Trust and reactions to threats*

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High and low scorers on Rotter's interpersonal trust scale were targets of intermittent threats sent by a simulated source in the context of a conflict of interest situation. The threats were either 100% or 0% credible. Results showed that credibility, but not trust, mediated compliance and impressions of the threatener.

Rotter (1971) has defined trust as the "expectancy that the word, promise, verbal, or written statement of another individual can be relied upon [p. 444]." Trust may be modified on the basis of experience with a particular person but, in the absence of such experience, should directly mediate the individual's reactions to the verbal behavior of strangers. If a person generally does not trust strangers, he may learn to believe the verbal statements of a person who has provided credible communications in past interactions. Schlenker et al (1973) investigated these relationships in the context of a prisoner's dilemma game (PDG) in which a simulated source (SS) transmitted promises of cooperation to Ss who had been divided into high- and low-trust groups on the basis of Rotter's (1967) paper and pencil measure of interpersonal trust. High-trust Ss did cooperate more often with the promisor than did low-trust Ss, and the higher the credibility of the source, the more cooperative the Ss. Thus, both of the hypotheses derived from Rotter's theory of social learning were confirmed.

The credibility of a threatener is known to be directly related to the amount of compliance he gains from a target individual (cf. Tedeschi, 1970). Rotter specifically predicts that trust should mediate believability of threats in the same manner as with promises; threat credibility should also be directly related to compliance by the target. The present study was a 2 by 2 factorial design which selected high and low scorers on the interpersonal trust scale and then placed them in a relatively weak position in a conflict of interest situation where a simulated peer intermittently transmitted contingent threats. The threatener either always punished noncompliance (100% credibility) or never did (0% credibility).

METHOD
Subjects

Introductory psychology students at SUNY—Albany were given a mass testing with Rotter's interpersonal trust scale at the beginning of the Fall semester, 1971. All students were required to sign up for 3 h of research participation during the semester. When a female student who scored between 41 and 54 or between 60 and 80 signed up for a joint decision-making

experiment, she was included in the present sample. The 20 high-trust Ss (X = 74.05) had significantly higher scores (t = 19.5, df = 38, p < .001) than did the 20 low-trust Ss (X̄ = 48.75). Ss were recruited in pairs and care was taken to maintain the impression that they were interacting with a same-sex peer *other* than the person with whom they were paired on sign-up sheets. The Es were undergraduate males majoring in psychology and enrolled in a directed study course; they were randomized over conditions.

Apparatus and Procedure

Ss were seated alone in a cubicle containing the game panel and were given time to read a set of instructions. The PDG equipment was fully automated (see Tedeschi et al, 1971 for a more complete description). The Ss' game panel contained: (1) two strategy selection buttons labeled Choice 1 (cooperative) and Choice 2 (competitive); (2) a 2 by 2 payoff matrix with separately illuminated cells which indicated one of four possible outcomes on each play of the game; (3) automatic cumulative counters which displayed both the S's and the other person's point totals at all times during the experiment; (4) printed messages with separate light indicators for incoming messages and pushbuttons for outgoing messages; (5) a large green light to indicate the start of each trial; and (6) a large white light to indicate when messages could be sent and received. The fixed matrix values determined that if both players cooperated, each won four points, while, if both competed, each lost four points. If one cooperated and the other competed, the cooperator lost five points and the competitor gained five points.

The instructions informed each S that her task was to gain as many points as possible during the experiment and fully explained the interdependent nature of the payoffs and how outcomes accrued on each trial. To insure an individualistic instructional set, terms such as "cooperate," "compete," "game," "opponent," and "threat" were not used. Whenever the white communication light came on, the SS purportedly could send the single message mounted on the incoming-message side of the S's panel. The message read: "If you do not make Choice 1 on the next trial, I will take 10 points away from your counter." Ss were told that they must reply with one of three outgoing messages whenever they received a message: (M1) "I intend to make Choice 1 on the next trial," (M2) "I intend to make Choice 2 on the next trial," (M3) "I do not wish to disclose my intentions." Ss were informed that they could not initiate message exchanges. If Ss did not make Choice 1 following the receipt of a threat demanding that response, a red light illuminated for a period of 10 sec, indicating that the SS had an option to press a penalty button and subtract 10 points from the S's counter.

The SS's responses were programmed so that two threats were transmitted over each block of 10 trials. A total of 20 threats were sent over 100 PDG trials. After sending a message and receiving a reply, the SS always made Choice 2 on the threat-relevant trial, posing a least-of-evils choice for Ss between complying and being exploited or else noncomplying and risking the possibility of punishment. Depending upon the S's cell assignment, the SS either always or never punished noncompliance to threats. On nonmessage iterations of the PDG, the SS was programmed to respond on a random 50% schedule, which was the same for all Ss. Following the interaction, Ss were asked to give their impressions of the "other girl" on a shortened form of the semantic differential (Osgood et al, 1958).

