

When Manipulation Backfires: The Effects of Time Delay and Requester on the Foot-in-the-Door Technique

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We examined the effects of 2 variables on compliance rates within the foot-in-the-door procedure. Participants who agreed to a small request were presented with a larger request either immediately after the first request or 2 days later. The second request was presented either by the same person or by a different requester. Compared to a control group receiving only the large request, participants were more likely to agree to the second request in all experimental conditions except one. When the same requester presented the second request without delay, participants were less likely than the control group to agree to the target request. This latter condition represents a situation in which typical foot-in-the-door procedures can backfire on the requester.

Three decades ago, Freedman and Fraser (1966) introduced to social psychology the foot-in-the-door technique for increasing compliance with a request. The technique consists of securing agreement to a small initial request in order to increase the likelihood of compliance with a second, larger request. In one of their initial demonstrations of the effect, Freedman and Fraser asked people to put a small sign in the window of their homes or to sign a petition. Two weeks later, these people were more likely to agree to have a large sign placed on their front lawn than people not presented with the initial request. Like the prototypical door-to-door salesperson, the requester is said to get his or her "foot in the door" with the first request.

These initial investigations spawned a large amount of research concerned with the theoretical as well as the applied implications of the technique. Investigators from psychology and a number of related disciplines have examined the impact of numerous conditions and variables on the strength of the foot-in-the-door effect. At least four reviews of foot-in-the-door studies have been published (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Steblay, 1983; DeJong, 1979; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986). The conclusion drawn from each of these reviews is remarkably consistent. Each team of reviewers argues that the effect appears more often than

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would be expected by chance. Hence, the foot-in-the-door phenomenon first demonstrated by Freedman and Fraser (1966) is real.

Unfortunately, this is only part of the story. Research on the foot-in-the-door effect is far from consistent or easy to interpret. The literature is filled with failures to replicate and occasional reversals of the effect. Three meta-analyses of this research have found that while the combined foot-in-the-door effect is statistically significant, it is relatively small (Beaman et al., 1983; Dillard et al., 1984; Fern et al., 1986). Foot-in-the-door research is further complicated by ambiguity about the mechanisms underlying the effect. Perhaps the most common interpretation for the effect is that people engage in a kind of self-perception process (DeJong, 1979). That is, after agreeing to the first request, people come to see themselves as the kind of people who comply with such requests or support these kinds of causes. This change in self-perception is then said to increase the likelihood of compliance with the second request. Unfortunately, the evidence for this interpretation is far from strong or consistent (DeJong, 1979; Gorassini & Olson, 1995).

The present study is designed as a first step toward identifying variables that may be responsible for some of the confusion in the foot-in-the-door literature. Although no single set of experiments can clarify all of the delimiting conditions and relevant variables, we identify two variables that should play an important role in the foot-in-the-door effect. These two variables are the amount of time between the two requests and whether the same or a different person makes the second request. We will argue that, if ignored by researchers, the interaction between these two variables might derail the intended foot-in-the-door effect.

First, foot-in-the-door researchers have allowed the amount of time between the first and second requests to vary considerably in their studies. Investigators have used time periods ranging from a few seconds to 2 weeks. Beaman et al. (1983) found an average of 4.4 days between requests in the studies they reviewed, with 27% of the studies allowing virtually no time to elapse between requests. What effect does the length of delay between requests have on compliance with the second request? The few studies directly examining the impact of different lengths of time delay failed to uncover a significant effect for this variable (Beaman, Steblay, Preston, & Klentz, 1988; Cann, Sherman, & Elkes, 1975). A similar conclusion was drawn by reviewers who used the amount of time between requests as a variable in their meta-analyses (Beaman et al., 1983; Dillard et al., 1984; Fern et al., 1986). In each case, the reviewers found that this variable could not account for a significant percentage of the variance in foot-in-the-door studies. That is, as time between requests lengthened, no noticeable relationship with the strength of the effect was found. Thus, by itself, the length of delay between requests does not seem to have a significant impact on the strength of the foot-in-the-door effect.

Second, whether the same or a different person makes the second request also has been allowed to vary from one foot-in-the-door study to the next. Although Freedman and Fraser (1966) used different requesters supposedly from different organizations in their studies, subsequent investigators often have used the same person or two requesters representing the same organization to make both requests. Although this would seem to be an important variable, research to date suggests otherwise. When Fern et al. (1986) compared the average effect size from studies using the same requester and studies using different requesters, they found only a nonsignificant tendency for a stronger effect when a different requester was used. Thus, like the length-of-time variable, whether the same or a different requester presents the second request does not seem to alter the effectiveness of the technique.

