The Perceptual Contrast Explanation of Sequential Request Strategy Effectiveness

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Although previous studies of the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face techniques of interpersonal influence have established the effectiveness of these sequential request strategies, communication researchers have not discovered an adequate conceptual framework for explaining their compliance-enhancing properties. The present study tests the perceptual contrast explanation for sequential request efficacy. Compared with nonsequenced critical requests (i.e., controls), substantially higher compliance with various types of requests was obtained through the use of the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face techniques, but measures of underlying cognitions failed to reveal significant anchoring effects as would be predicted by a perceptual contrast model. Limitations are discussed and suggestions for future research are offered.

A number of researchers have concentrated recently on establishing the effectiveness and limitations of various *sequential* compliance-gaining techniques (Chmielewiski, 1982; Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978; Tybout. 1978). Relatively few studies have focused upon "why" and "how" such message strategems work, however. Theoretical accounts often have been applied to sequential request findings a posteriori, with little preliminary concern for test and falsification of a particular model. Seibold, Cantrill, and Meyers (1985) observe that much of the research in the domain of interpersonal influence in general is atheoretical and conceptually fragmented and that, in the sequential request tradition, this problem is particularly

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evident in studies of the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face techniques of interpersonal influence.

In this article we report the results of a study designed to investigate one potential theoretical explanation for sequential request effects associated with the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face techniques of interpersonal influence. We begin by discussing the *perceptual contrast* hypothesis, with special emphasis upon its falsifiability within the sequential request paradigm. Second, we report the findings of a study that examines both the effectiveness of the techniques and differences in subjects' perceptions of the acceptability of request scenarios used as experimental stimuli. Finally, we suggest directions for future investigations of the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face effect.

Sequential Requests and the Role of Perceptual Contrast

The foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face techniques are essentially mirror images of each other, and their effectiveness is always gauged against nonsequential, similar critical requests. *Critical requests* refer to those appeals, either control or experimental, that conclude a compliance-gaining scenario. In their seminal research, Freedman and Fraser (1966) established that if one could get a target to comply with minimal requests (i.e., get a foot in the door), further compliance with a second request would be more likely and significantly greater. Alternatively, Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, and Darby (1975) initially demonstrated the "rejection-then-moderation," or door-in-the-face, technique for gaining compliance. Cialdini et al. reasoned that by getting subjects to reject a large request, the same individuals would be more likely to comply with a subsequent critical appeal requiring a more moderate level of compliance. The researchers again observed the sequential effect in comparison with control subjects' compliance rates.

Numerous research groups have examined the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face techniques in the past decade, and a number of reviewers (e.g., DeJong, 1979; Seibold, Cantrill, & Meyers, 1985) have concluded that these types of sequential requests are applicable to a wide variety of compliance-gaining situations. Although recent meta-analyses (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Steblay, 1983; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984) suggest that significant increases in compliance rates are reliably associated with the use of the techniques, even

a brief analysis of this family of research reveals a number of conceptual and methodological flaws in previous attempts to explain *why* the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face are effective. The fragmented nature of the paradigm has fostered the application of a wide variety of incompatible explanatory frameworks to both techniques, rather than attempting to achieve parsimony and accuracy through a single generative mechanism of compliance. Furthermore, most of the theoretical bases for explaining foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face efficacy have been applied a posteriori rather than used as a foundation for designing studies capable of falsifying underlying postulates. Hence the inability to integrate previous research findings makes suspect the pragmatic value of techniques the bases of which are not fully understood.

Dillard and Burgoon (1982) recently argued that the major questions to be answered in understanding foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face efficacy are cognitive in nature. We concur and, like a number of other researchers interested in explaining sequential request efficacy, we have begun to examine the cognitive mechanisms of *perceptual contrast* with an eye toward understanding the differences in compliance rates observed in various studies.

