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“You will probably refuse, but...”: When activating reactance in a single sentence increases compliance with a request

Abstract: Studies investigating compliance-gaining procedures have shown that the feeling that someone is free to comply or not with a request is a requirement to obtain compliance. In this study, participants were asked for money for a charitable organization. In the experimental condition, people first heard a sentence saying that they would probably refuse to help, and then they were asked to make a donation. In the control condition, participants were just asked for money. Findings showed that more participants complied with the request in the experimental condition. Reactance theory was used to explain these results.

Key words: Freedom, Request, Reactance, Compliance

In an extensive review of compliance-gaining procedures, many tactics were identified by social psychologists (See Dolinsky, 2016 and Pratkanis, 2007 for an exhaustive review). All these techniques are different, and the theoretical processes associated with their effectiveness vary from one to the other. Most of these techniques, however, have something in common: at each step of the procedure, the participants are free to accept or to refuse to comply with the request. No pressure or external factors (e.g., incentives) were used at any given time to increase participants' compliance. One of these techniques, the “but you are free” technique (Guéguen & Pascual, 2000), showed that simply telling people that they are free to accept or to refuse a request increased compliance with the target request. Guéguen et al. (2013) reported that this technique appeared to be effective in increasing the number of individuals who accepted very different requests: people who accepted to give money to a requester, smokers who accepted to give a cigarette, passers-by who accepted to respond to a survey, and homeowners who accepted to buy pancakes. These authors also found that various sentences evoking the freedom to comply (e.g., “Do not feel obliged”, “Do as you wish”) were found to be associated with greater compliance. A recent study conducted by Pascual et al. (2015) indicated that the simple exposure to the word “freedom” influenced compliance.

The effects of such sentences or a single word associated with freedom feelings suggest that reactance

could be a good theoretical explanation. According to reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974), individuals feel free to behave. When their own perceived freedom is threatened, people are motivated to restore their freedom. Thus, when someone is solicited by a stranger, this solicitation probably elicits some reactance because the solicited person is perhaps busy, is frequently solicited day after day, likes to be in peace, etc. Research focusing on persuasion has shown that people express resistance to persuasion; thus, for persuasion to be successful, strategies must be found that will overcome the target's resistance (Knowles & Linn, 2004). Focusing on reactance to persuasion could be one of the technique to reduce such initial resistance. Thus, using a phrase that states that participants are free to comply could decrease the reactance activated by the request and lead, in return, to increase the probability that they will comply with the request.

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the reverse effect of a sentence associated with a request. The “but you are free” technique increases people's perceived freedom to act, which in turn, influences compliance. However, it could also be stated that using a sentence that threatens people's perceived freedom could lead them to comply more willingly in order to restore their feeling of freedom. In day-to-day relationships, the verbal content of people's persuasive request often contains sentences such as “You are free but”, “Do not feel obliged but”, “You will probably refuse but...”, “You will probably say no but...”,

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“You will probably not OK this but...” Because the people using them need help, these statements are probably not used to obtain the reverse effect (i.e., no compliance); instead, they are probably used to create a form of reactance, which in turn would increase compliance with the request. People are free to decide who, how, and why they would like to help, and they are not always refusing requests for help. Expecting no compliance with a request is probably not consistent with the control of our own decision to help or not, and people would probably want to restore control of their own behavior by offering help to the requester.

Whereas various statements arguing that someone is free to comply with a request have been tested in the literature, to our knowledge, statements arguing that somebody will probably say no have never been examined in the compliance-gaining literature. In this experiment, participants were asked for money for a charitable organization. In one condition, before being asked for the donation, participants heard a sentence saying that they would probably refuse to help. Based on the theory of reactance and on previous studies that have examined the effect of the “but you are free” technique, it was hypothesized that saying that participants would probably refuse to help would be associated with greater compliance with the request for help.

Method

Participants

The participants were 320 men and 320 women (approximately between 30 and 55 years of age), walking alone in the street of two towns (between 60–70,000 inhabitants) situated on the south coast of Brittany, France.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted over a few days before Christmas. This period was chosen because many humanitarian organizations traditionally solicit individuals in the streets or in stores for donations during the Christmas season.

Three male confederates (all 20 years old) wearing red tee-shirts with the logo and the official badge of an association were stationed in the street. The experiment was conducted over 2 days from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Each confederate was instructed to approach individuals between 30 and 55 years old, walking alone in the street, and to say with a smile: “*Good morning/afternoon, Sir/Madam. My name is (first name); I am a volunteer for the “One*

Thousand and One Smiles Organization” (in French, the “*Association Mille et un sourires*”). *Please, could you give me one minute?*” If the participants refused, the confederate thanked them. If the participants agreed, then the confederate said: “*Our organization helps children who have serious health problems and their family. We help them overcome some of the difficulties in their lives*”. In the control condition, the confederate then said: “*You are probably interested in organizations for children with health problems. I wonder if you could help us by making a donation*”. In the experimental condition, the confederate said: “*You are probably interested in organizations for children with health problems. You will probably refuse, but I wonder if you could help us by making a donation*”. If the participants refused, the confederate thanked them. If they accepted, then the confederate waited until the participants gave a donation and thanked them. As the participants gave the money directly to the confederate, the latter then counted the amount of money given and recorded it on a small form. The confederate was instructed to test two men and two women in one condition and then to change the condition. The confederate was asked not to select a participant but to approach the first passer-by walking alone who appeared in front of him. If a child, an adolescent, or a group of people came by, the confederate waited until a person corresponding to the profile (a man or woman of roughly 30 to 55 years of age, walking alone) walked by.

