

Perceptual contrast versus reciprocal concession as mediators of induced compliance

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ABSTRACT

This study examined two explanations for the success of a compliance strategy in which a second moderate-sized request is asked immediately after the refusal of a first large-sized request. The reciprocal concessions explanation argues that the change from the first request to the second is viewed as a concession on the part of the requestor that compels the subject to make a concession of his own, i.e., agree to the second request. The perceptual contrast explanation proposes that the first request establishes a comparison standard against which the second request appears to be less costly; without the first request, the second request might be compared with the possibility of doing nothing for the requestor. The results supported the view that the critical manipulation in eliciting compliance is the reduction of relative cost to the subject and not the personal concession shown by the requestor.

In the popular comic strip *Blondie*, one episode has recurred many times over the years. In the scene, Blondie enters the living room wearing a new hat, new shoes, and a new dress. She cheerfully calls her husband's attention to the wonderful bargains she has found. Her husband, Dagwood, glares reproachfully at her from the couch and demands to know how much it all cost. After Blondie reveals the price, Dagwood becomes hysterical and orders Blondie to return the goods because he can't afford them. Blondie, in turn, begins to cry and bargains with Dagwood to keep only the hat. Observing her distress, Dagwood relents. Later the reader discovers that all Blondie wanted in the first place was the hat. The scene ends happily with Blondie congratulating herself for the success of her ploy and with Dagwood satisfied that the dress and shoes are to be returned.

What are the important elements of this tactic that has served Blondie so well? Examining the situation from Blondie's point of view, we see that she has made essentially two requests of her husband. The first

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consisted of asking his permission to keep the hat, dress, and shoes, the second to keep only the hat. In retracting the first request, which was refused by Dagwood, Blondie (a) reduced the cost of compliance for Dagwood, and (b) appeared to have made a significant personal concession. The outcome was fruitful for Blondie because she induced Dagwood to allow her to keep the hat, the original intention of her strategy.

Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, & Darby (1975) have argued forcefully that compliance shown in situations such as the above occurs because of a reciprocal concessions rule which regulates the behaviour of participants. The reciprocal concessions rule states that "You should make concessions to those who make concessions to you" (Cialdini et al., 1975, p. 206). Cialdini et al. cited evidence from the reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and bargaining literature (Chertkoff & Conley, 1967; Benton, Kelley, & Liebling, 1972) and concluded that the offer of a small favour or a concession by one participant increases the likelihood that the other participant will return the favour or make a similar concession. In a series of three experiments, Cialdini et al. showed that it is indeed an effective strategy to make an unreasonably large request and follow it with a much smaller one. In the Blondie example, Cialdini et al. would probably argue that Blondie's concession, the reduction of her demands for a hat, dress, and a pair of shoes to the simple request for a hat, compelled Dagwood to offer a concession of his own. Since Dagwood's alternatives were dichotomous (he could either allow her to keep the hat or not), the only way he could make a concession would be to let Blondie have the hat.

There are two ways in which one could decide whether a concession has been made. First, one could focus on the requestor. A concession can be said to have been made if the requestor, by making the second request, appears to have given up something; it must be clear to the other party that the requestor has abandoned his first choice and is willing to accept less. A second way one could view a concession is by focusing on the person to whom the request was addressed. This person will perceive that a concession has been made if he concludes that he will gain more or lose less by agreeing to the second request than the first. The interesting twist to this analysis is that the yielding on the part of the requestor and the gaining or losing less on the part of the other person can be mutually exclusive. While it is probably true, as Cialdini et al. have pointed out, that the yielding and gaining aspects of concession usually occur together, they are distinguishable theoretically and can be manipulated separately.

In the Cialdini et al. experiments, it is impossible to specify whether the yielding or gaining component was more responsible for the success of the large-then-small request strategy. Cialdini et al. suggested strongly that the yielding component was more important. Their explanation is that it is

precisely because the requestor has shown that he is willing to lessen his demand that the other person agrees to yield and acquiesces to the second request. However, it is entirely possible that compliance is given to the second request not as a function of the reciprocal concessions rule, but because the person who is the object of the requests perceives the second request as less costly than the first and therefore a more reasonable request with which to comply.

It is important to distinguish between the yielding and gaining components of concession for two reasons: (1) very different practical compliance strategies derive from each component. The yielding strategy would emphasize the sacrifice of the requestor while the gaining strategy would emphasize the lessened cost to the subject. (2) The reciprocity explanation may only be appropriate if the yielding component proves to be essential. If the gaining component is shown to be crucial, then a perceptual contrast type of explanation may be required.

