

To Comply or Not Comply: Testing the Self-Perception Explanation of the "Foot-in-the-Door" Phenomenon¹

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A field experiment was conducted to test the self-perception explanation of the "foot-in-the-door" phenomenon of increased compliance with a substantial request after prior compliance with a smaller demand. In this study, some subjects were first approached with a small request (answer 8 questions in a telephone survey) the size of which was virtually certain to guarantee compliance. Other subjects were first approached with a request sufficiently large to guarantee noncompliance (answer 50 questions). Subjects in both of these conditions were subsequently approached with a moderately sized request (30 questions sponsored by a different public service organization). As predicted by self-perception theory, subjects in the small-initial-request condition showed a higher rate of compliance to the second request (.519), whereas subjects in the large-initial-request condition showed a lower rate of compliance (.219) than subjects in the no-initial-request control condition (.333).

In an attempt to determine how a person can be induced to do something he might otherwise not do, Freedman and Fraser (1966) demonstrated that a powerful determinant of compliance is prior compliance itself: A person who can be induced to comply with an initial small request is then more likely to comply subsequently with a larger and more substantial demand.

To demonstrate this "foot-in-the-door" phenomenon experimentally, Freedman and Fraser (1966) had experimenters contact suburban housewives in their homes. The housewives were first asked either to place a small sign in their window or to sign a petition on the issue of either keeping California beautiful or safe driving. Two weeks later a different experimenter returned to each home and asked each housewife to place a large and unattractive billboard promoting auto safety on her front lawn for the next couple weeks. A con-

trol group was contacted only about the second large-billboard request. The results showed a very strong foot-in-the-door effect. Subjects who had complied with the earlier request were much more likely to comply with the larger one several weeks later. More intriguing yet was the apparent generality of the effect. It did not matter which action or which issue had been involved in the initial request: The compliance generalized equally in all four conditions to the later larger request.

Freedman and Fraser (1966) offered the following explanation of the findings:

What may occur is a change in the person's feelings about getting involved or about taking action. Once he has agreed to a request, his attitude may change. He may become in his own eyes, the kind of person who does this sort of thing, who agrees to requests made by strangers, and who takes action on things he believes in, who cooperates with good causes [p. 201].

Such an explanation is congruent with the self-perception and attribution theories of Bem (1972) and Kelley (1973) who suggest that people frequently make self-attributions about their attitudes and dispositions on the basis of the experience of their own overt behavior and the context in which it occurs. Thus a housewife who observes herself taking action on a good, if innocuous cause, without any obvious

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external pressure, infers that she must be the kind of generous, compliant person who becomes involved with such causes. This inferred change in self-perception would then lead to a change in her subsequent likelihood of engaging in other compliant acts. Although self-perception theory itself is well supported by experimental evidence in numerous domains of self-attribution (Bem, 1972), little research has directly concerned the self-perception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door effect.

Lepper (1973) has demonstrated that an effect conceptually analogous to that of Freedman and Fraser (1966) is most likely to occur under conditions of minimal external pressure, as would be expected on the basis of self-perception theory. Lepper proposed that in the classical "forbidden toy" situation (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963), the child who avoids the forbidden toy under a mild threat might infer that he is one who can successfully resist temptation and that this increased self-control should generalize to a different temptation situation. As predicted, children who complied with the initial prohibition under a mild threat were less likely to cheat in a game situation several weeks later than were control subjects or subjects who had initially complied under a severe threat. An attempt to assess changes in children's self-perceptions of honesty and ability to resist temptation, which had been proposed to mediate these effects, provided qualified support for the self-perception analysis.

In a conceptual replication of Lepper's (1973) demonstration, Uranowitz (in press) has reported that women in a shopping center who were induced to help an experimenter under low justification were more likely to help a second experimenter than were subjects who had been asked to help the first experimenter under high justification. No attempt was made in this investigation to assess intervening changes in self-perceptions of helpfulness.

The converging results of Lepper (1973) and Uranowitz (in press) make the self-perception hypothesis a highly plausible account of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon. However, there is as yet no more direct experimental test of this interpretation. Our confidence in this explanation, as well as the positive heuris-

tic value of self-perception theory, would be bolstered by examining an experimental situation in which subjects' compliance experience is controlled so that they come to infer that they are noncompliant individuals who do not do favors. According to the self-perception hypothesis, such individuals should be much less likely to comply to subsequent requests than subjects without such prior experience. Thus a subject who had previously been induced not to comply with a request ought to be less likely to comply with another reasonable request than a subject who only receives the second request.

Accordingly, a field experiment was conducted to test the self-perception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door technique. In this study, some subjects were first approached with a small request, the size of which was virtually certain to guarantee compliance but not so small as to appear inappropriately trivial. Other subjects were first approached with a request sufficiently large to guarantee noncompliance but not so large as to appear incredible.

These constraints in the size of the request are necessary to ensure that the compliance or noncompliance behavior could function as credible cues to inferring corresponding dispositions. Subjects in both of these conditions were subsequently approached with a moderately sized request. A third control group was contacted only with the second request. The self-perception explanation predicts that subjects in the small-initial-request condition should show a higher rate of compliance to the second request than subjects in the control condition, whereas subjects in the large-initial-request condition should show a lower rate of compliance than subjects in the control condition.