Most perceptual contrast work within the sequential request paradigm has been conducted by Shanab and his associates (i.e., Shanab & Isonio, 1980, 1982; Shanab & O'Neil, 1979 1982). Grounding his analysis in Adaptation Level Theory (Helson, 1964), Shanab has argued that perceptual contrast is a more parsimonious explanation for sequential request effects than that provided by other theoretical perspectives. The perceptual contrast explanation states that the initial request employed in both techniques acts as an anchor against which further requests are assimilated or contrasted. That is, targets of sequential techniques use initial requests as standards for interpreting the acceptability of critical requests in such ways as to form an impression that the critical requests are more reasonable than they would be if an anchoring request were not present. In foot-in-the-door scenarios, the perception of the critical request is assimilated to the previously established anchor of a trivial request; the second request would seem to be *more* like the first and, therefore, would appear less severe than a non-anchored (i.e., control) request. Alternatively, door-in-the-face subjects would contrast critical requests against the previously established anchor of an outlandish request; the second request would appear to be less severe than a control request precisely because the target would perceive it as *less* like the perceptual anchor unavailable to control

subjects. In either case, this perceptual process is thought to guide the interpretation of requests, resulting in the differential compliance rates obtained in the typical sequential request study.

Although Dillard and Burgoon (1982) have suggested that perceptual contrast processes can account for a number of sequential requests effects, there does not exist an adequate empirical examination of the applicability of the framework to foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face research. For example, Miller, Seligman, Clark, and Bush (1976) argued that since subjects' compliance rates covaried more with perceptions of personal gain than they did with perceptions of yielding on the part of the requestor, perceptual contrast processes were the cause of the door-in-the-face effect they observed. Yet Miller et al. neither specified a perceptual contrast model to *predict* the degree of compliance, nor did they actually *measure* shifts in perception or the effects of anchoring stimuli (i.e., the intial requests). As with most research groups in this area, a fundamental test of the explanatory framework through the comparison of anchored and nonanchored *ratings* of requests (see Bieri, Atkins, Briar, Leaman, Miller & Tripodi, 1966) was not conducted. Hence we cannot conclude with certainty that perceptual contrast processes form the basis for sequential request effectiveness in either the foot-in-the-door or the door-in-the-face paradigm.

An additional question concerning the general applicability of the perceptual contrast framework to sequential request phenomena involves the extent to which various *types* of request sequences are subject to anchoring effects. Most investigators have operationalized the differences between initial and critical requests by manipulating the perceived *effort* associated with various appeals (e.g., time volunteered or money donated). However, some studies (Shanab & O'Neil, 1982) have also investigated the effectiveness of qualitatively different requests by implicitly altering the *novelty* instantiated in a request sequence. Although other perceptual dimensions (e.g., request duration) may have a bearing on sequential compliance rates, effort and novelty seem to be the axes upon which most previous studies have pivoted. Hence these two dimensions are particularly germane to the present research. And if, as Helson (1964) suggests, perceptual contrast processes are applicable to both quantitative and qualitative cognitive anchors, we should observe the effect of the sequential presentation of requests in ratings of both the effort and novelty subjects perceive to be associated with foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face scenarios.[1]

Based on this rationale, a study was designed to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Compliant subjects' perceptions of critical foot-in-the-door requests will exhibit an assimilation effect anchored by their impressions of initial requests.

Since the previous exposure to a comparatively mild initial requests should serve as a reasonable standard by which the second request can be compared, we should observe that compliant subjects' ratings of critical requests converge (i.e., assimilate) upon their ratings of the pre-established anchor.

Hypothesis 2: Compliant subjects' perceptions of critical door-in-the-face requests will exhibit a contrast effect anchored by their impressions of initial requests.

Unlike their foot-in-the-door counterparts, door-in-the-face subjects will have been initially exposed to an unreasonable request that should serve as a standard against which the subsequent request is contrasted. As such, ratings of the critical requests will diverge from ratings of the first requests and will appear less severe than those exhibited by the nonanchored control subjects' ratings.