Nowhere in the foot-in-the-door research could we find a study that examined the interaction between time of delay and whether the same or a different requester was used. However, a case can be made that such an investigation is necessary. Imagine the reaction of a person who complies to a small request and who then is asked immediately for a larger request from the same individual. Although this procedure fits within the methods typically used in foot-in-the-door experiments, there are reasons to suggest that participants may not be inclined to comply with the second request in such a situation. We can identify two social psychological phenomena that may be operating in this situation, each of which may dilute the effectiveness of the foot-in-the-door manipulation. At this point, our intention is not to identify the extent to which each of these processes affects foot-in-the-door compliance, nor are we trying to argue that these are the only two relevant processes operating in this situation. Rather, we are trying to chip away at the foot-in-the-door puzzle by identifying conditions under which foot-in-the-door manipulations are and are not effective.

First, when a requester follows one agreed-upon request immediately with a second request, the response to the second request might be explained in part by reactance theory. According to the theory of psychological reactance, people are motivated to maintain a sense of personal freedom (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). When we perceive efforts to reduce our freedom, such as pressure to make a certain choice, we often do something to reassert our ability to do as we please. Typically, this reaction takes the form of pursuing the opposite course of action to that advocated by the person providing the pressure. Relevant to the present investigation, when Brehm and Cole (1966) pressured participants to return a favor, the participants responded by refusing a request to help a confederate more often than when pressure was not applied. Returning to the foot-in-the-door procedure, it is possible that participants feel excessive pressure from a requester who follows up one request with another. In this situation, people may feel the need to say "No" in an effort to reassert their right to do as they please.

Second, people presented with a second request from the same individual also might be affected by the norm of reciprocity. The *norm of reciprocity* is a widely accepted social rule that says we should give to and receive from others in a relatively equivalent manner (Gouldner, 1960). One application of this rule is that most of us feel obligated to return a favor when someone does something nice for us (Regan, 1971). As with other social rules, we tend to react negatively to those who violate the norm of reciprocity (Cialdini, 1993). Social exchanges proceed smoothly as long as both parties understand the back-and-forth reciprocal nature of these exchanges. An individual who continues to either receive or to give without waiting for reciprocation threatens the socially agreed-upon framework for social interaction and can expect efforts to enforce the norm and punish the deviance (Gouldner, 1960). Gouldner argued that the norm of reciprocity specifically precludes “exploitation” by those who take without giving. In short, in our society, requests and concessions are carried out in a reciprocal manner, and someone who continues to request without concessions is likely to generate a negative reaction. Again returning to the foot-in-the-door procedure, immediately following up compliance to one request with a second request could result in a decreased likelihood of complying with the second request.

We examine the effect of both length of time between requests and whether the same or a different requester presents the second request within the same foot-in-the-door experiment. For the reasons outlined earlier, we predict no increase and perhaps even a decrease in compliance relative to a control group when the same person delivers the second request immediately after the participant agrees to the first request.

In contrast, we expect to find the traditional increase in compliance when a different person presents the second request or when a significant amount of time passes between the two requests. First, we expect an increase in compliance when a different person makes the second request. Because the second requester does not appear to be working with the first, the participant in this situation should perceive no excessive pressure to comply and thus should not respond with reactance. Moreover, the give-and-receive ledger is clear with this new individual. Thus, there should be no perceived violation of the reciprocity norm. Second, we expect an increase in compliance when a significant amount of time is allowed to elapse between requests, regardless of who makes the second request. Participants should perceive relatively little pressure from the requester if that person has left them alone for a considerable amount of time between requests. That is, by allowing 2 days to pass before approaching the participant a second time, it is unlikely that the requester would be seen as badgering the participant. Of course, it is possible that people will still experience some pressure to comply with the second request even after a delay of a few days. However, any such perceived

pressure most certainly will be less than that experienced when the initial request is immediately followed up with a second request. Moreover, the need to maintain an equal give-and-receive relationship probably diminishes rapidly for the kinds of small requests typically used in foot-in-the-door experiments. Although the need to reciprocate large favors probably lasts a long time, it would be impractical and perhaps unpleasant for people to carry around with them mental notes of each and every little favor given and received. Consistent with this reasoning, one recent set of studies found that participants' perceived obligation to reciprocate a small unrequested favor (a free soft drink) completely disappeared after a few days (Burger, Horita, Kinoshita, Roberts, & Vera, 1997). In short, there seems little possibility of generating a reactance effect or violating the norm of reciprocity when either a different individual delivers the second request or when a significant amount of time elapses between requests.

