

To command or to ask? Gender and effectiveness of “tough” vs “soft” compliance-gaining strategies

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On the basis of the experiments by Carli (1990) on the determinants of persuasion efficiency, we predicted that women are more effective using direct strategies in social influence to address women, and indirect strategies to address men; however, men’s efficiency should not depend on strategy. Two field experiments presented in this article did not confirm these assumptions. Our data suggest that both sexes are more successful when asking their own sex, but commanding members of the opposite sex.

In action films, comedies, sitcoms, and soap operas, women and men use completely different social influence methods in order to achieve their goals. Men typically use direct measures, give straightforward commands, or use physical strength, while women tend to demonstrate their helplessness, cry, or hint to get their way (Falbo, 1977). Undoubtedly, these behaviours are simplified and exaggerated in the movies and on television. However, the psychological literature suggests that certain gender differences in social influence strategy selection do exist.

The tendency of men, as compared to women, to apply the direct and “tough” strategies of social influence, and the tendency of women rather than men to choose the indirect, “softer” strategies, have been demonstrated in several empirical studies (see Eagly, 1983, for review). These differences were particularly evident in contacts with people of the opposite sex (e.g.,

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Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Mandal, 2003). Two reasons are provided by the literature.

First, it is assumed that, having less power than men, women avoid direct methods, which are reserved for those of higher social status and power (Cowan, Drinkard, & MacGavin, 1984). Second, men and women are differentially socialised. Men are usually given more freedom and encouraged to communicate their true intentions, while women are made subordinate, polite, and compliant (Block, 1984). This difference in socialisation determines their future adult strategies when trying to influence others. It is worth noting that these two interpretations of differences are not contradictory. The most adequate interpretation would probably be that gender differences in social influence strategy preferences are determined by both factors.

The studies mentioned above imply that males and females choose and prefer different strategies. One should take into account, however, that this research has focused on between-gender differences—that is, the studies compared differences between means or between percentages for women and men. They did not examine the relative frequencies with which particular strategies were used (i.e., between-strategy differences). In research comparing patterns for the relative use of various social influence strategies, it has been shown that there are no relevant differences between the genders. The same social influence strategy can be favoured by both men and women (White & Roufail, 1989). Also, in those experiments where participants are made to achieve their real goals by addressing another person, both men and women opted most frequently for the same strategy—a kindly formulated request (Steffen & Eagly, 1985; White, 1988). Although men are likely to employ the “tougher” social influence strategies more frequently than women, they still use “softer” strategies in most situations, as do most women.

In the studies referred to above, the focal point is which social influence strategies are preferred by men or women. In our research we focus instead on the *effectiveness* of the different strategies used by men and women to influence individuals of their own or opposite sex. Linda Carli (1990) presumed that in the American culture a woman’s status is generally lower than that enjoyed by men (which is obviously equally true of the European culture, e.g., Bennett, 1997; Woestman, 1995). Demonstrations of dominant behaviours by people of lower status are considered unwelcome in social interactions. A person of higher status can read such behaviour as an attempt by the person of lower status to dominate them. Hence, in their interactions with men, women will become more persuasive by using uncertain or tentative language rather than playing confident and assertive. However, in interactions with other women, assertive formulation of messages and self-assured behaviour will be more effective. This strategy

will be received as a sign of their competence. Such rules do not apply to men formulating persuasion messages. "Being male makes one a legitimate leader (...) As a result men may be considered competent and knowledgeable, regardless of their speech. [The clear conclusion is that] men will be equally influential whether they speak assertively or tentatively" (Carli, 1990, p. 944).

In Carli's first study, participants were scheduled in pairs, so that they disagreed with one another on particular topics. Participants were asked to discuss the topic in either female, male, or mixed pairs. The dialogue was videotaped for subsequent analysis of the language used by participants. After the discussion, participants were asked to indicate their opinion on the topics they had just argued about. It was shown that when interacting with men, women spoke more tentatively than when interacting with women. Men's language was generally more assertive than women's, regardless of the gender of their opponent. Most importantly, while the use of tentative vs assertive speech had no effect on how influential men were with either women or men, women who spoke tentatively were more influential with men. In the second study, female and male participants were listening to a persuasive message concerning the addition of a fare to the college bus. Two versions of the message (tentative vs assertive language style) presented by either a man or a woman were played from a tape. After listening to one version of the speech, participants rated their opinion on the topic. It was shown that while male speakers were equally influential, regardless of the language style used or the gender of the listener, female speakers who spoke tentatively were more influential with men than when they spoke assertively. However, women who spoke assertively rather than tentatively were more influential with women. Moreover, male speakers were generally judged to be more knowledgeable than female speakers. While the language style had no effect on the perceived competence of male speakers, the female confederate speaking assertively was judged to be more competent than the woman using tentative language.

