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Measuring the Locus of Causality as a Means of Generating Explanations for the Legitimization of Paltry Favors Effect

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Abstract

Two experiments were designed to examine the potential for impression management as an explanation of the legitimization of paltry favors (LPF) effect. Scenarios varied the technique (control v. LPF, Experiment 1), and both whether or not the target complied and the amount donated by the target (Experiment 2). The potential for impression management as a mediator of the effect was explored by examining attributions made concerning the locus of causality for compliance and non-compliance. Findings provide the foundation for future research by generating evidence consistent with the desire to make a favorable impression as an explanation for the LPF effect.

Key words: Sequential persuasion strategies; Legitimization of paltry favors; Impression management

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INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that the probability of gaining compliance decreases as the cost of the compliance request increases. Thus, when possible, those seeking to gain the compliance of others are served well by minimizing the expense of the compliance request (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). Doing so eliminates one substantial obstacle to gaining compliance, making it more difficult for the target to deny the request. This premise was a pivotal premise in Cialdini and Schroeder's (1976) argument for predicting the effectiveness of the legitimization of paltry favors (LPF) technique.

LPF refers to a compliance gaining technique in which the legitimization of small donations follows a direct request for compliance. Although legitimizing the small donation commonly takes the form of the phrase, "even a penny will help," phrasing extends to time, effort, and task size as well. By minimizing costs to the target in this manner, targets find it difficult to generate reasons to refuse the request without lying, presenting themselves in an unfavorable manner, or engaging in some other form of non pro-social action (Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987).

A potential weakness of the LPF is that, although targets may be more inclined to donate, their mean donation might be substantially less than what would be obtained when making a direct request (Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis, 1994). If so, then a lower proportion of people complying with a direct request might net more money, time, or effort than that obtained from employing the LPF. Notably, however, the LPF legitimizes, but does not solicit small donations. Thus, the magnitude of the mean donation remains an empirical question. Pertinent to this question Andrews, Carpenter, Shaw, and Boster (2008, p.66) report no evidence of substantial differences in mean donation size when comparing direct requests with the LPF, although they caution that more research is required before embracing this conclusion confidently.

The Andrews et al. (2008) meta-analysis indicated that adding the legitimizing phrase to a direct request increased the proportion of targets complying relative to a direct request control, but they were unable to find evidence of any variables that explain, or mediate, the relationship

between the LPF induction and compliance.[1] Despite not identifying mediators, the meta-analytic review suggested potential explanations. Emphasized particularly were mechanisms involving impression management. Andrews et al. (2008) suggest that others may evaluate the target negatively following a refusal to comply with a request in which a paltry contribution is legitimized, so that the concern with creating a positive impression may result in a higher likelihood of compliance in the LPF condition than in the control condition.

This suggestion is pursued in this manuscript. Specifically, the attributions that people provide for complying with or refusing an LPF request relative to a direct request are examined in the first experiment. These attributions have the potential to provide evidence pertinent to impression management or other factors that mediate the LPF/direct request – compliance relationship, and hence, provide an explanation for the observed LPF effect.

Different models emphasize the importance of various attribution dimensions. One dimension common to several models is the locus of causality (Jones & Davis, 1965; Weiner, 1974, 1986). When the locus of causality is internal, behavior is explained as resulting from dispositional characteristics; whereas, when the locus of causality is external, behavior is explained as resulting from situational factors. This dimension is particularly pertinent to an impression management explanation of the LPF.

To the extent that the LPF effect is mediated by an impression management mechanism, it is expected that people will be more reluctant to refuse an LPF request than a direct request. Thus, when asked if one would comply with a request, self-reported compliance will be higher in an LPF condition than in a direct request condition. Moreover, to the extent that an impression management mechanism is operative, explanations for one's compliance will be internal in the main; whereas, explanations for one's non-compliance will be primarily external. Experiment 1 was designed to examine the empirical merit of these ideas.

1. EXPERIMENT 1

1.1 Subjects

The sample was comprised of 139 undergraduates from a large Midwestern university. They ranged in age from 18-26 years old (M =19.97, SD = 1.66). Of the 137 (98.6%) *S*s who reported their sex, 64.2% identified themselves as female. More than 99% of the sample (99.3%) reported their year in school, including 42 freshmen (30.4%), 22 sophomores (15.9%), 33 juniors (23.9%), and 41 seniors (29.7%). *Ss* were informed that participation was voluntary and that their responses were anonymous. They received class research credit or extra credit for participating.

