

The effects of delay upon compliance with socially undesirable requests in the door-in-the-face paradigm

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The efficacy of the foot-in-the-door technique for inducing compliance with socially undesirable requests was investigated using a delay procedure. After refusing the first large request, experimental subjects were presented with a moderate request, which involved a concession on the part of the requester, a relative gain to the subject, or both. The control subjects received the second request only. No significant differences were found between the experimental and control groups. The results were discussed in terms of both contrast and self-perception explanations.

Two techniques have been developed to study the phenomenon of compliance. According to the foot-in-the-door technique, subjects are first presented a small request that has a high probability of acceptance and are later asked to comply with a large and more demanding request. The results of several studies utilizing this technique are consistent in showing that compliance with a second large request is significantly increased following compliance with a preceding small request. This increase in compliance is observed regardless of whether the second request follows the first immediately (Cann, Sherman, & Elkes, 1975; Harris, 1972) or after a minimum delay of 24 h (Cann et al., 1975; Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Pliner, Hart, Kohl, & Saari, 1974; Seligman, Bush, & Kirsch, 1976; Snyder & Cunningham, 1975).

The second technique, or the door-in-the-face technique, starts with a rather demanding request that is followed by a much smaller request. Compliance in this paradigm appears to depend on how soon the second request follows the first one. When the second request follows the first without delay, a significant increase in compliance with the second request is obtained (Cann et al., 1975; Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catlan, Wheeler, & Darby, 1975; Miller, Seligman, Clark, & Bush, 1976; Shanab & O'Neill, 1979). However, both Cann et al. (1975) and Snyder and Cunningham (1975) reported noncompliance with the second request when a delay of either 2 or 7-10 days, respectively, was imposed between the first and second requests.

Bem's (1972) self-perception theory has been quite successful in explaining the compliance obtained in the preceding foot-in-the-door studies. According to this theory, people come to know their internal states such as attitudes, feelings, emotions, and the like by inferring them from observation of their own overt behavior. Thus, subjects who first comply with the small request in the foot-in-the-door technique presumably interpret

such behavior as due to an underlying compliant disposition. These subjects would perceive themselves as "compliers," so that when confronted with a second, larger request, they would be more likely to comply than control subjects presented the second request only. The same theory also predicts that noncompliance with an initial request should lead to noncompliance with a subsequent request.

Although the evidence from the foot-in-the-door studies is overwhelmingly in favor of the self-perception theory, the results, as noted earlier, of several door-in-the-face studies are inconsistent with such an interpretation (Cann et al., 1975; Cialdini et al., 1975; Miller et al., 1976; Shanab & O'Neill, 1979). In these studies the second request followed the first immediately. Two alternative explanations to the self-perception theory have been offered in this regard. On the one hand, Cialdini et al. (1975) proposed that the increase in compliance can be adequately explained in terms of a reciprocal concessions model (Gouldner, 1960), which assumes that individuals normally return a favor for a favor they receive. Thus subjects who refuse to comply with the initial large request would be more likely to comply with the second, less demanding request since the latter might be construed as representing a concession on the part of the experimenter. On the other hand, Miller et al. (1976) argued that compliance in the door-in-the-face paradigm could be a result of contrast rather than reciprocal concessions effects. In other words, the subjects may comply not only because they feel that the experimenter has given up something by making the second request, but also because the second request as compared with the first request appears less demanding than it actually is. Thus, the subjects may decide that they stand to gain more, or lose less, by complying with the second request.