While Carli focused on the effectiveness of persuasion, oriented towards changing attitudes, the concern of our experiments was behavioural compliance. We asked about the consequences of women's versus men's choice of direct clear-cut commands (the "tough" strategy) and alternatively a kind, polite request (the "soft" strategy), when trying to obtain compliance from a person of the same or opposite gender. We expected our pattern of results to resemble those of Carli (1990). Therefore we assumed that women choosing the "soft" strategy would be more successful in making men compliant than when choosing the "tough" strategy; and when addressing other women they would be more effective by giving commands than by asking. As to men attempting social influence, the way their messages would be formulated should not matter.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

The experiment had a 2 (confederate's sex) \times 2 (participants' sex) \times 2 (request vs command) design. Four confederates, two men, two women, aged 22–23 took part in the experiment. They were decently but casually dressed in a way appropriate for young women or men of their age. The confederate was standing on the pavement and holding a small red box in his or her hands. There was one gold earring in the box. The confederate was to address people walking alone along the pavement when they approached her or him. Only adults were confronted; the participants were alternately men and women. The participants were randomly assigned to “request” or “command” conditions. There were 50 participants in each of the eight groups.

In both experiments presented in this article, the confederates were aware of the conditions of the particular groups, but blind to the hypotheses. The confederates were instructed to stick rigidly to the script. In the request condition the confederate presented the following request: “I’m very sorry but I’ve lost a precious gold earring here, a gift for my mother. Would you be so kind and help me to look for it, please?” In the command condition, the confederate said: “I’ve lost a precious gold earring here, a gift for my mother, you must help me to look for it”.¹

Regardless of the condition, when the participants agreed to help and bent down in order to look for the earring, the confederate pretended they had just found it (in fact, they kept it in their closed hand all the time), shouted “I’ve found it!”, and presented it to the participant, thanking them for their willingness to help.

Results and discussion

Preliminary analyses showed that participants’ compliance was comparable among two male confederates, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) < 1$, as well as among two female confederates, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) < 1$. The proportions of people who agreed to look for the lost earring with the confederate in all the different conditions of the experiment are presented in Table 1.

A log-linear analysis of the 2 (confederate's sex) \times 2 (participants' sex) \times 2 (request vs command) \times 2 (compliance) design showed two main effects (confederate's gender effect and request vs command effect), interaction: confederate's gender \times participants' gender, and the second-order interaction effect.

¹ Originally (in Polish): “*Bardzo Pania(a) przepraszam, ale zgubił(a)em tu gdzieś złoty kolczyk, który miał być prezentem dla mojej mamy. Czy był(a)by Pan(i) tak dobra i pomogła mi go szukać?*” in the request condition, and “*Przepraszam, zgubił(a)em tu gdzieś złoty kolczyk, który miał być prezentem dla mojej mamy. Niech Pan(i) tu stanie i szuka go razem ze mną!*” in the command condition.

TABLE 1
 Percentage of people who agreed to look for a lost gold earring in each experimental condition in Experiment 1

Participant	Confederate			
	Female		Male	
	Request	Command	Request	Command
Female	82	34	54	74
Male	66	80	58	28

N = 50 in each condition.

Female confederates obtained help more often (65.5%) than male confederates (53.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 5.86, p < .016$. A polite request was more effective (65%) than a command (54%), $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 4.93, p < .027$. Male participants offered their help more often to females (73%) than to males (43%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 18.47, p < .0001$, but female participants' altruistic behaviour was not affected by confederate's gender, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) < 1, ns$. Females helped in 61% of cases. The most intriguing results seem to be the second-order interaction. In the situation when a female confederate approached people, a chi square test revealed a significant gender of participant \times request vs command interaction, $\chi^2(3, N = 200) = 24.91, p < .001$. When the female confederate approached a female participant she received help more frequently when she asked for help rather than demanded it, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 31.51, p < .0001$. When she approached male participants, however, she received help a bit more often when she used the direct command rather than the polite request, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 2.49, p < .115$. In the situation where there was a male confederate, the interaction gender of participant \times request vs command was also highly significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 100) = 21.33, p < .001$. Male confederates were more effective when ordering the female participants than when politely requesting assistance, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 4.34, p < .038$. When addressing male participants, male confederates received help more frequently when they asked for it than when they ordered it, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 9.18, p < .0024$.