Method

Participants

One hundred eighty-one male and female undergraduates from Santa Clara University served as participants in exchange for class credit.

Design Overview

Four experimental conditions were created by randomly dividing participants into same-requester/different-requester conditions and immediate/delayed conditions. One control group was also used in the experiment. Participants in the four experimental conditions were presented with an initial request and a target request. These participants received the target request either immediately after the initial request or after a 2-day period. They were given the two requests either by the same person or by two different people. Control-group participants received only the target request. The number of participants in each condition was: immediate-same = 43; immediate-different = 35; delayed-same = 32; delayed-different = 34; control = 37.

Procedure

Upon arrival at the designated meeting area, each participant was told by the experimenter that the experiment consisted of completing some personality tests, but that due to some scheduling confusion, all department research rooms were already in use. The participant was escorted to a chair in the main hallway of the building and told that he or she could complete the tests there.

The experimenter said she would return to check on the participant in a few minutes, and left him or her alone in the hallway. The location of the desk in the hallway was selected because many people typically walk through this area during the time of day when the experiment was being held, and this made the appearance of the confederate plausible. The personality tests took about 10 to 15 min to complete and were unrelated to the study.

Participants in each condition were approached by Requester A about 5 min after they had begun work on the personality tests. In the same-requester condition, Requester A played the role of a volunteer for the American Heart Association. She wore a button with the organization's logo and a name tag. She also carried a binder with the logo prominently displayed. Requester A presented participants with the following request:

Hi, my name is ____ and I'm a student at Santa Clara University as well as a volunteer for the American Heart Association. This is County Volunteer Week and as part of a volunteer project, I'm asking students to wear these buttons to show their support for the American Heart Association. Would you be willing to wear this on your backpack to promote awareness throughout Santa Clara?

The button held by Requester A was 1.5 in. (35 mm) in diameter and displayed the American Heart Association logo and slogan. In the different-requester condition, Requester A made an identical request of the participants, except that she presented herself as representing the Crippled Children's Society. If the participant did not agree to the initial request, he or she was thanked and contact ended.² If the participant agreed to the request, the experimenter attached the button to the participant's backpack and thanked him or her.

If the participant was in the same-requester/immediate condition, after attaching the button, Requester A also said, "There is also another way you can help us if you would like." She then presented the participant with the target request:

We are going to be setting up a table outside of Benson Center, and we need volunteers to sit at the booth for one 3-hr shift to pass out informational brochures about heart-disease prevention. We can work the shift around your schedule so that it is at a convenient time for you. Would you be willing to participate?

²Two participants refused the request to wear a button, one in each condition. As in earlier foot-in-the-door research, these participants were included in the final data analyses as having refused the second request.

If participants were in the different-requester/immediate condition, Requester A left immediately after attaching the button and thanking the participant. About 1 min later, Requester B appeared.³ Requester B had a button, name tag, and binder with the American Heart Association logo. She introduced herself as one of the students participating in County Volunteer Week and presented participants with the target request.

Participants in the two delayed conditions had signed up to participate in two experimental sessions scheduled 2 days apart. At the end of the first session, the experimenter reminded these participants of the second session, and dismissed them after they had completed the personality tests. When the participants returned 2 days later, they again were seated at the desk in the hallway and given a second set of unrelated personality tests to complete. A few minutes after the participants began working on the questionnaire, they were approached by either Requester A (same-requester condition) or Requester B (different-requester condition) and presented with the target request. Participants in the control condition attended only one experimental session and were presented only with the target request by one of the two requesters.

If the participant agreed to the target request, the requester wrote down his or her name and phone number and said that someone would be contacting the participant if needed. The two requesters exchanged roles throughout the experiment to counterbalance any effects unique to the particular requester.

Results

We compared the percentage of people who agreed to the target request in each of the four experimental conditions with the percentage who agreed to this request in the control condition. As shown in Table 1, participants who received the second request from the same person immediately after agreeing to the initial request were less likely to agree to the target request than participants in the control condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 5.87, p < .02$. In contrast, a significant foot-in-the-door effect was produced in each of the other three experimental conditions. Compared to the control group, participants were more likely to agree to the target request in the different-requester/immediate condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 4.50, p < .04$; the same-requester/delayed condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 69) = 8.78, p < .004$; and the different-requester/delayed condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 71) = 3.96, p < .05$.

