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People in a freezer. Self-perception as an explanatory mechanism for the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique

According to the foot-in-the-door technique of social influence, everyone who wants to increase the likelihood of having their request fulfilled by another person should first present that person with an easier request. Granting the easier request will make that person more inclined to fulfill the subsequent escalated request. The results of numerous studies confirm this rule. In the psychological literature it is usually assumed that this is possible thanks to the self-perception mechanism. People who comply with an easy request cannot find any external explanation for doing so and therefore draw the auxiliary conclusion that they are "people for whom it is normal to grant such requests". The author of this article, however, points out that the self-perception thesis implicitly assumes no impact of any other types of requests on the individual between the times they hear the two requests posed by the psychologists-researchers. Two simple studies presented here demonstrate that people are normally faced with several requests every day, of which some they fulfill and some reject. This constitutes a serious challenge for the self-perception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door technique.

Keywords: *compliance, foot-in-the-door, self-perception, social influence*

Introduction

Of the many techniques of social influence described in psychological literature, the one that is considered to be one of the first techniques ever described in psychology still draws the particular attention of researchers. Nearly half a century ago, Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser (1966) set forth the hypothesis that when an individual agrees to comply with an easy request, that an individual would be more inclined to grant a subsequent, more difficult request than when presented only with the same latter request. They demonstrated this phenomenon in two experiments.

What psychological mechanism could possibly make people who granted a simple preliminary request more inclined to comply subsequently with a more serious request?

As the two authors themselves put forward: "What may occur is a change in the person's feeling 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 request made by strangers, who takes action on things he believes in, who cooperates with good causes"

(p. 201). Thus the authors outlined a regularity which was only a year later and then several years later, described in full by Daryl Bem (1967, 1972) and has ever since been known as the *self-perception theory*.

To this day, the self-perception theory is the one invoked most often as the psychological background of the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique. People who have complied with a request try to understand their own motivation, and being unable to identify any external reasons for their own action (such as, being blackmailed to comply with a demand or being well paid for it), finally conclude that their decision to comply with the request must have been brought about by their own attitudes and beliefs, which in turn must have been coherent with the decision. Thanks to self-perception, people change slightly – into people who perceive and define themselves in a new or different way. A subsequent, serious request then seems quite consistent with the new self-image. Then there seems to be nothing strange in the fact that the chances of fulfilling the second request increase.

During the decades which have passed since the article by Freedman and Fraser, hundreds of experiments have been carried out to verify the effectiveness of this technique

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as well as to reveal the possible mechanisms that underlie its effectiveness. A great deal of the latter studies focused on the thesis by Bem (1967, 1972) – that foot-in-the-door is effective thanks to self-perception mechanisms at work. Generally, these studies managed to replicate the same effects as those obtained by Freedman and Fraser and to demonstrate indirectly the self-perception mechanism as underlying these effects. For example, a decrease in the technique's effectiveness was demonstrated in the condition when the experiment's participants were paid for complying with the first request (e.g., Zuckerman, Lazzaro and Waldgeir, 1979) or in the condition when granting the first request was an obvious option because of social norms (e.g., when it was formulated by an impaired person - DeJong & Musieli, 1982). Because in both cases the experimental subjects had definite external reasons for complying with the first request ("I was paid to do it", and "everyone helps the impaired" respectively), they no longer needed to analyze their own psychological traits and were subsequently not more inclined to comply with another, more serious request.

The results of these experiments seem to deliver some serious but only indirect support for the self-perception foundations of the foot-in-the-door technique. To obtain some direct support, experiments should demonstrate that after fulfilling the first request people actually do change their opinion about themselves (in accordance with granting a request "of this type") and then, more frequently than control group participants, agree to comply with the following request. Unfortunately, the studies aimed at demonstrating such an effect usually failed (see: Gorassini and Olson, 1995). I know of only one study which actually succeeded in demonstrating the occurrence of the "I'm-an-altruist" self-perception effect in people who granted the first request, which also resulted in an increase in their compliance with the second request, i.e., the study by Burger and Caldwell (2003). In this experiment, the experimenter's confederate pretended to be a participant of the study in which, – together with a real participant, – they were to fill out certain questionnaires. At the beginning of the study, the experimenter excused himself for some time because he had forgotten to bring some materials with him. As the experimenter left the room, his confederate asked the participant to support the cause of homeless people by writing a short statement to the authorities about the nature and scale of the problem and signing it. Right after the participant had written and signed the letter, the experimenter reappeared and handed each, - the participant and the confederate, for the sake of conspiracy, – a pile of questionnaires which also included an evaluation scale of one's own altruism. In the control conditions, the participant was not asked to do anything by the confederate during the absence of the experimenter. Several days later, another experimenter telephoned the participants asking

them to join an action to help the homeless. It turned out that complying with the first request resulted in perceiving oneself as an altruist, and that self-image in turn, proved to be a good predictor of granting the subsequent, more serious request.

The problem, however, is that if the belief in one's own altruism (or submissiveness) does control one's decisions whether or not to comply with a serious request, then this belief must be active at the very moment of being posed the second request. So far, the experiments demonstrated only that such changes in self-perception occur directly after fulfilling the first request (Burger and Caldwell, 2003), but they were never detected when the altruism/submissiveness measurements were carried out later (e.g., on the following day). That could mean either that fulfilling the easy request evokes only short-lasting changes in the participant's self-image or that evoking such changes is caused only by trying to measure them. Filling out a questionnaire makes the participants focus on themselves and explore their own personality traits (among them, altruism and submissiveness). Without such self-analyses (or, in other words, in natural conditions), it is possible that no changes in the participants' self-image appear at all. It would then be another example of the phenomenon described by Heisenberg (1958) in his uncertainty principle: the very measurement has an impact on the picture of the results.