In addition to examining the separate effects on compliance of the yielding and gaining components, the present study was also designed to include a behavioural as well as an attitudinal measure of compliance. There were four conditions in the present study. The first two conditions replicated the Cialdini et al. conditions. The first condition combined the manipulations of yielding and gaining. It consisted of a large request which, when refused, was followed by a smaller one. The second condition, the control, was a single request that was the same as the second request in the other conditions. Two additional conditions were designed to distinguish between the yielding and gaining components. In the yielding-only condition two similar requests were made, the second of which was described as equally costly to the subject, equally important to the program for which the requestor was working, but not as personally advantageous for the requestor. In the gaining-only condition, the two requests were described as equally costly to the subject in terms of his time commitment and equally advantageous for the requestor. However, the second request was said to be easier for the subject to perform.

METHOD

Subjects and Experimenters

Subjects were 77 undergraduate students currently enrolled at a midwestern university. Sophomore level students were selected because the yielding plus gaining condition initially asked for a two-year commitment and this ruled out juniors and seniors. Subjects were selected from a pool of all the arts and science sophomores listed in the current school directory and randomly assigned to conditions.

Experimenters were four (two male and two female) undergraduate students currently attending Introductory Psychology who participated in the study in order to

satisfy a course requirement. Each experimenter telephoned approximately equal numbers of subjects in each condition between the hours of 6:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M. None of the experimenters was aware of the purpose of the manipulations.

Procedure

A subject was contacted by a student experimenter who first introduced himself and explained that he was working for a faculty member who was co-ordinating a volunteer mental health program. At this point the experimenter made either the initial request followed by a second request or, as in the control condition, made only a single request. It should be noted that in the three two-request conditions the first and second requests were counterbalanced. In the control condition, the single request was counterbalanced.

In the *yielding plus gaining condition*, the initial request asked subjects to perform as counsellors (or clerical office workers) in a mental health agency for at least two years. The experimenter said: "Hi, I'm _____ and I'm working for Dr _____ in the Psychology Department. He's co-ordinating a volunteer mental health program to be staffed by non-professionals. We're recruiting students to work as voluntary unpaid counsellors (or clerical office workers) in a community health agency. The position would require two hours of your time per week for a minimum of two years. You would be assisting regular staff members in their duties (or filing and doing general clerical work). Would you like to be considered for such a position?"

The second request in this condition asked for two hours' work as a clerical office worker (or counsellor) in a mental health agency for one time only. The experimenter said: "Well, I'm also recruiting volunteers for another position which would entail two hours once on a single afternoon or evening working as a voluntary unpaid clerical office worker (or counsellor) in a mental health agency. Would you like to be considered for this position?"

In the *yielding-only* and the *gaining-only* conditions, subjects were asked to do two hours of clerical office work in a mental health agency followed by a request to do two hours of counselling in that agency or vice versa. For the initial request the experimenter said: "Hi, I'm _____ and I'm working for Dr _____ in the Psychology Department. He's co-ordinating a volunteer mental health program to be staffed by non-professionals. We're recruiting students to work as voluntary unpaid clerical office workers (or counsellors) in a community mental health agency for two hours once on a single afternoon or evening. You would be filing and doing general clerical work (or assisting regular staff members in their work). Would you like to be considered for such a position?"

In the *yielding-only condition*, the experimenter mentioned in the second request that the second position was equally important to the program but noted that it was not as personally advantageous to him. Thus, he retreated from his best outcome and emphasized a reciprocal concessions norm. The experimenter said: "Well, I'm also recruiting volunteers for another position which is not as advantageous to me to fill but equally important to the program. This would entail two hours of voluntary unpaid work as a counsellor (or clerical office worker) in the community mental health agency for an afternoon or evening. Would you like to be considered for this position?"

In the *gaining-only condition*, the experimenter noted in the second request that the second position was equally important for the experimenter to fill and he added that it was easier for the subject to do than the first position. In this case, he minimized the reciprocity norm, but emphasized the decrease in cost to the subject. The experimenter said: "Well, I'm also recruiting volunteers for another position which is equally important to me to fill and is easier for you to do. This would entail two hours of voluntary

unpaid work as a counsellor (or clerical office worker) in the mental health agency for an afternoon or evening. Would you like to be considered for this position?"

In the *control condition*, only the second request was asked of the subject. The experimenter said: "Hi, I'm _____ and I'm working for Dr _____ in the Psychology Department. He's co-ordinating a volunteer mental health program to be staffed by non-professionals. We're recruiting students to work as voluntary unpaid counsellors (or clerical office workers) in a community mental health agency for two hours once on a single afternoon or evening. Would you like to be considered for such a position?"