As the first parametric test of a hitherto *assumed* explanation for sequential request effectiveness, test of these hypotheses can contribute to the continuing study of the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face. Simply stated, if we observe that foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face subjects' ratings of the effort and novelty associated with critical requests are different from those produced by control subjects, and that the direction of the perceptual shifts is compatible with assimilation and contrasts effects, we can assume that perceptual contrast is occurring.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for the experiment were drawn from basic speech courses at a large midwestern university. A total of 526 students participated in the research; the responses from 3 persons were not usable. All subjects participated voluntarily in the research. Subjects were contacted in 24 intact groups, were from diverse majors, and were generally in their first two years of college. A total of 222 of the subjects were male, 276 were female, and 23 did not indicate their gender on the response protocols.

Experimental Design and Analyses

The design of the experiment made provisions for a number of nonparametric and parametric tests. Since the objective of the study involved an assessment of the underlying cognitions associated with sequential request compliance, two types of analyses were employed. To discern if a sequential effect was occurring, the first stage of analysis examined the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face techniques for each of two topics in four 2 (experimental versus control) by 2 (comply versus not comply) chi-square analyses. In order to examine the underlying cognitive differences between experimental and control subjects' request ratings (relevant to both Hypotheses 1 and 2), 16 *contingent* t-tests were conducted. These t-tests were contingent by virture of the fact that some of the contrasts would not be needed if prior t-tests proved nonsignificant.

Materials

The materials for the experiment consisted of two sets of response protocols. First, subjects in the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face conditions received a single page that contained spaces for them to indicate their name, age, telephone number, and gender. These demographic questions were followed by (a) a dichotomous (i.e., Yes/No) question regarding the subjects' desires to comply with the initial request, (b) a six-point, bipolar scale upon which to indicate their impressions of the effort associated with initial-request compliance, and (c) a six-point, bipolar scale dealing with the novelty associated with the focus of the first request.[2] Second, all subjects received a critical-request response form identical to the initial protocol with the addition of two questions concerning their prior exposure to social scientific research settings.

Dependent Variables

The dichotomous yes-no responses served as subjects' intentions to comply with the critical requests on the control and sequentially manipulated cells of the design. Alternatively, the effort and novelty ratings measured the subjects' cognitive perceptions of request severity levels.

Procedures

The procedures employed in this experiment were tested in two pilot studies and were conceptually similar to the manipulations found in other foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face studies. However, to increase the generalizability of the findings, two separate topics (i.e., foci of requests) were used, each drawn from an inductively generated, pretested set of applicable request foci. Half of the sample received requests regarding their willingness to solicit via telephone either blood, organ, or sperm and ova donations (i.e., "donation" topic); half the subjects were presented with appeals either to have a conversation with nursing-home residents, to run a few errands for them, or to teach them how to bathe themselves properly (i.e., an "elderly" topic). Each of these different requests represented the operationalization of the two topics into low, moderate, and severe levels of perceived novelty. The effort dimension was manipulated by requesting either fifteen minutes, one hour, or six hours of commitment on the part of the subjects. Table 1 illustrates the various foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face request scenarios used in this study. Hence, for each topic, there were six unique foot-in-the-door, door-in-the-face, or control combinations, each of which could be presented to an intact group of individuals. Each intact group received only one request scenario. Each type of request sequence for each topic was pretested using a separate sample of the population to ensure that appropriate compliance rate differences could be obtained when presenting different sequential requests.

A male experimenter briefly introduced the research to each of 24 classes that were contacted (two for each unique cell in the design) by indicating that data were being collected in conjunction with a fictitious representative of a well-known organization (e.g., the American Medical Association) and that they were looking for volunteers for a study. In the experimental conditions, subjects received the first protocol, indicated their responses to the stimulus items, and then returned the sheets to the experimenter.[3] Next the experimenter passed out the critical-request response forms and asked the second request. Control subjects only received the critical-request and its associated response protocol. Once all response-forms had been collected the experimenter asked the subjects what they believed was the purpose of the study, if they had heard about it from their friends, and if they had any questions. He then debriefed the subjects and requested that they not discuss the research.