In a well designed experiment that manipulated each of the yielding (concession) and gaining (contrast)

components separately, Miller et al. (1976) found that contrast was a more critical factor than reciprocal concessions in determining compliance in the door-in-the-face paradigm. Similarly, in a recent replication of the Miller et al. study, Shanab and O'Neill (1979) found that contrast continued to be the critical factor even when the two requests involved aversive consequences. Specifically, experimental subjects were first asked if they would agree to participate in a study in which their task was to deliver electric shock to human subjects over a 3-month period. Immediately following their response, they were asked to participate in a similar study that involved shocking rats for a single 2-h session. In one experimental (the gaining-only) condition, emphasis was placed on the relative gain that might accrue to the subject as a result of complying with the second request. In a second (the yielding-only) condition, the subjects were induced to focus on the presumed concession made by the experimenter when making the second request. In the third (yielding-plus-gaining) condition, neither the yielding nor the gaining component was emphasized, thus deliberately confounding their effects. Control subjects received the second request only.

The major purpose of the present study was to replicate and extend the findings of the latter study (Shanab & O'Neill, 1979) by investigating the effects upon compliance of delaying the presentation of the critical request. If the two requests are perceived as independent because of the intervening delay interval, then neither the contrast nor the reciprocal concession manipulation would lead to an increase in compliance. However, if the two requests are viewed as interrelated, then the present design would provide an additional test of the adequacy of the contrast relative to the reciprocal concessions interpretation.

METHOD

Design

Twenty subjects were assigned randomly to each of four conditions. The subjects in the yielding-plus-gaining condition, the yielding-only condition, and the gaining-only condition were first induced to refuse a large request and later asked to comply with a more reasonable request after a delay of 5-14 days. In the yielding-only condition emphasis was placed on the concession made by the experimenter while making the second request. The gaining-only condition stressed the decrease in cost to the subject. In the yielding-plus-gaining condition, no specific emphasis was placed on either the yielding or the gaining aspects associated with the second request. The control subjects received the second request only.

Subjects

A total of 82 volunteer subjects, 16 male and 66 female, were used in the study. All subjects were undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at California State University, Fresno.

Procedure

All subjects were run individually according to a prearranged schedule. Each subject participated in two sessions, separated by

an average delay period of 8.5 days. As each subject arrived at the experimental room, he/she was greeted by the experimenter, who recited a script appropriate for the condition to which the subject had been randomly assigned. The experimenter began with the following introduction to all subjects: "Hello, my name is [experimenter's name], you must be [subject's name]." After the subject was seated, the experimenter continued: "You will be taking the 'Study of Values Inventory,' which is a short test designed to measure how you feel about various things." The experimenter then presented the first request to all subjects except control subjects in this manner: "However, before you begin, I'm looking for volunteers to help out in a study which would take 2 h of your time each day for a duration of 3 months. Your task would be to administer punishment in the form of electric shock to human subjects whenever a subject makes a mistake in learning a list of paired associates. Would you like to participate in this study?" After responding, the subject was asked to fill out the Study of Values Inventory and was reminded to return for the second session at the appointed time.

Upon returning for Session 2, the second request was presented to the subject, each according to his/her condition. For subjects in the yielding-plus-gaining condition, the second request was as follows: "As you may recall, I am interested in what effect punishment has on learning in humans. I am now recruiting volunteers for a study investigating the effects of shock on the rate of learning in rats which would require a single 2-h session. Your main task would be to punish rats by giving them a mild electric shock whenever they make incorrect choices in a discrimination task. Would you like to participate in this study?" Subjects in the yielding-only condition were told: "As you may recall, I am interested in what effect punishment has on learning in humans. Although this work is important to me personally, I am now recruiting volunteers for a study which is of equal importance to the general research program I am involved in. This study will investigate the effects of shock on the rate of learning in rats and would require a single 2-h session. Your main task would be to punish rats by giving them a mild electric shock whenever they make incorrect choices in a discrimination task. Would you like to participate in this study?" These instructions were designed to induce subjects to focus on the concession made by the experimenter when making the second request. For subjects in the gaining-only condition, emphasis was placed on the relative gain that accrues to them when they comply with the second request. The experimenter told them: "As you may recall, I am interested in what effect punishment has on learning in humans. I am now recruiting volunteers for a study which is of equal importance to me, but which would be easier for you to carry out. This study will investigate the effects of shock on the rate of learning in rats, and would require a single 2-h session. Your main task would be to punish rats by giving them a mild electric shock whenever they make incorrect choices in a discrimination task. Would you like to participate in this study?" Control subjects, who had not been asked the first request, were told the following: "I am recruiting volunteers to help out in a study which would require a single 2-h session. Your main task would be to punish rats by giving them a mild electric shock whenever they make incorrect choices in a discrimination task. Would you like to participate in this study?" After responding to the second request, each subject was given the results of the Study of Values Inventory and debriefed immediately thereafter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two subjects complied with the initial request: One in the gaining-only condition and one in the yielding-plus-gaining condition. These subjects were removed from the analysis so as not to artificially inflate the