Those subjects who agreed to the second request then made appointments to meet with the co-ordinator of the mental health program to arrange when they would work in an agency.

RESULTS

During the course of the experiment 10 subjects agreed to the initial request: two of these were in the yielding plus gaining condition, and four each were in the yielding-only and gaining-only conditions. These subjects were not included in the final analyses because to include them as compliers would have spuriously increased differences from the control.

The percentages of subjects who agreed to the second request in each of the treatment conditions can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Verbal measure: Percentage of subjects agreeing to the second request

| Treatment | Agreement (%) |
|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Yielding plus gaining (N = 17) | 76.5 |
| Gaining-only (N = 19) | 78.9 |
| Yielding-only (N = 20) | 40.0 |
| Control (N = 21) | 28.6 |

Chi Square comparisons were made and it was found that both the yielding plus gaining condition, $\chi^2(1) = 6.81, p < .01$, and the gaining-only condition, $\chi^2(1) = 8.23, p < .01$, differed significantly from the control. The yielding-only condition did not differ significantly from the control, $\chi^2(1) = 1.88$.

It is interesting to note that the gaining-only condition differs significantly from the yielding-only condition, $\chi^2(1) = 4.56, p < .05$, and that the yielding plus gaining condition is also marginally significantly different from the yielding-only condition, $\chi^2(1) = 3.57, p < .10$.

The analyses thus far are only on subjects' verbal acceptance rates to a telephone request which may or may not represent a real behavioural commitment. Therefore the experimenters had the subjects make appointments to meet with the program director. This provided a behavioural

measure. The average percentage of subjects across conditions keeping their appointments was 71%. In the control condition, 50% of those who made an appointment to come in to the psychology office to arrange to work in a social agency actually showed up. In the yielding-only condition, 62.5% of those who made appointments showed up. The show rate was 73.3% for the gaining-only condition and 84.6% for the yielding plus gaining condition. The percentages of subjects showing up in the various conditions follow a pattern similar to the telephone acceptance rates given in Table 1.

Rather than look at the show-up rates of those subjects who made appointments, let us consider a more conservative measure. Table 2 presents the show-up rates of all subjects called in each condition. That is, these figures include those subjects who refused to make appointments and also those who made appointments but did not show up. This measure is the severest test of the effectiveness of the large-then-small request strategy.

TABLE 2

Behavioural measure: Percentage of subjects keeping scheduled appointment with program director

| Treatment | Keeping appointment (%) |
|--|-------------------------|
| Yielding plus gaining (<i>N</i> = 17) | 64.7 |
| Gaining-only (<i>N</i> = 19) | 57.9 |
| Yielding-only (<i>N</i> = 20) | 25.0 |
| Control (<i>N</i> = 21) | 14.3 |

Chi Squares were computed on these data and it was found again that yielding plus gaining, $\chi^2(1) = 8.21$, $p < .01$, and gaining-only, $\chi^2(1) = 6.53$, $p < .01$, differed significantly from the control, while the difference between yielding-only and the control was negligible, $\chi^2(1) = .213$. Also, yielding plus gaining differed significantly from yielding-only, $\chi^2(1) = 4.36$, $p < .05$, and gaining-only differed marginally significantly from yielding-only, $\chi^2(1) = 3.07$, $p < .10$.

DISCUSSION

The results have shown that the large-then-small request strategy is effective in producing compliance. Furthermore, the results support the view that it is the gaining component, and not the yielding component, that is the critical manipulation in eliciting compliance. In the data given in Tables 1 and 2, the gaining-only manipulation produced significantly more compliance than the control, while the yielding-only manipulation did not.

In the less stringent test of compliance, acceptance of the telephone request, the gaining-only manipulation produced significantly more compliance than the yielding-only manipulation. The same comparison was marginally significant when the more conservative test was made, i.e., counting the number of people actually turning up at the office.

These results call into question the adequacy of the reciprocity explanation. Had the yielding component shown itself to be superior to the gaining component, then the reciprocity explanation would be appropriate. As Cialdini et al. (1975) indicate, there are data to support the notion that a concession on the part of one person leads to a concession on the part of the other. However, it is not clear that a concession perceived through its gaining component leads to a reciprocal concession. A different explanation may be necessary to explain compliance mediated by the gaining component.

In the present study, the gaining component was operationalized in such a way that the subject was told that the second request was easier to do than the first. The essence of the large-then-small request strategy is that the second request is always smaller than the first. Therefore, we need not worry that the second request is perceived as smaller. The question to answer is how a lessened-cost explanation can explain why compliance with the second request, after the first has been refused, should be greater than compliance with the control request which is the same request.