This experiment additionally allows a test of an alternative explanation of the foot-in-the-door effect. It may be that the initial small request serves as a standard of comparison against which to evaluate the second larger request. Thus, the second request may appear smaller in the context of previous compliance experience than in the context of no such experience. As an analogy, a request for \$10 may not seem so very large to one

who has become accustomed to being asked for \$5 loans, but it may be perceived as a major demand to another who has never before been asked for money. Stated more formally, prior requests for compliance may simply define one's adaptation level (Helson, 1959) for perceiving the magnitude of current compliance requests. Such reasoning suggests that the subjects in the large-initial-request condition of the present experiment should show a higher rate of compliance to the second request than control subjects. For these individuals, the second request should appear small by comparison with the initial larger request which was refused. Again as an analogy, a request for only \$10 may seem very small and reasonable to one who has just refused another request for \$100.

METHOD

Subjects were 78 female and 14 male Minneapolis residents randomly chosen from the telephone directory and randomly assigned to conditions.

The subjects were contacted by a male or female experimenter on a Wednesday afternoon and assigned at random to either the large-initial-request or small-initial-request condition. The requests made of the subjects involved answering a specified number of questions for a telephone survey. The small-initial-request subjects ($n = 30$) were asked if they would be willing to answer 8 questions, and the large-initial-request subjects ($n = 32$) were asked to answer 50 questions for a fictitious public service organization. Pretesting had indicated that these particular request magnitudes guaranteed a high or low initial compliance rate, respectively.

After verifying and recording the identity of the respondent, the experimenter identified himself with either of two fictitious public service organizations and explained his purpose as follows:

My name is _____, of the Consumer's Interest Group. We are compiling a guide to aid consumers and are calling you today to ask if you would be willing to answer _____ questions over the telephone concerning your use of various paper products. Would you be willing to cooperate in this survey? [or] My name is _____, of the Bureau of Civic Safety. We are calling you today to ask if you would be willing to aid us in our study of motor vehicle safety by answering _____ questions over the telephone concerning your response to highway laws and winter driving hazards in Minnesota. Would you be willing to cooperate with us in this survey?

If the subject agreed to participate in the survey, he or she was informed that the interviewer was presently lining up people for the survey which would

be conducted at an unspecified later date. These subjects were told that they would be called back if they were needed.

Two days after the first request, on a Friday afternoon, each subject was called back by a second experimenter of the other sex. This experimenter was ignorant as to both the magnitude of the initial request and the subject's initial response.

In the second contact, the experimenter first ascertained that the original subject had been reached and then without mentioning the earlier request presented himself as a representative of the service organization with which the subject was not previously acquainted. The experimenter then asked if the subject would be willing to answer 30 questions for his survey, and the subject's response was noted. Once again subjects were informed that the interviewer was only lining up participants for a survey to be conducted at an unspecified later date.

Subjects in the no-initial-contact comparison condition ($n = 30$) were contacted on the same day as the second request was made of the experimental subjects and asked if they would answer 30 questions for either the Consumer Interest Group or the Bureau of Civic Safety survey.³

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 62 experimental subjects, 3 could not be reached for the second contact. These subjects were eliminated from further consideration in the experiment.

According to the self-perception hypothesis, the small-initial-request condition should produce a higher rate of compliance with the second request than the no-initial-request condition, whereas the large-initial-request condition should produce a lower rate of compliance than the comparison condition.

The results are in line with the self-perception hypothesis. Over one half (.519) of the subjects who had initially been approached with a small request subsequently complied with the moderately sized request, whereas only one-third (.333) of the comparison group of subjects who had only been approached with the final moderately sized request complied ($z = 1.76$, $p = .039$, one-tailed test).

³ There is a possible sampling error in contacting the controls only at Time 2. Subjects who could not be contacted at Time 1 had been eliminated from the experimental groups but not from the control group. However, of the 62 subjects contacted at Time 1, only 3 could not be reached at Time 2. This suggests that the subject populations available at both Time 1 and Time 2 and that available only at Time 2 are virtually identical.

By contrast, subjects who had initially been approached with a large initial request were less likely to comply (compliance rate = .219) with a second moderately sized request than were subjects who had had no initial contact ($z = 1.43$, $p = .076$, one-tailed test). Finally, as a test of the overall self-perception predicted effect, the final compliance rate in the small-initial-request experimental condition was significantly larger than that in the large-initial-request condition ($z = 2.46$, $p = .007$, one-tailed test).⁴

Thus the results of this experiment provide further experimental support for the self-per-

⁴ The self-perception hypothesis assumes that the increase in compliance in the small-initial-request condition is due to previous compliance with the small request, whereas the decrease in compliance in the large-initial-request condition results from prior non-compliance with the large request. However, 5 subjects in the small-initial-request condition refused to comply on the first contact, and 8 subjects in the large-initial-request condition actually complied with that very large request. If these subjects are eliminated from consideration in the data analysis, a more striking confirmation of the self-perception predictions ensues. Almost two thirds (.636) of the subjects who had initially agreed to a small request subsequently complied with the moderately sized request, whereas only one third (.333) of the comparison group complied ($z = 2.17$, $p = .015$, one-tailed test). By contrast, subjects who had been initially led to refuse a large request were considerably less likely to comply (compliance rate = .125) with a second moderately sized request than were subjects who had had no initial contact ($z = 1.78$, $p = .038$, one-tailed test). Although in some sense it is appropriate to eliminate these 13 subjects because the self-perception predicted effects could not have possibly worked on them, this analysis unfortunately suffers from a possible subject self-selection problem.

ception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door phenomenon. Although it was not possible to assess changes in actual self-attributions concerning generosity and willingness to get involved in this field experimental situation, the pattern of behavioral compliance rates does corroborate the predictions from self-perception theory. In addition to replicating the Freedman and Fraser (1966) demonstration of a technique by which "a person [can] be induced to do something he would rather not do [p. 195]," the study also suggests an inoculation procedure to increase resistance to external compliance demands and influence attempts.

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