TABLE 1
Request Scenarios and Design

Topic	*Manipulated Dimension*	*Foot-in-the-Door*	*Critical and Control*	*Door-in-the-Face*
Donation	Effort	Request 15 minutes soliciting organ donations	Request 1 hour soliciting organ donations	Request 6 hours soliciting organ donations
	Novely	Request 1 hour soliciting blood donations	Request 1 hour soliciting organ donations	Request 1 hour soliciting sperm and ova donations
Elderly	Effort	Request 15 minutes running errands for elderly	Request 1 hour running errands for elderly	Request 6 hours running errands for elderly
	Novelty	Request 1 hour conversation with elderly	Request 1 hour running errands for elderly	Request 1 hour instructing elderly how to bathe

NOTE: Control subjects received the same critical requests as were presented to foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face subjects. For example, the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face subjects manipulated by the novelty instantiation of the donation topic were given the critical request to volunteer one hour of telephone solicitation which was the only appeal presented to control subjects.

RESULTS

Compliance Measures

The initial chi-square analyses demonstrated that the sequential techniques were effective in boosting compliance rates. Significantly more foot-in-the-door subjects (71%) than control subjects (30%) complied with the request to solicit organ donations (χ^2 (1, n = 164) = 9.47, $p < .003$, $C = .23$). Significantly more door-in-the-face subjects (79%) than control subjects (21%) complied with the request to solicit organ donations (χ^2 (1, n = 165) = 29.88, $p < .001$, $C = .39$). Significantly more foot-in-the-door subjects (71%) than control subjects (29%) complied with the request to examine request strategies and run minor errands for the elderly (χ^2 (1, n = 167) = 11.86, $p < .001$, $C = .26$). And significantly more door-in-the-face subjects (68%) than control subjects (32%) compiled with the request to work with the elderly (χ^2 (1, n = 161) = 8.45, $p < .004$, $C = .22$). In all conditions, compliance rates for experimental subjects were at least double those of control subjects.

Cognitive Perceptions

t-tests of the "elderly" topic. Support for the perceptual contrast explanation required that subjects' critical request ratings differ, with the compliant experimental subjects' responses exhibiting assimilation and contrast shifts in the perception of critical request severity levels. To demonstrate perceptual contrast, the mean compliant experimental and control subjects' ratings in any particular condition had to (a) differ significantly from each other, and (b) the *difference* (i.e., d-score) between the initial and critical request ratings for experimental subjects had to be significantly different from the difference between the initial request ratings of the experimental group and the critical request ratings of the control group. If the experimental and control subjects' rating means did not differ, perceptual contrast could not be occurring; if the d-scores did not differ, the differences in the ratings could not be attributed to the *sequencing* of the requests in the experimental conditions. Thus the first step in testing either hypothesis establishing that assimilation and contrast were taking place was to demonstrate that experimental and control means differed. Table 2 indicates the means for the compliant experimental and control subjects in each condition of the design, their standard deviations, the t value, the degrees of freedom, and two-tailed probability estimates for each contrast. As can

TABLE 2
Contrasts Between Experimental and Control Conditions for the "Elderly" Topic

Tech and Type	*Dependent Variable*	*Mean**	*S.D.*	*t-value*	*df*	*2-tailed Probability*
FITD-E		3.33	1.197			
	ER			−.65	29	.521
CON-E		3.60	.699			
FITD-E		3.70	1.031			
	NR			−.49	26	.628
CON-E		3.90	1.101			
DITF-E		2.85	1.008			
	ER			−2.16	34	.038
CON-E		3.60	.699			
DITF-E		3.46	1.067			
	NR			−1.10	34	.281
CON-E		3.90	1.101			
FITD-N		3.32	1.003			
	ER			1.51	23	.145
CON-N		2.67	.516			
FITD-N		3.74	.991			
	NR			1.09	23	.286
CON-N		3.17	1.472			
DITF-N		3.38	1.061			
	ER			1.50	12	.160
CON-N		2.67	.516			
DITF-N		3.75	.886			
	NR			.93	12	.373
CON-N		3.17	1.472			

NOTE: FITD = foot-in-the-door; DITF = door-in-the-face; CON = control; -E = effort-version request; -N = novelty-version request; ER = effort rating; NR = novelty rating.
*Higher mean values indicate greater levels of the perceived effort or novelty associated with experimental and control conditions.