1.2 Design

Ss received a scenario of an influencing agent soliciting compliance using either the LPF technique or a direct request control message. Specifically, they read the following description of a compliance gaining encounter.

Pat is in charge of trying to raise funds for the Lansing (local) Food Bank. Pat goes around a local neighborhood to solicit donations. When individuals answer the door, Pat says the following:

As you are likely aware, the Lansing Food Bank is a non-profit organization that provides emergency food to individuals and families in need. Food is distributed through an extensive network of food pantries and community kitchens located throughout the greater Lansing area. The food bank serves thousands of people annually, many of them seniors and children. Would you help by giving a donation? [Even a penny will help.]

1.3 Instrumentation

Ss were asked to report whether or not the target complied. Of those reporting that the target complied, follow-up questions assessed the amount the target would donate and the reason(s) for compliance (i.e., donating). Of those reporting that the target did not comply, follow-up questions addressed the reason(s) for noncompliance. All *Ss* were asked to report the percentage of people who would comply in this situation, as well as estimate the average donation. Finally, they were asked to report whether or not they would comply, as well as the reason(s) for their (in) action.

Two-trained research assistants coded the reasons given for compliance. Each reason was coded into one of the following six categories: *support cause*, *small monetary request*, *speaker characteristics*, *organization characteristics*, *did not want to create a negative impression*, and *social obligation* (κ=.92).

Reasons for non-compliance were coded into one of seven categories including: *did not support cause*, *too much of a monetary request/did not have the money*, *speaker characteristics*, *organization characteristics*, *no self-benefit*, *not social responsible*, and *dislike for door-to-door solicitors* (κ=.91).

Locus of causality is internal when a cause is ascribed to personality or disposition and external when a cause is assigned to situational or environmental factors (Jones & Davis, 1965; Weiner, 1974, 1986). Hence, reasons

[1] Moreover, although no strong evidence of moderators emerged, two moderators were discussed. First, the LPF was more effective than the direct request control when the solicitation was made face-to-face, but in the only experiment to use an alternative medium (mail), and for which an effect size could be calculated, a different outcome emerged (e.g. DeJong & Oopik, 1992; see also Brockner, Guzzi, Kane, Levine, & Shaplen, 1984). Second, in some experiments donations were collected immediately; in other experiments pledges were obtained. The latter produced slightly larger effect sizes, but they were not so much larger that they could not be attributed to sampling error.

pertaining to supporting the cause, self-disposition, the impression created, and felt social responsibility, were coded *internal*; whereas, size of monetary request and both speaker and organizational characteristics were coded *external*. Dislike for door-to-door solicitors was coded as *other* given that an external cause (i.e., being approached at home) led to an internal predisposition (i.e., dislike). Notably, the internal attributions for complying are uniformly pro-social.

1.4 Procedure

The survey was administered online with *S*s being assigned randomly to conditions. Initially, they read the scenario to which they were assigned, and then immediately responded to the six items mentioned previously. This procedure took approximately five minutes to complete.

1.5 Results

Three items probed perceptions of the compliance gaining effectiveness of the LPF strategy.[2] First, *S*s were asked if the target would comply with the request, a substantial majority, 71.2%, indicating that the target would comply. There was insufficient evidence that responses to this question differed by more than would be expected by sampling error in the two conditions, 75.4% responding that the target would comply in the LPF condition and 67.1% responding that the target would comply in the control condition, X^2 (1, N=139)=1.15, *ns*, r=.09, OR=1.50.[3]

The differences in the attributions made by those who indicated that the target would comply and those who indicated that the target would not comply were striking. Of the 40 *Ss* who indicated that the target would not comply, 34 provided an external attribution, five provided an internal attribution, and one provided an attribution with both internal and external elements; whereas of the 99 who indicated that the target would comply, 50 provided an external attribution, 48 provided an internal attribution, and one provided an attribution with both internal and external elements. Excluding the two responses which provided an attribution with both internal and external elements, those who thought that the target would not comply were much more likely to provide an external attribution (87.2%) than those who thought that the target would comply (51%), X^2(1, N=137)=15.38, p<.001, Fisher's Exact Test p<.001, r=-.34, OR=6.53.

Next, *S*s were asked if they would comply, 72.7% indicating that they would. Again, there was insufficient evidence that responses to this question differed by more than would be expected by sampling error in the two conditions (see note 3), 78.3% responding that the target would comply in the LPF condition and 67.1% responding that the target would comply in the control condition, X^2 (1, N=139)=2.16, *ns*, r=.13, OR=1.76.