Since cost is not an absolute concept, it may be that people sometimes make either an implicit or an explicit comparison with some other request when assessing the cost of a new request. The small request may appear more reasonable (i.e., less costly) when compared with the large request than when it is not compared with any request. The success of the large-then-small request strategy may be due to the establishment of an anchor against which subsequent requests are compared.

Perceptual anchoring is a phenomenon that has been explored extensively by psychophysicists and made relevant to social psychologists by the work of Sherif and Hovland (1961) on social judgment. In that literature, the function of an anchor depends upon its placement in relation to a stimulus range. If an anchor is placed near the end of a stimulus range, then a shift in item placement toward the anchor should result. This effect is called assimilation. On the other hand, an anchor placed far beyond the end of a stimulus range causes a shift away from the anchor. In the present experiment, the stimulus range consisted of an internal standard of reasonable requests as perceived by the subject. The anchor, which was the large request, fell clearly outside the stimulus range. It would follow that the item, i.e., the small request, would shift away from the anchor. If this is so, then the small request should appear smaller than it would otherwise

be perceived. Thus, compliance would be facilitated by the perceptual contrast effect. The results of the experiment conform nicely to the predictions logically derived from social judgment theory.

However, data from other experiments suggest that a simple perceptual contrast process is not sufficient to account for the results. In one of Cialdini et al.'s (1975) experiments, subjects were asked to choose between a large and a small request that were offered simultaneously. If the large request acted as an anchor against which the small request was compared, then more compliance should have resulted in this condition than in a control condition. However, no differences in compliance were found between the two conditions. It has also been shown (Cialdini et al., 1975, second experiment; Snyder & Cunningham, 1975) that the large-then-small request strategy is ineffective if the person who made the second request is different from the person who made the first. Again, a simple perceptual contrast explanation might have predicted that it is irrelevant whether the two requestors are the same or different people.

Thus it is clear that further research is required to settle this issue. However, it should be pointed out that the procedure of the present study was different in important respects from the Cialdini et al. (1975) studies, and from Snyder & Cunningham (1975). First, the perceptual contrast process may only work when the large request is made first, independent of the small request, and when the small request is made after the refusal of the large request, as was done in the present study. The act of considering and then refusing the large request on its own may be critical in establishing the meaningfulness of the large request as an anchor. In addition, the comparison process produced by the sequence of large request made, large request refused, small request made, probably arouses a much greater feeling of relief in the subject than the comparison process induced by making both requests at the same time. The Cialdini et al. comparison manipulation may have been unnecessarily weak because it failed to anchor firmly the large request as the comparison object, and because it did not arouse the feeling of relief which should accompany a subject's consideration of a smaller request. Second, in the present study, one person made both the first and second requests and it was clearly stated that the two requests were made under the auspices of the same organization. Cialdini et al. (1975, second experiment) and Snyder and Cunningham (1975) specifically dissociated the two requests. It may be essential for the same requestor to make related requests. Otherwise, there may be no reason to compare one request with the other. Therefore, it is suggested that a perceptual contrast process can explain the results, if the above limitations are taken into consideration.

The practical applications of the procedure outlined in this experiment

should not be overlooked. This is apparently a very powerful technique for inducing compliance. Even with the use of the telephone, which is often considered a difficult medium in which to obtain compliance, the technique resulted in dramatic acquiescence. Of the people who agreed to the second request on the 'phone, 71% came in to the office, made an appointment to work with a social agency, and eventually went to the agency.

Finally, we should consider the nature of the requests asked. In both the Cialdini et al. experiments and in the present study, the requests were socially desirable. When requests are less than socially desirable or are counternormative, compliance may be reduced.

RÉSUMÉ

Etude de deux explications données à l'efficacité d'une stratégie de concession selon laquelle une deuxième demande modérée est faite immédiatement après une première jugée excessive. L'explication fondée sur des concessions réciproques veut que le changement de demande soit vu comme une concession faite par le demandeur, ce qui amènerait le sujet à faire lui-même une concession en acceptant la seconde demande. L'explication fondée plutôt sur le contraste perceptif veut que la première demande établisse une norme de comparaison rendant alors moins coûteuse l'acceptation de la seconde; sans la première demande, la seconde serait plutôt comparée à la possibilité de ne rien accorder au demandeur. Les résultats appuient le point de vue voulant que le facteur crucial d'une telle stratégie soit la réduction de coût relatif et non la concession personnelle faite par le demandeur.

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