RESULTS

The only significant effect on the frequency with
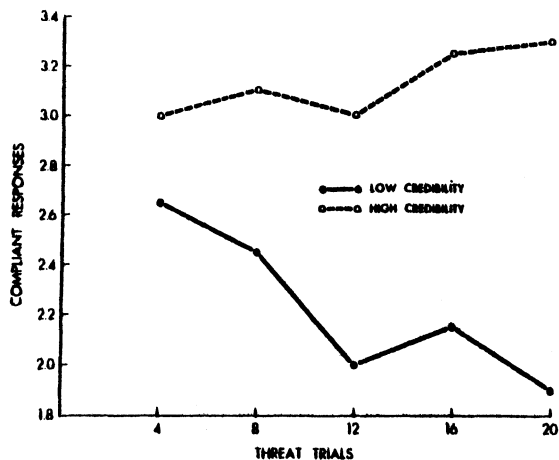
Fig. 1. Compliance to threats over trials.

which Ss complied to threats was due to the credibility manipulation (F = 25.638, df = 1/36, p < .001). Ss were more compliant ($\overline{X}$ = 15.74) when the SS was 100% credible than when the SS was 0% credible ($\overline{X}$ = 11.20). A significant linear trend (F = 9.367, df = 1/36, p < .004) was found when compliant responses were analyzed over five blocks of four threats. As can be seen in Fig. 1, Ss in the high-credibility conditions were increasingly more compliant over trials, while Ss in the low-credibility conditions were less compliant over trials. Neither factor of the experiment produced any effect on the degree of cooperation displayed by Ss on nonmessage trials. A trend test (see Fig. 2) revealed a linear decrease in the amount of cooperation over five blocks of 20 trials (F = 6.889, df = 1/36, p < .013). Trust had no effect on Ss' behaviors either by itself or in interaction with the SS's credibility. An analysis of Ss' responses to the first threat sent to them indicated no significant differences in compliance (p > .10).
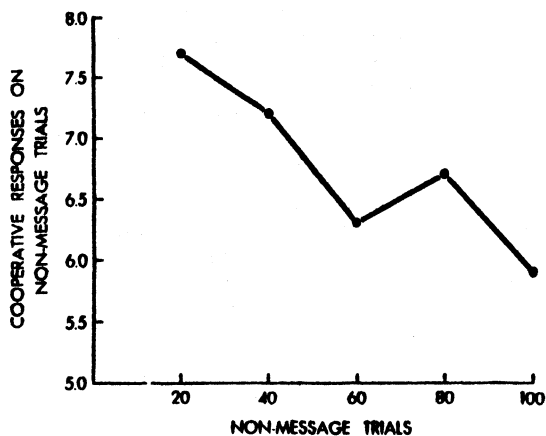
A main effect of credibility was found on the frequency with which Ss used the defiant reply message (M2) (F = 5.322, df = 1/36, p < .027). Ss were more verbally defiant ($\overline{X}$ = 3.06) when the SS was 0% credible than when the SS was 100% credible ($\overline{X}$ = 1.50). There was a slight tendency for high-trust Ss to more frequently use the reply message indicating the intention to comply to the threatener than low-trust Ss (F = 3.191, df = 1/36, p < .08). High-trust Ss sent more M1 messages ($\overline{X}$ = 18.02) than did low-trust Ss ($\overline{X}$ = 15.28). Finally, the perceived potency of the SS was affected by the credibility manipulation (F = 3.828, df = 1/36, p < .058). When the SS was less credible, she was perceived as less potent ($\overline{X}$ = .100) than when the SS was highly credible ($\overline{X}$ = 2.3).

DISCUSSION

Generalized expectancies that the communications of others can be relied upon may mediate responses to promises and persuasive communications, but it seems clear that dispositions to trust or distrust strangers do not affect reactions to threats. Yet Schlenker, Helm, Nacci, & Tedeschi (1972) found that trust built up over a series of credible promises did generalize to threats, so that Ss complied frequently to threats even when the threats were not credible. Ss who had interacted with an incredible promisor did not comply to threats, even when the threats were highly credible. Together with the Schlenker et al (1973) study (reported in the introduction), the pattern of results indicates that generalized trust mediates responses to positive forms of communication and that specific trust may develop as a consequence of a history of credible positive communications from a source. Specific trust apparently mediates reactions to threats, as has been indicated in the Schlenker, Helm, Nacci, & Tedeschi (1972) study and as indicated by the fact that the established credibility of a threatener is important in gaining compliance to his demands. There was a tendency for high-trust Ss to more often use verbal announcements of their intentions to comply to threats, a tendency which could be interpreted as indicating that they believed that promises to cooperate would dissuade the threatener from using coercion. Specific trust produced a somewhat different effect. When the threatener did not punish noncompliance, Ss were more often verbally defiant than when the threatener was highly credible in the use of threats. Finally, and consistent with prior findings (Faley & Tedeschi, 1971), a threatener who consistently punished noncompliance was perceived as more potent than a threatener who did not punish noncompliance.

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Fig. 2. Compliance on nonmessage trials over time.