be seen, only one of the contrasts was significant at the .05 level. However, inspection of the cell means indicate that, although non-significant, differences existed between the experimental and control means. The ratings of those individuals presented with effort-version requests in the "elderly" topic are lower than the control subjects' ratings; the ratings of experimental novel-version subjects are higher than those of their control counterparts. The direction of the non-significant differences suggests that assimilation and contrast effects

could only have been occurring for individuals presented the effort-version of the request sequences.

t-tests of the "donation" topic. Although the meaningfulness of the contrasts conducted on the "donation" topic was attenuated by the lack of significant findings for the "elderly" topic, the same series of t-tests were performed. Table 3 demonstrates that, as with the alternate topic, there were no significant differences between the critical request ratings of experimental and control subjects. Unlike the "elderly" topic, the responses of experimental subjects given effort-version requests were generally not as predicted by the perceptual contrast framework (i.e., did not exhibit assimilation and contrast shifts compatible with sequential request compliance rates).

DISCUSSION

The clearest, albeit conjectural, implication of this research is that perceptual contrast processes were not driving forces behind the sequential request efficacy-rates we obtained. The fact that significant differences were observed at the nonparametric level, but not when the underlying cognitions were contrasted against each other, suggests that alternate psychological mechanisms were producing the communication effects. That is, since the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face manipulations in this study resulted in dramatic increases in experimental subjects' compliance rates but did not produce observable cognitive differences in the a priori contrasts between experimental and control group means, we cannot appeal to a perceptual contrast model to interpret the findings. At best we can only indicate that the general pattern of response means for the "elderly" topic was consistent with the principles of perceptual contrast, although differences between conditions were nonsignificant.

The failure of this research to demonstrate a causal link between perceptual shifts and compliance rate differences provides another caveat for communication scholars attempting to assess the direct effects of cognition on behavior. As Nisbett and Ross (1980, p. 11) observe, "we share our field's inability to bridge the gap between cognition and behavior, a gap that in our opinion is the most serious failing of modern cognitive psychology." Despite Dillard and Burgoon's (1982) recommendation to adopt a cognitive perspective in interpreting sequential request phenomena, we currently may lack the interdisciplinary sophistication needed to apply broad cognitive frameworks

TABLE 3
Contrasts Between Experimental and Control Conditions for the "Donation" Topic

Tech and Type	*Dependent Variable*	*Mean**	*S.D.*	*t-value*	*df*	*2-tailed Probability*
FITD-E		3.85	.988			
	ER			1.60	25	.123
CON-E		3.14	1.069			
FITD-E		4.20	.834			
	NR			−.19	25	.852
CON-E		4.29	1.496			
DITF-E		3.42	1.102			
	ER			.60	31	.552
CON-E		3.14	1.069			
DITF-E		3.73	.827			
	NR			−1.31	31	.199
CON-E		4.29	1.496			
FITD-N		4.36	1.027			
	ER			1.54	16	.144
CON-N		3.67	.516			
FITD-N		3.91	1.578			
	NR			.57	15	.580
CON-N		3.50	1.049			
DITF-N		3.36	.727			
	ER			−.95	26	.350
CON-N		3.67	.516			
DITF-N		2.68	1.171			
	NR			−1.55	26	.134
CON-N		3.50	1.049			

NOTE: FITD = foot-in-the-door; DITF = door-in-the-face; CON = control; -E = effort-version request; -N = novelty-version request; ER = effort rating; NR = novelty rating.
*Higher mean values indicate greater levels of the perceived effort or novelty associated with experimental and control conditions.