Results

The number of participants who agreed or not with the request was used as the first dependent variable, and the amount of money given by those who complied was the second dependent variable. A preliminary analysis showed no interaction effect between experimental condition and genre of participant ($p > .20$ for both dependent variables). Accordingly, all data were collapsed across gender and are shown in Table 1.

With the number of participants who agreed or not with the request, a chi-square independence test showed a significant effect of the experimental condition ($\chi^2(1, N = 640) = 14.53, p < .001, r = .15$) revealing that, overall, more compliance was found in the experimental condition than in the control condition. Using the amount of money donated by the participants, a 2 (experimental condition) between group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed and revealed no main effect of the experimental condition ($F(1, 203) = 1.45, p = .483, r = .08$).

Table 1. Participants Who Complied With the Request for Donation and Amount of Donation

	Control condition	Experimental condition
Compliance with request	25.0% (80/320)	39.1% (125/320)
Amount of donation (in €)	2.44 (1.36) ^{a)}	2.25 (0.88)

^{a)} Mean (SD in brackets).

Discussion

Congruent with our hypothesis, this field study showed that more participants complied with the donation request addressed by requesters when the sentence “You will probably refuse, but...” preceded the request for money. This effect occurred with both male and female participants. Replication appears necessary, but this study seems to show that this sentence could be considered as a new verbal way to increase compliance with a donation request. Previous studies have indicated that a few sentences that are included in a helping request increased the number of participants who comply. It has been reported that adding the sentences “You are free to accept or to refuse, but...”, “Do not feel obliged, but...”, or “Do as you wish, but...” exerted the same effect by increasing the rate of compliance with a request (Guéguen et al., 2013). Enzle and Harvey (1982) reported that indirect negation in a rhetorical request (e.g., “You will help me, won’t you?”) elicited greater helping behavior than either a direct negation in a rhetorical request (e.g., “Won’t you help me?”) or a control positive form (e.g., “Will you help me?”). Several experimental studies showed that first asking people how they feel was associated with greater compliance with a following request (Aune & Basil, 1994; Dolinski, Nawrat, & Rudak, 2001; Fointiat, 2000; Howard, 1990). It has also been reported that the addition of the sentence “Even a penny helps” in a request for the benefit of a charitable organization led to an increase in the amount of donations (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Jacob, Charles-Sire, & Guéguen, 2013; Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987; Reeves & Saucer, 1993). Thus, combined with all these previous studies, this new experiment confirmed that many kinds of sentences preceding a request for a donation exert a strong effect on participants.

The issue that now remains is how to explain the positive effect of the sentence used in the present experiment. The theory of psychological reactance could help us explain our results. Reactance occurs when people perceive that their freedom to act is threatened or restricted. Reactance is aroused in various manners: the social pressure to act, financial incentives to comply, physical dominance. For Brehm (1966) and Brehm and Brehm (1981), reactance creates a negative tension state that motivates individuals to act in order to restore their threatened freedom. Hence, when people are informed that they are probably going to refuse to do a good deed, as in our experiment, this could lead them to perceive that their freedom to decide whether they will accept or not is threatened. Thus, in order to restore their perceived freedom to decide what they want to do, participants are led to take the opposite direction and to accept the request, thus showing that they are in control of their decision.

With the “but you are free...” compliance technique, reactance theory was also used to explain the effect of the technique. Using a sentence that states that someone is free to comply could decrease the spontaneous and the initial reactance activated by the request, which in turn increases

the probability that the individual will comply with the request.

In our study, the reverse effect could have been obtained by our sentence “You will probably refuse but...” This sentence could have been threatening the perceived freedom of the participants, which in turn led them to comply more willingly in order to restore their feeling of freedom. People always want to be free to decide for themselves whether to help someone else in any circumstance. Sometimes they say “yes” and sometimes “no”, but they probably expect to be free each time. When the participants perceived, through a particular phrasing, that they were expected to say no, this was not in accordance with their own expectation to act freely. Thus, in order to restore their own perceived freedom to decide, participants were probably led to comply with the request.

Impression management could also explain the effect of the sentence used in this technique. Research has shown that concern about public image is a way to influence compliance with a request (Millar, 2002; Rind & Benjamin, 1994). Thus, when the requesters said that the participants would probably refuse a request for a positive action (helping children), the participants could infer that the requesters had a negative impression of them. Hence, in order to contradict this feeling and to show a positive image of themselves in the eyes of the requester, participants were led to comply with the request. Cialdini and Golstein (2004) discussed the importance for people of making a positive impression on requesters and argued that agreeing with a request could be a way for the individuals involved to create this positive impression. According to Knowles and Linn (2004), the sentence “You will probably refuse but...” could act as a technique that reduces people’s natural resistance to comply. These authors explained that any threat to people’s self-image is a good technique to help reduce resistance to comply. Thus, in our experiment, in order to give a positive self-image to the requester, people were led to comply more readily with the request.

Other explanations could also explain the results reported. For example, the words “You will probably refuse, but...” could act as “placebic” information calling for mindless behavior that leads to greater compliance (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). The compliance effect reported is perhaps not explained by one process only, and a combination of reactance theory and impression management theory could explain the effect reported in this study. The processes underlying influence tactics are often polygenetic, and the same technique often involves multiple processes (Guéguen et al., 2013). Our study confirms that a sentence suggesting that people would probably refuse to help seems to create the reverse effect by increasing helping behaviors. In future, it would be worth replicating the effect of this new sentence on other requests and to study more extensively various kinds of sentences stating that someone would probably say no (e.g., “You will probably say no, but...”). Investigating this type of reversing sentences could help us understand the role of perceived freedom or impression management in people’s behavior and decision making.

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