There is, however, a much more serious problem with the accuracy of the popular self-perception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door technique. In the original studies by Friedman and Fraser (1966) there was a three-day interval between the first and the second request (study 1), or even two weeks (study 2). In other studies, the time intervals between the requests varied greatly, but on average they were 4.4 day (Beaman et al., 1983). Then it is at least implicitly assumed that between granting the first request and hearing the second one the experiment's participant is not presented with any other requests. If the participant was asked during this interval to fulfill some other request and refused to comply with it, then such a refusal should result in their self-perception of the kind of "I am not particularly altruistic" and, at the same time, block the individual's inclination to comply with the following request. Moreover, it is also assumed (implicitly) that the control group participants either are not faced with any requests by anybody between the two experimental requests or even if they are, they refuse. After all, the initial "easy" request made up by the experimenters for the sake of the study is not more important for the self-perception processes than an "accidental" request, which is beyond the control of the experimenters as it is posed by someone outside the study.

The assumption that during the few days that pass between the initial and the final request formulated by the experimenter according to the study procedure the participants are faced with no other requests that they must

decide about (i.e. comply with them or refuse to comply, or negotiate, etc.) seems very risky. On the other hand, it is difficult to find any data in the psychological literature on how often people are asked to do different things every day and how they react to those requests. However, these very questions are the focus of the two simple experiments presented below.

Study 1

Participants & Methods

Twelve female students of the Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities participated in the study. For four days (Tuesday to Friday) they were to keep a detailed diary table of every event when other people presented them with a request. For every "event" in the first column, they also put down information in the five subsequent columns headed "day", "time", "who asked", "what request", and "complied/not complied".

Results

It turned out that the students were posed 6 to 15 requests daily – 9.3 on average ($SD = 4.9$). These were both totally trivial requests (such as asking what the time was or the way to somewhere in town), easy requests (asking to change money or letting someone buy something without queuing), slightly more difficult (lending someone money or notes from a lecture) or very difficult (buying something unnecessary from a street seller or filling out a long questionnaire in an internet discussion forum). On average, the students complied with 76% of all these requests (with 65% being the lowest "student compliance percentage" and 88% - the highest). No regularity or pattern was discovered as far as the participants reactions to subsequently requests are concerned. Refusals randomly intermingled with compliance (even if the latter prevailed). Likewise, no connections were found between the day of the week and the number of requests addressed to the participants ($t < 1$) or the participants' inclination to comply with the requests ($chi^2 < 1$).

The study method of writing things down in the diaries turned out to be slightly inconvenient for the participants. They complained that sometimes they had no time to put the information down directly after the request, so they had to do it later. In the second study, we decided to eliminate that inconvenience and also to include some men as participants.

Study 2

Participants & Methods

Twelve students (6 women and 6 men) of the Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities participated in the study. Each of them was asked to send a text message from their mobile phones to the mobile number of the experimenter during three defined days (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday), every time they are asked to do something. The participants were to text "Y" when they were posed a request they agreed to do or "N" – if they were asked something they refused to do.

Results

On average, the participants sent 11.8 messages daily (ranging from 7 to 18, $SD = 4.2$). "Y" was texted more often (62%, - ranging from 52% to 76%) than "N". No differences were found between women and men in the frequency of texting or in the number of messages sent ($t < 1$), or in the frequency of compliance ($chi^2 < 1$).

General Discussion

In the two studies, conducted by different methods, the results were very similar. Also, although only women participated in the first study, the second study included men as well. Each of the participants was presented with several requests daily and more often complied with than rejected them. We could assume that the people who participated in the two above studies were presented with different requests just as frequently as the participants of any experiments on the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique. They most probably also had similar reactions to these requests, – complying with some and rejecting other. These results are then very problematic for the self-perception interpretation of foot-in-the-door effectiveness. If we assume that the foot-in-the-door technique is effective because after complying with the easier request the individual analyzes their own altruism or submissiveness, it would imply that we normally do such self-analyses more than a dozen times a day and, on top of that, we completely change our opinion about ourselves several times a day (when we reject a request after we have just complied with an earlier one or when we agree to a request after we have just rejected another). This seems very unlikely, particularly in light of the results of self-image studies - showing that for the majority of people, their self-images remains stable (Campbell, 1990; Goldman, 2006). Psychologists who call upon self-perception as the mechanism underlying the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique seem to

treat the participants of their experiments as if they were kept in a freezer after fulfilling the preliminary request and let out of the freezer only to hear the second, more serious request of the experiment. In a freezer, they would not be presented with any requests. However, real social life is nothing like a freezer.

Obviously, we could defend the self-perception theory by referring to the results of studies that indicate that the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door technique is influenced by the degree of similarity of the two requests. In this context, it is worthwhile to remember these three facts:

- (1) In the classical study by Friedman and Fraser (1966, study 2), a strong effect was also found in the conditions of minimal similarity of the two requests.
- (2) In numerous foot-in-the-door studies, the participants were students and the requests dealt with filling out questionnaires (see: Beaman, et al., 1983; Burger, 1999). In Study 1 presented in this article, nine out of the twelve students were asked to fill out a questionnaire or a survey at last once.
- (3) Under the influence of compliance with the first request, an individual can start perceiving their inclination to engage in some very specific actions or can start perceiving a greater intensity of such traits as altruism or submissiveness. If we assume the latter perspective, the similarity of the two requests should not be important.

All this makes it very difficult to treat the self-perception interpretation of the foot-in-the-door technique as accurate, – at least not in its classical form, as assumed by Bem (1967, 1972). It seems then that the problem of the psychological grounds of the foot-in-the-door technique's effectiveness demands some fresh theoretical ideas and new empirical studies.

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