These results indicate that giving a command was a more effective strategy for people of the opposite sex (in both female–male and male–female interactions: 77% in the command condition vs 60% in the request condition), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 6.70, p < .01$. In male–male and female–female interactions, a polite request was much more effective (70%) than a command (31%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 30.42, p < .0001$.

These unexpected results of Experiment 1 led us to conduct another field study based on a slightly different procedure. This time, the participants

were asked to keep watch on a bicycle left by the confederate in front of a tall apartment building.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

As in the prior study, the experiment had a 2 (confederate's sex) \times 2 (participants' sex) \times 2 (request vs command) design. Unlike the first experiment only two confederates were used—a 24-year-old woman and a 23-year-old man. (They did not take part in our first study.)

The casually dressed confederate was standing on the pavement with a new, rather expensive bicycle. As in the first experiment, the confederate approached people passing by alone, alternately men and women. Half of the participants were asked to help, and the other half were ordered to help. There were 50 participants in each of the eight groups.

Each of the confederates explained that they wanted to pay a short visit to an aunt who was ill and lived on the eighth floor—as the elevator was out of order and it was too difficult to carry the bicycle up the stairs, and they did not have a bike lock, they asked the passers-by to keep watch on the bicycle for a couple of minutes for them. In the command condition the confederate would say:

Hi, I have to visit my aunt who is ill. She lives here on the eighth floor [the confederate points up at the building], but the elevator doesn't work and I can't drag my bicycle that high up the stairs. Watch my bicycle so no one will steal it. It won't take more than five minutes!²

However, in the request conditions the confederate said:

Excuse me, I really need to ask you a favour. I have to visit my aunt who is ill. She lives here on the eighth floor [points up], but the elevator doesn't work and I can't drag my bicycle that high up the stairs. Could you please watch my bicycle so no one will steal it? It won't take more than five minutes, okay?

² Originally (in Polish): “*Przepraszam, koniecznie musze odwiedzić moja chora ciotke. Mieszka tu na siódmym pięttrze, ale winda nie działa, a ja nie mam sily ciągnac roweru po schodach. Niech mi go Pan(i) przypilnuje, zeby ktos nie ukradł. To zajmie nie wiecej niz piec minut*” in the command condition, and “*Bardzo Pana(ia) przepraszam, ale naprawde potrzebuje pomocy. Musze koniecznie odwiedzić moja chora ciotke. Mieszka tu na siódmym pięttrze, ale winda nie działa, a ja nie mam sily ciągnac roweru po schodach. Czy byl(a)by Pan(i) tak uprzejmy(a) i popilnowal(a) mi go, zeby go ktos nie ukradł? To zajmie nie wiecej niz piec minut*” in the request condition.

Results and discussion

The proportions of people who agreed to watch the bicycle in each experimental condition are presented in Table 2.

A log-linear analysis of the 2 (confederate's sex) \times 2 (participants' sex) \times 2 (request vs. command) \times 2 (compliance) design revealed one main effect (confederate's gender), interaction: confederate's gender \times participants' gender, and the second-order interaction effect.

As in Experiment 1, the female confederate obtained help more often (54.5%) than the male confederate (37.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 12.15, p < .0005$. Male participants offered their help more often to the female confederate (64%) than to the male confederate (33%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 19.24, p < .0001$, but female participants' altruistic behaviour was not affected by the confederate's gender, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) < 1, ns$. Females helped in 43% of cases.

The pattern of the three-way interaction was almost identical to that of our first experiment. In the situation when the female confederate approached pedestrians, the chi square test revealed a significant gender of participants \times request vs command interaction, $\chi^2(3, N = 200) = 13.08, p < .01$. When female confederate approached a female participant she received help more frequently when she asked for help than when she demanded it, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 3.27, p < .071$. When she approached male participants, however, she received help a bit more often when she used the direct command than the polite request, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 2.78, p < .095$. In the situation where there was a male confederate, the interaction gender of participant \times request vs command was also significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 9.88, p < .025$. He was more effective when he ordered the female participants than when he used the polite request, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 5.00, p < .026$. In cases where the man addressed male participants, however, he received help more frequently when he asked for it than when he ordered it, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 3.66, p < .056$.

TABLE 2
Percentage of people who agreed to supervise a bicycle in each experimental condition in Experiment 2

Participant	Confederate			
	Female		Male	
	Request	Command	Request	Command
Female	54	36	30	52
Male	56	72	42	24

N = 50 in each condition.

