

When a service request precedes the target request: another compliance without pressure technique?

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Empirical observation led us to identify a particular and widespread form of solicitation involving requesting a service before making the target request. Relating this form of solicitation to compliance paradigms based on consistency, we hypothesized that the technique would increase the compliance rates of individuals. 167 passersby were approached in the street for a money donation according to two conditions: the appeal for money was preceded by a service request or not. We found that those passersby receiving the service request and the monetary appeal were significantly more compliant than those receiving the monetary appeal only. The discussion focuses on the psychological mechanisms at work in the acceptance of the requests, and avenues for future research are suggested.

Keywords: Compliance without pressure; service; consistency; commitment

Introduction

The paradigmatic field of freewill compliance is defined as the study of compliance techniques whose specificity is to encourage individuals to do freely what is asked of them, without any appeal to persuasion or any other pressure (Joule, 2000). The psychological mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of these techniques vary from one technique to the next, but seem to fall mainly within the consistency/commitment principle (Heider, 1946, 1958; Kiesler, 1971) that accounts for the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique (Freedman & Frazer, 1966), Lowball (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978), or the foot-in-the-mouth (FITM) technique (Howard, 1990). The present study builds on these techniques to examine a new form of solicitation that is also based upon the psychological mechanism of consistency and commitment.

Heider's (1946) balance theory was the first to address the notion of consistency. According to this theory, individuals are motivated to maintain consistency between their behaviors and their attitudes. This preference for consistency finds a social foundation in a social norm particularly important in Western society (Jouffre, Py, & Somat, 2001; Petrova, Cialdini, & Skills, 2007). The commitment theory focuses on the operational side of consistency. Proposed by Kiesler and Sakamura (1966) as "a link between individuals and their behavioral acts" (p. 349), the theory was redefined later

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by Joule and Beauvois (1998) as “the conditions under which the performance of an act cannot be attributed to any other than the person who has performed it” (p. 60). This theory postulates that the performance of an act in specific circumstances will commit individuals to a given course of action; the commitment factors include the costly, repetitive, explicit, irrevocable, and free character of the act. Once committed, people will continue along the same lines and be consistent with the first act performed; they are more likely to show behaviors in the same registry and/or to generate or modify attitudes in the same direction.

As part of the commitment process, the FITD technique involves soliciting an inexpensive behavior before making the request that constitutes the real purpose of the solicitation (Freedman & Frazer, 1966). For example, Freedman and Frazer (1966) asked people who were at home to place a small sticker about road safety on the windshield of their car. Once this preparatory behavior was performed, they asked the participants to place a large billboard showing the same message in their garden. The literature on this technique focuses on the key process at work: carrying out the preparatory request promotes acceptance of the target request (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Steblay, 1983; Burger, 1999; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986). Besides the consistency/commitment principle, other interpretations of the effect have also been proposed: self-perception (Bem, 1972), social norm (Harris, 1972), social learning and reinforcement (Crano & Sivacek, 1982), or self-promotion (Rind & Benjamin, 1994) (see Burger, 1999, for a review). However, the level of consistency of people, when measured, appears to be crucial in achieving the effect (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010; Petrova, Cialdini, & Skills, 2007).

The lowball technique (Cialdini et al., 1978) is also based upon a sequence of requests. It is not based on the completion of a preparatory behavior but rather on people’s decision to carry out the target behavior. This is achieved either by presenting an advantage arousing people’s interest or by hiding major drawbacks. Once their decision is taken, participants are informed about the erroneous or missing items, and asked to confirm their initial decision. For example, Cialdini et al. (1978) asked individuals to take part in a psychology experiment, and informed them, after they had accepted, of the early hour at which it was going to take place. Burger and Cornelius (2003) asked students to make a money donation in exchange for a ticket for a free drink, and informed them, once their decision was taken, that they had run out of tickets. Although several interpretations have also been proposed, the consistency/commitment principle is the preferred explanation for the phenomenon. This lever would act, however, in a different way from that of the FITD, in the sense that people would be more bound to the experimenter than to the target behavior (Burger & Petty, 1981; Guéguen & Pascual, 2014).

The FITM technique (Howard, 1990) also works in sequence, but begins with a preliminary question such as “How are you feeling tonight?” (Howard, 1990) or “I hope I’m not disturbing you, am I?” (Meineri & Guéguen, 2011), which is a priori disconnected from the target behavior; after people have answered the question, the request is made. As this preliminary question is governed by a social ritual, the answer given is mostly favorable or very favorable, and the exchange then promotes the acceptance of the request that follows. A number of theoretical interpretations of the effect have been proposed: activation of a positive mood (Howard, 1990), induction of a perceived closeness (Aune & Basil, 1994), dialog involvement (Dolinski, Nawrat, &

Rudak, 2001; Nawrat, 1997), and consistency/commitment (Fointiat, 2000; Howard, 1990). The latter seems to be the only way to account for all the results, either by linking the response to the ritual question to that given to the target request, or more generally, by linking the initial acceptance of the friendly approach to the subsequent acceptance of the target request (Meineri & Guéguen, 2011).