Once again the differences in the attributions made by those indicating that they would comply and those indicating that they would not comply were striking. Of the 38 *Ss* who indicated that they would not comply, 36 provided an external attribution, one provided an internal attribution, and one provided an attribution with both internal and external elements; whereas of the 101 who indicated that they would comply, 19 provided an external attribution, 81 provided an internal attribution, and one provided an attribution with both internal and external elements. Excluding the two responses which provided an attribution with both internal and external elements, those reporting that they would not comply were much more likely to provide an external attribution (97.3%) than those reporting that they would comply (19%), X^2(1, N=137)=68.90, p<.001, Fisher's Exact Test p<.001, r=-.71, OR=153.47.

Finally, *S*s were asked to estimate the percentage of targets who would comply with the request. Estimates were distributed normally, ranging from 5% - 95% with a mean of 49.75 and a standard deviation of 20.65. There was evidence that these responses differed across conditions with a mean 54.9% in the LPF condition and 44.67% in the control condition, t(137)=3.00, p<.01, r=.25, d=.51.

Two items probed the monetary amount that the *S*s believed would be given in response to the request. First, judgments of the amount given by Pat, the requestor in the scenario, varied from $0.00 to $100. The distribution of this measure had a substantial positive skew and was leptokurtic with a mean of $7.93 and a standard deviation of $14.33. There was insufficient evidence that these judgments differed across conditions ($8.93 in the control group and $6.92 in the LPF condition), t(137)=-0.83, *ns*, r=-.07. Five scores exceeded the mean by more than two standard deviations, and were recoded to equal what was otherwise the highest score in the distribution ($25). Nevertheless, there was insufficient evidence that the amount judgments differed by more than would be expected by sampling error.

Second, judgments of the mean amount given by the hypothetical sample of 100 people were provided by 135 of the *S*s, and their estimates varied from $0.00 - $100. The distribution of this measure had a pronounced positive skew and was leptokurtic with a mean of $10.80 and a standard deviation of $13.28. There was evidence that these responses differed across conditions with the mean judgment being $13.18 in the control condition and $8.38 in the LPF condition, t(133)=-2.13, p<.05, r=-.18, d=-.37.

[2] Structural analyses were inconsistent with the hypothesis that these three items were alternative indicators of the same underlying factor.

[3] The high percentage of *S*s in the control group who reported that the target would comply rendered it difficult to reject the null hypothesis. With control group compliance at 67.1% approximately 82.6% of experimental group *S*s would have had to make the judgment that the target complied to reject the null hypothesis at p<.05.

1.6 Discussion

There was evidence consistent with the prediction that *S*s would recognize the LPF effect. Although two of the three measures did not produce an effect that was statistically significant at the conventional .05 probability level, the effect sizes did not depart substantially from the weighted mean effect size reported by Andrews et al. (2008) for face-to-face encounters in which money, rather than pledges, served as the dependent variable – the context the scenario attempts to simulate. Specifically, Andrews et al. (2008) report that value to be r=.18, and the mean effect size for the three measures employed in this experiment is approximately r=.16. Furthermore, this value does not deviate substantially from the Andrews weighted estimate of all LPF experiments, including mediated requests and request for pledges, r=.11. Hence, these judgment data are consistent with the behavioral data from the LPF literature.

*S*s were more likely to make external attributions when they believed that targets did not comply than they were when they believed that targets did comply with Pat's request, and the same pattern occurred when *S*s explained their own compliance or non-compliance. Nevertheless, attributions for others' action and for one's own action differed in one important respect. For *S*s who thought that others complied, the proportion of those providing an external v. an internal attribution was approximately equal (.51 v. .49); whereas, for *S*s reporting that they would comply, the proportion providing an internal attribution (.81) was much more larger than those providing an external attribution (.19).

Thus, *S*s tended to explain non-compliance in a manner reflecting relatively favorably on the non-complying target. When the target was an unknown other, their explanation for target compliance was mixed, approximately equal numbers making a flattering favorable internal attribution and a kind, but less flattering, external attribution. On the other hand, when explaining their own behavior a substantial majority (81%) provided a more self-enhancing internal attribution.

One of the two measures of the magnitude of the donation given by those who agreed to comply produced a statistically significant effect, the other did not. Nevertheless, the two effect sizes (r=-.07 and r=-.18) do not differ appreciably. Andrews et al. (2008) indicate that although no meta-analytic results could be reported for the amount of donation variable, the primary studies fail to report substantial differences in LPF and control conditions. It is plausible that donations are slightly higher when direct requests are made than when the LPF technique is employed, but that typical small sample LPF experiments lack the power to reject the null hypothesis for such small effects. The data reported in Experiment 1 are consistent with this possibility.

2. EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 1 provided relatively sparse description of the compliance context. Experiment 2 expands this context by providing additional information concerning the typical amount that others donate and information concerning the compliance of the target. To the extent that people are concerned with impression management, they can be expected to attend carefully to Cialdini's (2009) social proof principle. Specifically, under conditions of high ambiguity as to what action is expected, it is anticipated that people will examine others' action so as to ascertain what is normative. Subsequently, they can be expected to act in a normative manner as a way of creating or maintaining a favorable impression. Thus, it is expected that the size of generalized others' donations will affect the *S*'s own reported donation. Furthermore, it is expected that knowing that a specific target complied, or did not comply, will impact compliance judgments.

2.1 Subjects

The sample was comprised of 204 undergraduates from a large Midwestern university. They ranged from 18-34 years old (M =19.94, SD = 1.74), and 57.6% of the 203 who responded to the item reported that they were female. Of the 203 (99.5%) *S*s who responded to the item, approximately 29.1% reported being freshman, 21.7% sophomores, 20.7% juniors, and 28.6% seniors. *S*s were informed that participation was voluntary, and that all information provided would be anonymous. They received class research or extra credit for participation.

2.2 Design

A 2 X 3 independent groups design was employed in which *Ss* were exposed to the same scenario as was employed in Experiment 1. How much generalized others had been donating ($0.50, $5.00, $20.00) and target compliance (yes/no) were varied. *S*s were assigned randomly to conditions.

2.3 Instrumentation

After reading the scenario *Ss* were asked to report their perception of how much the target donated (applicable to those in the compliance condition only). Follow-up questions addressed the likely reasons for donating or not donating. They were also asked to report the percentage of people who would donate, whether or not they would donate, and the reasons for their choice.

The same two trained research assistants coded responses using the existing coding scheme with the addition of two categories: *others were donating* (compliance) and *others already donated* (reason for non-compliance). For the compliance attributions κ=.89; for the non-compliance attributions κ=.90. Responses were collapsed to assess the locus of causality using the same coding scheme as that employed in Experiment 1.

2.4 Procedure

The survey was administered online with *S*s being assigned randomly to conditions. Initially, they were asked to read the scenario to which they were assigned, and then to respond to all items. This procedure took approximately five minutes to complete.

2.5 Results

Although both the modal and median target donation judgment was $1 in the $0.50 condition, $5.00 in the $5.00 condition, and $20.00 in the $20.00 condition, mean values differed markedly, within condition variances were very large and heterogeneous, and distributions were markedly skewed as a result of a few extreme estimates in each of the donation conditions, including a donation of $1,000 in the $20.00 condition. To produce more reasonable mean estimates, amounts exceeding $20.00 were coded to equal $20.00. An analysis of variance performed on these data indicated evidence of differences in the means with the donation being highest in $20.00 condition ($M$=$14.88, SD=7.83) and more modest both in the $5.00 condition ($M$=$4.97, SD=2.83) and in the $0.50 condition ($M$=$4.63, SD=6.39), F(2,99)=31.89, p<.001. Scheffe, Tukey, and LSD tests indicated evidence of a statistically significant difference between the $20.00 condition and both the $5.00 and $0.50 conditions, but no evidence of the latter two differing from one another. Combining the $5.00 and $0.50 condition data and contrasting them with the $20.00 condition produced a modest sized effect (r=.17, d=.34).

Attributions also demonstrated evidence of differences across donation conditions with 71.9% of the attributions being internal in the $0.50 condition, 61.8% of the attributions being internal in the $20.00 condition, but only 42.9% of the attributions being internal in the $5.00 condition, $X^2(2, N=101)=6.03$, $p<.05$. Combining the $0.05 and $20.00 condition data and contrasting them with the $5.00 condition data showed evidence of a modest effect, $X^2(2, N=101)=6.03$, $p<.05$, r=-.23, OR=2.67.

The distribution of estimates of the percentage of people who would donate was approximately normal, ranging from 4% to 95% with a mean of 50.71% (SD=20.51%). An analysis of variance performed on these data produced a statistically significant, albeit modest, effect of the compliance induction such that when informed that the target had complied *S*s estimated this percentage to be higher (M=54.52%) than when informed that the target had failed to comply (M=46.89%), $F(1,198)=7.26$, $p<.01$, r=.19, d=.38. There was no evidence of a donation main effect or a compliance X donation non-additive effect.