As in the previous experiment, in same-gender interactions the polite request was a more effective strategy (48%) than the command (30%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 6.81, p < .01$. In the opposite-gender interaction, giving a command was more effective (62%) than making a request (43%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 7.24, p < .008$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Although the two experiments differed slightly in procedure, the received pattern of results was basically the same. Importantly, it is very different from the results of the experiments by Carli (1990). In Carli's experiments, women were most effective having chosen direct strategies to address other women, and using tentative or uncertain language to address men. Men's efficiency in having successful social influence did not depend on the kind of strategy applied. In our two experiments, it turned out that when addressing a person of the same sex it was more effective to ask him or her rather than give a direct command; however, it was more effective to command when addressing a person of the opposite sex.

We presume that this discrepancy between the current results and those obtained by Carli (1990) is due to the situation of behavioural compliance, in the present two experiments, differing from Carli's situation of persuasion oriented at changing attitudes and beliefs.

First of all, we should consider the procedural differences between the two pieces of research. In Carli's (1990) studies participants were discussing in pairs or were listening to arguments concerning different topics, and then were asked to assess their opinions and beliefs, whereas in our experiments participants unexpectedly met a confederate who needed help. Most probably, quite different processes were engaged in these two types of studies. Above all, in the persuasion setting, at least in some situations, the effectiveness of the message is determined by the perceived competence of the source (e.g., Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Petty, 1995). In Carli's (1990) studies, female confederates using tentative language were perceived as less competent than female confederates speaking assertively, and for this reason they were less influential with other women in the first situation than in the second one. In our experiments, participants were targets of requests for a helping behaviour and their compliance had little to do with the perceived competence of the requester. Besides, persuasion is a process that usually extends in time. In research concerning attitude change, participants are usually given time to analyse the message and to consider possible answers to the questions in the questionnaire presented to them. The situations in our experiments were meant to take the participants by surprise and force them to make an immediate decision whether to help or not. Lastly, it is perhaps worthy of note that some findings obtained in our

experiments totally match the current knowledge on altruistic behaviour: females received more help than males, and men offered more help to women than to men (e.g., Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Piliavin & Unger, 1985). However, it would be difficult to understand this pattern of results in light of the literature concerning persuasion.

Although in some cases it may be useful to derive predictions from research conducted in another field of psychology, in many other cases it might be much more complicated. What is found regarding gender in one social influence domain (here: persuasion) may not apply to other domains (such as behavioural compliance and helping). Broadly speaking, our research is a good example of that. The fact that we understand why our results do not match Carli's is not enough to explain the pattern of results obtained in our experiments. This pattern consists of two elements: asking is much more effective than giving commands with someone of the same gender; a straightforward command is more effective than a polite request with the opposite gender.

We suggest that in interactions between two people of the same gender, with no other social status indicators present, the position of both participants in the interaction (message sender and recipient) is the same. A polite request indicates that the message sender respects social status equality. On the other hand commands, which do not agree with the equal status principle, can be treated as an attempt to suggest to the message recipient that the sender's status is higher. The simplest reaction of the recipient to such a violation of the equal status principle would be not to agree to help. In this light, it is not surprising that in case of interaction between two people of the same gender, the message respecting the social status equality (request) is more effective than the message that violates this equality (command).

The situation where the sender and recipient of the message are of different genders is more complicated. Although Polish culture and American culture differ in many aspects of social life, in both societies there is a parallel phenomenon of a principle that men should help women. A woman, then, has a *cultural right* to demand help from a man. Accordingly, we may assume that the higher effectiveness of command over request in the condition of opposite-gender interactions results because a command is received as a stress on the message sender's privileged position over that of the recipient. In the case of men, this privileged position results directly from the higher social status, and in the case of women it results from the cultural right to expect help and care from the stronger gender. Both genders, for totally different reasons, are thus entitled to underline their privileged position in interactions with people of the opposite gender by using direct commands. Apparently, in these conditions the recipients of such messages do not question these rights, and comply with the sender's message.

Although the results of our experiments are consistent with the status and cultural rights explanation developed here, one may suggest yet another interpretation of our findings regarding opposite-sex targets. Despite the fact that our confederates were trained in speaking very politely (in the request condition) and assertively (in the command condition), it is still possible that the command from a female confederate was actually heard by male participant not as a command, but rather as a strong request from a distraught, helpless woman, and it was this perception of helplessness/greater need that elicited more compliance than did a kind request. Future empirical investigations should be devoted to sort out all these competing explanations.

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