In summary, from our point of view, a single element appears to distinguish these three techniques, namely the strategy for obtaining the “committing behaviour base” (Joule, 2000) capable of generating the expected consequences. The empirical study of several social exchanges in France led us to identify a form of solicitation involving requesting a service before making the real request. Answers to the service request that were generally positive or minimally neutral seemed to promote acceptance of the following target request. Flynn and Bohns (2012) report in their book chapter a relatively close experiment. Conducted at New York, USA the authors were testing the effect of a prior solicitation for a favor on response to a short questionnaire. Due to the format of publication (book chapter), only few information is available and no statistical information is presented. However, percentages presented and authors’ comments indicate a positive effect of this approach compared to a direct solicitation. And all the more so that the answer to the prior question is positive: “For those subjects in the second condition who offered an immediate affirmative response [...], the compliance rate was near 100%” (p. 24). Though it is not used in France, the solicitation tested by the authors could match the service request that we observed. Our objective was to establish statistically the effect of prior service request to a donation request, furthermore, by analyzing the decomposed effect depending on answers (favorable or moderate) given to this prior solicitation.

Method

A total of 167 passersby (93 women and 74 men; mean age 45, 41 years; SD = 15.87) were randomly addressed in the center of a medium-sized town (50,000 inhabitants) in the Brittany region by one of three female research experimenters (20–21 years old) who requested a few coins to take the bus. Depending on the condition, each experimenter asked for 50 euro cents directly or after first making a service request. In order to obtain a comparable number of participants depending on conditions and response to the prior solicitation, experimenters were instructed to approach the first met person with the control script and the two next with the service script, and so on.

In the control condition, the experimenter said, “Hello, sorry to bother you, I need to take the bus, but I haven’t got enough money; could you give me 50 cents, please?” In the service condition, the experimenter said, “Hello, sorry to bother you, could you do me a service?” If the passerby refused, the passerby was debriefed, and the interaction ended. If he or she said “Yes” or “It depends”, the experimenter continued: “I need to take the bus, but I haven’t got enough money; could you give me 50 cents; please?”

The acceptance rate of the target request was measured through the participants’ response and behavior. A “No” answer was counted as a refusal. A “Yes” or “Wait a minute” accompanied by a search in pockets or handbag was counted as acceptance.¹ The participants were then stopped, debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Table 1. Acceptance rates depending on the conditions.

Conditions	Acceptance rates
Control	35.7% (20/56)
Service	54.9% (61/111)
Decomposed service	
- Answer "Yes"	57.1% (28/49)
- Answer "It depends"	61.1% (33/54)
- Answer "No"	Not solicited for the request (/8)

Results

The collected data, which showed no difference depending on the experimenter people met ($\chi^2(2, 167) = 3.723, p = .155$), were aggregated. A 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (solicitation type) log linear analysis of the acceptance of the request was conducted. As hypothesized, results revealed a main effect of solicitation type ($\chi^2(1, 167) = 5.578, p = .018; \phi = .182$). Participants who were first asked to give a service (61/111) accepted the target request more readily than participants who were directly solicited (20/56).

A second set of analyses was conducted on the answers given to the first service request in the service condition. Of the 111 initial participants in this condition, 8 participants (7.20%) answered "No" to the first question, 49 participants (44.1%) answered "Yes" and 54 participants (48.6%) replied "It depends". The 8 participants who refused the service request and who were not asked the target request were not included in this analysis.

A 2 (participant gender) \times 3 (solicitation type) log linear analysis of the acceptance of the request was conducted. Results revealed a main effect of solicitation type ($\chi^2(2, 159) = 8.272, p = .016; \phi = .228$). The 2 by 2 comparisons showed a significant difference between the control condition (20/56) and the service "Yes" condition (28/49) ($\chi^2(1, 105) = 4.836, p = .028; \phi = .214$), and a significant difference between the control condition and the service "It depends" condition (33/54) ($\chi^2(1, 110) = 7.102, p = .008; \phi = .254$). No difference was observed between the service "Yes" condition and the service "It depends" condition ($\chi^2(1, 103) = .168, p = .682; \phi = .040$). Results are summarized in Table 1.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to test a form of solicitation observed empirically over several social exchanges, which involved preceding a target request by a service request. As expected, this type of solicitation generally produced significantly more positive results than the control condition of a direct request. The results were also significantly higher when the participants' responses were broken down into favorable and neutral; participants who answered "It depends" accepted the request as much as participants who answered "Yes".

Overall, the results replicate those presented by Flynn and Bohns (2012), in a different geographical area, based on a different formulation and benefiting to a different query. Thereby these attest to the robustness of the effect of compliance-induced script.