³A 1-min delay was used to avoid suspicion. Although it remains an open question as to whether 60 s constitutes a significant gap between requests in the participant's mind, this procedure is consistent with the notion of "immediate," as we use the term. Moreover, 1 min is certainly different from the 2-day delay used in the other conditions.

Table 1

Percentage of Subjects Complying With the Target Request

Condition	Same requester	Different requester
Immediate	7.0	51.4
Delayed	62.5	50.0
Control		27.0

Discussion

The findings suggest that the amount of time between requests and whether the same or a different person delivers the second request interact to affect compliance in the foot-in-the-door procedure. We produced the typical increase in compliance with the foot-in-the-door procedures when either a different person presented the second request or when the same person made the second request 2 days after the initial contact. Most important, within the same experiment, we identified conditions that not only failed to produce a foot-in-the-door effect, but actually led to a decrease in the participant's likelihood of agreeing to the second request. Participants were less likely than an appropriate control group to agree to the target request if they had just agreed to a smaller request from the same person. In other words, in this condition, the foot-in-the-door procedure backfired.

Our findings thus make some headway in identifying the conditions that facilitate and hinder a successful foot-in-the-door manipulation. However, researchers still have a significant way to go before untangling the existing accumulation of inconsistent foot-in-the-door findings. We would like to say that all past studies using procedures similar to our same-requester/immediate condition found the same reversal we report here and that all studies using procedures similar to one of our other three experimental conditions found an increase in compliance relative to a control group. Unfortunately, this is not the case. A review of foot-in-the-door research finds that investigators who have used the same requester for both requests and who also have allowed no delay between the first and second requests sometimes find the decline in compliance we demonstrated (Harari, Mohr, & Hosey, 1980), sometimes find an increase in compliance (Carducci, Deuser, Bauer, Large, & Ramaekers, 1989; Goldman, 1986), and sometimes find no effect (Reingen & Kernan, 1979).

Our response to this inconsistent pattern is twofold. First, none of the findings from earlier studies are inconsistent with the results reported here because ours is the only experiment to examine the interaction between the

delay variable and the same/different-requester variable in a fully crossed design. We created experimental situations that produced either an increase in compliance or a decrease in compliance, depending on the level of two crucial variables. Second, because these other studies did not examine this interaction, the inconsistent pattern of findings is likely the result of unidentified procedural variations (including different experimenters conducting the different studies). These variations can either increase or decrease compliance with the second request and thereby enhance or mask the basic foot-in-the-door effect. Past research suggests a large number of variables that have the potential to alter compliance rates in the foot-in-the-door paradigm. These include whether participants are made aware of others' responses (DeJong, 1981), the legitimacy of the request (Patch, 1986), whether researchers measure agreement to or actual performance of the target request (Cialdini & Ascani, 1976), whether participants explain their initial compliance in terms of external or internal reasons (Uranowitz, 1975), the relative difference in the size of the two requests (Seligman, Bush, & Kirsch, 1976), and characteristics of the requester (Williams & Williams, 1989), among others.

The experiment reported here was designed to identify a situation in which a common foot-in-the-door manipulation is not likely to work. However, further research is needed to better understand the processes underlying the reversal effect we uncovered. We have suggested two possible processes contributing to the decrease in compliance in the same-requester/immediate condition—psychological reactance and the norm of reciprocity. However, other processes might also play a role, and additional questions can be asked about the two processes we suggest. For example, Is the participant simply trying to avoid an imbalance in the exchange, or is he or she reacting to negative feelings about the norm violator? Another possibility is that the participant in this situation is making attributions about the experimenter that lead to a decreased likelihood of helping. For example, the experimenter might be seen as manipulative or inconsiderate, or perhaps someone who is really out for something other than collecting money for charity.

As always, the answers to these questions await additional research. What we can say at this point is that the foot-in-the-door phenomenon is real, but perhaps also easy to derail. There probably are situations in which recruiters and salespeople can benefit by inducing people to agree to a small request before hitting them with a large request. However, given all of the complexities of social interaction, there probably are many other variables in the situation of which the astute requester should be aware. The research presented here suggests that the metaphor of the salesperson with his or her foot in the door is wrong. Acquiescence to a small request can sometimes increase sales, but other times all the salesperson may get for his or her efforts is a sore foot.

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