For those *S*s in the compliance condition the estimated mean amount donated was multiplied by the estimated percentage donating to obtain a measure of the total amount of money that would be collected. These data were skewed positive, and ranged from $4 to $1,900 with a mean of $456.47 ($SD$=$473.32). An effect for the donation induction emerged with the amount being higher in the $20.00 condition ($M$=816.49, SD=514.96) than in the $5.00 condition ($M$=267.64, SD=167.65) and the $0.50 condition ($M$=286.38, SD=449.93). Scheffe, Tukey, and LSD tests indicated evidence of a statistically significant difference between the $20.00 condition and both the $5.00 and $0.50 conditions, but no evidence of the latter two differing from one another. Combining the $5.00 and $0.50 condition data and contrasting it with the $20.00 condition produced a substantial effect (r=.54, d=1.28).

When asked if they would donate, 74% of the *S*s indicated that they would. There was no evidence that these responses were affected by the compliance induction, the donation induction, or the non-additive combination of the two. When asked the reason for their compliance/non-compliance 96.6% of the *S*s provided either an internal attribution or an external attribution, and of these *S*s 52.8% reported an internal attribution. There was no evidence that these responses were affected by the compliance induction, the donation induction, or the non-additive combination of the two. But, in the main, internal attributions were provided by those who indicated that they would comply (67.3%) and external attributions were provided by those who indicated that they would not comply (91.8%).

2.6 Discussion

The fact that the percentage complying judgment was sensitive to the compliance induction indicates that *S*s attend carefully to the behavior of others when making such judgments. Moreover, Experiment 2 provides evidence consistent with the proposition that people's responses in LPF experiments are affected by impression management concerns.

As in Experiment 1, a substantial percentage of *S*s, approximately three of four, indicated that they would comply with the LPF request regardless of whether or not the target in the scenario complied and regardless of the amount donated. Furthermore, those who reported that they would comply were much more likely to make an internal attribution; whereas, those who reported that they would not comply were much more likely to make an external attribution.

Additionally, estimates of mean donation and total donation were sensitive to the donation induction with larger amounts being estimated in the $20.00 condition than in the $0.50 and $5.00 conditions, there being no evidence of a difference beyond that expected from sampling error for the latter two conditions. The attributions made concerning these donations were more internal than external when the donation was small ($0.50) and when it was large ($20.00), and slightly more external than internal when donations were likely more normative ($5.00). One explanation of this outcome is that when others give unusual amounts, small or large, people are

likely to generate reasons unique to the target for the donation, but when donations fall within a more usual range the explanations for them require less uniqueness.

3. GENERAL DISCUSSION

In both experiments *S*s were sensitive to the experimental inductions. In the first experiment the estimated compliance proportions were similar to those reported empirically by Andrews et al. (2008). In the second experiment estimated compliance proportions were sensitive to the compliance induction, and estimated donations were sensitive to the donation induction.

The data also indicated that a desire to make a favorable impression is a promising explanation for the LPF effect. In both experiments a substantial proportion of *S*s indicated that they would comply with a request that is decidedly pro-social. Furthermore, they tended to provide the more pro-social internal attributions for their compliance, but produce more external attributions for their reported non-compliance. Interestingly, they tended to provide the same external attributions for others who failed to comply, but they were substantially less likely to provide internal attributions for others who complied. These results suggest an interesting possibility; namely, that the self-serving bias operates in two ways in LPF experiments, on one hand serving to provide favorable reasons for one's own action/inaction and on the other serving to present oneself in a manner judged to be more favorable than others.

Notably, the results of these experiments involve self-report data, and the limitations of self-report measures are well known. Nevertheless, self-reports are necessary to collect attribution data, and attributions are central to an impression management explanation of the LPF. Consequently, self-reports are necessary to gain insight into this process. Moreover, there is reason to believe that these self-reports are likely to be veridical. People commonly generate reasons for their own and others' behavior, so their ability to do so in these scenarios is likely limited only in a minor way by the relatively sparse scenario descriptions. Additionally, these experiments do not produce conditions under which people are likely to desire to withhold their real explanations for their own and others' action. Certainly, *S*s may be unaware of their actual motives, but it is unlikely that they are unaware of their perceptions of their motives in scenarios such as those presented in these experiments. And, it is unlikely that they are unwilling to express them.

Nonetheless, these experiments are limited in an important way by what they attempted to accomplish. They were designed to assess the potential for impression management as a mediator of the LPF/control-compliance relationship. And, although the data are consistent with this possibility, it remains a possibility. To move beyond possibility requires that LPF experiments be designed and executed that test an impression manage explanation.

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