need for cognition) cannot yet be examined via meta-analysis, as they are not measured in the primary research literature. If such unknown individual differences do moderate the LPF-compliance relationship, they can contribute to the heterogeneity of the effect estimates observed across studies. Unfortunately, finding heterogeneous effects does not provide a clear clue as to which individual differences might serve as moderators. Thus, the investigation of such moderators in primary studies, as in Takada and Levine (2007), has the potential to make important contributions to our understanding of the LPF-compliance relationship.

Conclusion

This meta-analysis demonstrated that when solicitations were made face-to-face and donations were collected at the time of the request, a mean effect size was obtained that is comparable to other techniques known to be effective in gaining compliance (e.g., door-in-the-face and foot-in-the-door). Moreover, the LPF technique is easier to implement than other, multistage strategies. Additionally, two research opportunities arise from this review. First, there is a lack of definitive research locating mediators of the effect, making this area ripe for additional exploration. Second, the technique has not been implemented with antisocial or self-interested requests. Subsequent research investigating these issues has the potential to circumscribe the boundary conditions surrounding this phenomenon.

Notes

- [1] Clearly, there are alternative methods of performing meta-analysis (e.g., Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981; Hedges & Olkin, 1985; Rosenthal, 1991). Hunter's variance-centered method has been used extensively and effectively in communication research (e.g., Allen et al.,

2007; Boster & Mongeau, 1984; Dillard et al., 1984; Hullett, 2005). Moreover, it has been our observation that alternative methods rarely yield estimates that differ substantially when the methods are executed competently (e.g., Schmidt & Hunter, 1999). In any event, Tables 1 and 2 present the raw data that allow our conclusions to be examined with alternative methods.

- [2] Another dependent variable of interest is the difference in mean donation in the experimental and control groups. In some studies (e.g., DeJong & Oopik, 1992; Dolinski et al., 2005; Fraser & Hite, 1989), this value was reported for all experimental and control group subjects. In other studies (e.g., Fraser et al., 1988; Reeves & Saucer, 1993; Takada & Levine, 2007), this value was reported only for those who donated. This fact made the calculation of the within cell variances impossible, and thus, made the calculation of an effect size impossible for this dependent measure.

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