Table 1
Percent and Number of Subjects Complying
with the Critical Request

Condition	N	Percent	Number
Yielding Plus Gaining	20	25(65)	5
Gaining Only	20	25(75)	5
Yielding Only	20	40(40)	8
Control	20	30(35)	6

Note—Figures in parentheses refer to percentages obtained in the Shanab and O'Neill (1979) study.

results and were replaced by two additional subjects.

The number and percent of subjects who complied with the second request in each of the four conditions are presented in Table 1. Apparently, all four conditions yielded comparable low rates of compliance. This is supported by the results of a chi-square test performed on the overall data [$\chi^2(3) = 1.44, p > .05$]. Moreover, the difference between the yielding and gaining conditions was not significant [$\chi^2(1) < 1$]. The general lack of difference in rate of compliance with the second request indicates that the subjects probably did not perceive the two requests as being interrelated. It will be recalled that a significant increase in compliance was obtained in the gaining-only condition of the previous study (Shanab & O'Neill, 1979) when no delay was imposed between the two requests. A chi-square test corrected for continuity was used to compare the difference in compliance rate in the two gaining conditions of the two studies. Relative to subjects in the gaining condition of the present study, significantly more subjects in the gaining condition of the last study complied with the critical request [$\chi^2(1) = 8.08, p < .01$]. It should be noted that the general procedure as well as the two requests used in both studies were identical. Thus the same request that produced high compliance when presented immediately following a large request produced low compliance when presented after a few days delay.

The present finding of low compliance is consistent with the results of other studies that used socially desirable requests in a delay procedure (Cann et al., 1975; Snyder & Cunningham, 1975). It appears that delay makes it difficult for subjects to view the two requests as interrelated. This would imply that the subjects in this study were unable either to contrast the two requests or to perceive any yielding on the part of the experimenter. The latter explanation could be discounted because when subjects were able to perceive the concession made by the experimenter, contrast was found to be the only critical variable determining compliance (Miller et al., 1976; Shanab & O'Neill, 1979). The results of these two studies suggest that contrast is a sufficient condition for compliance in the door-in-the-face paradigm. This is because whenever subjects were allowed to contrast the two requests, compliance increased, regardless of whether the critical request was socially desirable. The results of the present study seem to indicate that contrast is also a necessary condition for compliance in the door-in-the-face

paradigm, since when contrast was minimal, compliance was minimal too.

An alternative, though not incompatible explanation, is the self-perception view. The low rate of compliance obtained in this study could accordingly be attributed to the fact that the subjects were more likely to refuse the second request because they interpreted their rejection of the first request as reflecting an underlying non-compliant disposition. Without introducing a more specific assumption the self-perception explanation cannot account for the increased rate of compliance when no delay intervenes between the two requests. It could be argued that formation of new perceptions requires time, so that when the second request follows the first immediately, processes other than self-perception mediate compliance. As noted earlier, recent evidence indicates that under no-delay conditions the increase in compliance seems best explained in terms of contrast rather than reciprocal concessions effects. Apparently, under these conditions (i.e., when the critical request follows the first request immediately), contrast is at a maximum and self-perception is at a minimum.

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