(e.g., Adaptation Level Theory) adequately to the study of foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face effects. Rather than attempting to force further such general theories upon these sequential compliance-gaining techniques, it may be advisable to retreat to a more rudimentary level of analysis. In particular, the next theoretical moves should address the two fundamental questions of what information is processed by the targets of sequential requests and how this information is used in

generating inferences that direct behavioral responses. For example, targets may interpret a request in light of the salience of social norms (Harris, 1972), a requestor's demeanor (Abelson, 1981), or impression-management concerns (Schlenker, 1980) among a host of socially induced mediators. Since a multiplicity of factors might be processed in any given request scenario, language variables such as the magnitude or novelty of a request may not be primarily responsible for a technique's effectiveness. As Greene (1984) observes, we must appreciate the nuances of cognitive *content* in order to investigate the *structures* of psychological processes adequately.

We began this investigation with the assumption that an adequate understanding of interpersonal influence processes is predicated upon a clear conception of what is required to support a particular explanation of human interaction. The present study has attempted to ground an examination of foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face efficacy in the falsifiable framework of perceptual contrast theory, and to highlight the need for rigor in applying social scientific theories to observed communication effects. For communication scholars to be able to predict and explain influence processes such as those associated with the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face, we may need a deeper understanding of the complexities of human communication. As Seibold et al. (1985) suggest, our ability to describe the strategic and tactical elements of interpersonal influence does not compensate for the shortcomings of theoretical models we have employed to integrate and understand compliance-gaining communications.

NOTES

1. Although perceptual contrast is a general mechanism of human perception that should be applicable to a wide range of dimensions, those perceptual dimensions are interesting in their own right. To the extent that the salience of effort or novelty differences between initial and critical requests define the *type* of requests targets are exposed to, the nature of the requests may influence the extent to which anchoring effects are observed. For example, some of Shanab's research (e.g., Shanab & O'Neil, 1982) seems to have confounded differences in the amount of time volunteered for a task with qualitative differences in the nature of the first and second requests, thereby resulting in somewhat mixed empirical findings.

2. Although most previous perceptual contrast studies have employed a single measure of anchoring effects (see Bieri et al., 1966), we chose to use conceptually distinct dimensions of perception represented by two scales drawn from a larger pool of pretested measures. The pretest established that these two rating scales were highly reliable indicators of the subjects' impressions fo effort and novelty severity (mean split-half reliability = .92). Further, Cronbach's-alpha coefficients for the "donation" topic ranged

from .84 to .97 and from .80 to .91 for the "elderly" topic. And, despite the fact that the two scales were shown to be moderately correlated (.02 to .71 and .23 to .75 for "donation" and "elderly" scenarios, respectively) depending upon the particular request manipulation in the design, we still have reason to believe that the dimensionality of the scales was not significantly confounded. Neither the size nor the statistical significance of the correlations depended upon the severity of the pretested scenarios.

3. For example, subjects in the door-in-the-face novel-version condition of the "elderly" topic received the following manipulations: For the last few years, my colleagues and I have been studying compliance-gaining strategies. These are the sort of things people say when trying to get others to do things for them. Recently, I've been conducting the research in conjunction with *Dr. Wiseman* of the *Illinois Department of Human Services* and she is also interested in the study of compliance-gaining messages. I'm going to pass out a form that's going to ask you to give us your name, age, and gender; this information will be useful when we analyze the data or if we wish to contact you later. Specifically, we are looking for a number of volunteers who would be willing to participate in a study that will help us better understand the needs and communication styles of senior citizens in local nursing homes. In particular, we are interested in how the elderly respond to *strangers' instructions regarding their oral and bodily hygiene needs.* Your participation in this research will result in three very tangible benefits. First, it will help me finish my doctorate so I can get back to the land of big fish. Second, and more important, your work will give health professionals is a better sense of what are the most effective approaches to dealing with the aged. And third, you may be directly assisting the residents of nursing homes by improving the health of many who have ceased to brush their teeth or bathe themselves properly. This study will require you to volunteer *one hour* of your time outside of class this semester. In turn, we will provide you with access and transportation to and from a local nursing home, instructions regarding what to say to the senior citizens you will encounter, and a series of report forms for you to fill out and return to us. If you are willing to volunteer *one hour* outside of class to *instruct the elderly on hygiene* please indicate so on the form and, even if you do not wish to participate in this research, please fill in all of the scales since it will provide us with useful data. I'll collect these at the end and then we'll move on to something else.

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