More particularly, the results of the "Yes" answers in the service condition are entirely congruent with the consistency principle and the commitment theory.

Individuals who accept freely, publicly, and explicitly to perform a service are bound to their statement and are then committed to take action. The results of the “It depends” answers in the service condition are more difficult to account for. These responses are theoretically less committing than a “Yes”, in terms of the factors defined by Kiesler (1971), namely the noticeably explicit and irrevocable nature of the act, and they are expected to produce an impact on a smaller scale. However, our data show that the number of individuals making this moderate response is not smaller in terms of target request acceptance, quite the contrary. Data presented by Flynn and Bohns (2012) do not permit us to establish any comparison between the two studies but author’s comments don’t report this kind of result. Moreover, the present result does not conform to the results produced by Howard (1990) who observed a significant reduction of the effect in the case of a moderate response. The difference may be explained by the intervention of a complementary psychological mechanism that could be called perceptual contrast. The first service request could create a particular expectation in people, who might anticipate receiving next a very high-cost request. In contrast, the ultimately less costly than expected target request promotes acceptance.

To account more specifically for the acceptance (more or less marked) of the first service request, several interpretive trails can be followed. The first one relates this procedure to a FITM. As discussed earlier, the acceptance strategy implemented in the FITM is based on a social ritual that runs between colleagues and acquaintances, creating a heuristic response. The service request may thus also correspond to a social ritual activating a proximity script and a response that is favorable or moderate.

The second interpretation places the service request strategy close to that of the FITD or the lowball, operationalized through the occultation of major drawbacks paradigms. In both techniques, individuals are requested to provide a behavior that carries a certain cost, and submit them conscientiously, without some cons. Flynn and Lake (2008) found that individuals systematically underestimate the social cost and the difficulty of refusing a helping behavior, which would correspond, according to the authors, to a violation of the social norms of benevolence (Brown & Levinson, 1987) or social responsibility (Berkovitz & Daniels, 1963). In light of these elements, the acceptance of the preparatory behavior in the FITD paradigm and the decision taken in the lowball paradigm, operationalized by the occultation of the drawbacks, is explained by the fact that it has for people a lower cost than the social cost of a negative response. The acceptance rate of the service request reveals that people find it difficult to refuse it directly (only 7.2% of the responses), and prefer to provide a more neutral response, if not a positive response. It is possible that the service request activates benevolence (Brown & Levinson, 1987)/social responsibility norms (Berkovitz & Daniels, 1963), and complicates any refusal. In this case, although it is a priori less or not used, a prior request for help or assistance should produce the same effect as a service request.

Finally, in a more general way, acceptance of the prior service request may be interpreted in the light of Action Identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985) and Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2000). This field of research postulates that people identify their actions at different levels of meaning depending on their level of expertise, familiarity, depending on the difficulty of the task, or by the physical, psychological, or temporal distance separating them from the action. The lower identification levels identify the action as it is carried out concretely, whereas higher levels are more abstract and identify the meaning of the action and the intention of the actor. Therefore, the higher identification levels convey values, and people wishing to promote themselves tend to explain their success in high-level terms (Vallacher, Wegner, McMahan,

Cotter, & Larsen, 1992). Similarly, people want to see their positive actions identified at a high level by others (Kozak, Marsh, & Wegner, 2006). Prior solicitation for a service may correspond to a high-level identity of the behavior, and because this behavior is inherently valuable, it would be harder to deny, or it would be more desirable than the same behavior presented in reference to a lower identification level. Meineri and Guéguen (2014) showed that the identity level of the FITD preparatory request modulates the course of action in which people are engaged and increases the effectiveness of the technique; it could also encourage acceptance of the preliminary request.

Although a prior service request is quite close to consistency-based compliance techniques, it differs from them. Compared to FITM or FITD, the service request technique bears directly on the target behavior and, just like the lowball technique; according to Brownstein and Katzev (1985), Cialdini et al. (1978), Hornik, Zaig, Shadmon, and Barbash (1990), it could thereby show a better effect than these. Finally, compared to lowball, this form of solicitation is not based on a false promise or erroneous information, and from this perspective, it constitutes a more ethical technique.

Further research is needed, first to understand better the mechanism at work when people respond moderately to the service request. Varying the cost of the target request could help with this. In addition, further investigation is needed to determine whether the service request is effective because it activates a social norm, or more generally, because it refers to a high identity level of the act, giving more value to the behavior. Comparing various requests made in reference to low and high identity levels would be useful in this regard. Finally, an interesting field of study is proposed by Flynn and Bohns (2012) who indicates that people previously requested for a favor seem to be waiting for some kind of counterpart for their effort. Although efficient in the present moment, some solicitation scripts and induced compliance procedures could present delayed negative consequences that it would be useful to circumscribe.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. The searching money behavior was counted as an acceptance of the request in order to measure the willingness to give more than the financial capacity to do it.

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