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# Better Think before Agreeing Twice The Effect of Mere Agreeing on Compliance

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The Effect of Mere Agreeing on Compliance

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## Abstract

Respondents in four studies were more willing to comply with a help request if they previously agreed with the person asking for help. In all four studies, the topic of agreement was unrelated to the issue for which help was requested. Mere agreeing increased subsequent compliance in a real life telephone survey (Study 1). Agreeing respondents perceived the person presenting the statements as more similar to them than disagreeing or neutral respondents (Study 2). Increased similarity following agreement mediated the effect of agreement on compliance (Study 3). Finally, the effect of mere agreeing on compliance disappeared when the agreement was made salient (Study 4).

Keywords: mere agreeing, similarity, compliance, help request, social influence

Whether it is to respond to a questionnaire, to sample a product, to visit a website, or to donate to a humanitarian organization ... almost daily people are confronted with compliance requests. For decades, social psychologists have been focusing on tools that boost compliance rates in this type of situations (e.g., Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Hornik, 1987; Nannberg & Hansen, 1994; Cialdini, 2006). Whereas seminal studies focused on persuasion through explicit social forces that were well within conscious awareness (e.g., Asch, 1965; Milgram, 1964), recent studies have focused on influence processes that are subtle, indirect, or unconscious (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Subtle influence processes possibly play an even larger role in compliance that is part of routine decisions (e.g., deciding to donate), often solicited for in time pressured and distracted circumstances (e.g., at the entrance of the supermarket). These (seemingly) low involving decisions are not always extensively thoughtful or deliberated, and perhaps often the result of efficient shortcuts. Although the consequences of saying yes can be substantial, a growing body of research indeed suggests that people like to rely on well-learned scripts or heuristics to guide their response (e.g., Burger, Soroka, Gonzago, Murphy, & Somervell, 2001; Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004; Cialdini, 2001; Garner, 2005). The present paper extends this latter line of research.

The contribution of this paper is threefold: we show that (1) initial agreement increases compliance with a subsequent but unrelated request for help, (2) perceived similarity is the mediator underlying this mere agreeing effect, and (3) the mechanism is (at least partly) driven by heuristic processing.

#### Mere agreeing, Similarity, and Compliance

The research we report demonstrates that the more participants initially agree on a set of statements (e.g., 'I get happy when the weather is nice'), the more they are willing to help the person who developed the statements afterwards (e.g., by conducting telephone calls for the

requester's master's thesis). Unlike the well-documented commitment and consistency strategies (see e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), designed to take advantage of people's basic desire to behave consistently with their prior commitments, in this research the initial agreement does not equal a prior commitment. For example in the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), which is known as a compliance strategy using the commitment and consistency principle, the procedure involves a gradual persuasion technique in which an initial, modest request is followed by a subsequent, larger request. In our research, however, we increase compliance rates by triggering agreement with statements, and thus *without* the aid of a preceding modest request. Moreover, the initial mere agreement and compliance request afterwards do not need to be related for the effect to occur.

Our research also demonstrates that an increase in perceived similarity between respondents and requester is (at least partly) responsible for the effect of mere agreeing on compliance. Because, if everyday conversation is guided by a desire to convey useful and correct information (Grice, 1975), respondents are likely to consider the statements they are presented with as indicative of the attitudes of the person who developed these statements and thus, agreement with these statement may be more likely to increase the perceived similarity with that person than disagreement or responding neutrally. As a result, compliance with a request from a person we 'easily' agree with may increase.

It is widely accepted that perceived similarity with a requester can lead to increased compliance. For instance, a subtle means by which requesters utilize the similarity principle for maximal influence is to dress in a manner similar to their targets' (Emswiller, Deaux, & Willits, 1971). In related research, perceived similarity between buyers and sellers has proven to result in greater likelihood of purchase (Woodside & Davenport, 1974), in more cooperation (Mathews, Wilson, & Monoky, 1972) and altruism (Deutsch & Kotik, 1978). Even when the apparent similarities are based on superficial matches such as shared names,

birthdays, or fingerprint types, they are capable of increasing compliance rates (Burger et al., 2004; Garner, 2005). Our studies suggest that initial agreement with statements from a requester is enough to increase the perceived similarity with the requester and thus boost compliance rates with a subsequent request for help.

In sum, we contend that triggering agreement from respondents can cause them to think of themselves as being similar to the person who developed the statements. Particularly, we think that agreeing respondents may perceive this person as being more similar to them than disagreeing or neutral respondents. Furthermore, we expect this increased similarity to boost the likelihood of helping the person who developed the statements subsequently.

#### Heuristic Processing and Corrective Influence

Compliance with a request from someone with whom we share a birthday or with whom we agree is, however, not more rational or justifiable than compliance with a request from someone with a different birthday or with whom we disagree. Thus, a thoughtful consideration of the costs and benefits of the help request should produce similar compliance rates between the experimental (e.g., agreeing) and control conditions. However, because participants often respond to requests with heuristic processing, they might react as if the request comes from a friend or acquaintance (Burger et al., 2004). That is, heuristic processing can lead to an increase in compliance when salient cues (e.g., same birthday or same attitudes) indicate that this is the kind of person we usually say ‘yes’ to. Next, if the increased compliance that we hypothesize in these studies is the result of heuristic processing, it implies that any condition that reduces the impact of heuristic processing, like raising awareness of the level of prior agreement, may reduce or eliminate the relation between mere agreeing and compliance (see e.g., Pollock, Smith, Knowles, & Bruce, 1998).

In social psychology several lines of research demonstrate that directing people’s attention towards a source potentially influencing their judgment leads to a correction of that judgment.

For instance, like in most priming studies, Strack et al. (1993) found that trait judgments based on ambiguous behavior were assimilated toward the primed trait categories. However, this was only the case if participants' attention was not directed towards the primes. In fact, if participants were reminded of the priming episode, contrast effects were obtained (see also Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987).

In this paper, we also apply the reminder procedure to investigate how the effect of mere agreeing on compliance changes when the agreement is made salient. If mere agreeing increases compliance as the result of heuristic processing, efforts to make respondents aware of the prior agreement should lead them to correct for this influence and thus to a decrease of the mere agreeing effect on compliance. On the other hand, if mere agreeing on statements changes cooperative behavior through an elaborative mechanism, then raising awareness, such as notifying the respondent of the fact that s/he agreed so many times with a stranger, may leave the effect unaffected or even boost it.

### Overview of Studies

In four studies we show that the more participants agree on a set of statements, the more they are willing to help the person posing the statements afterwards. In Study 1, we explored the effect of mere agreeing on compliance in the setting of a real life telephone survey, using both a correlational and an experimental research methodology. In Study 2, mere agreeing compared to mere disagreeing or responding 'neutrally' enhanced the respondents' perceived similarity with the requester. In Study 3, perceived similarity mediated the effect of mere agreeing on compliance with a subsequent request for help. In Study 4, finally, mere agreeing increases compliance at least partly as the result of heuristics processing: After being reminded of the level of prior agreement, participants corrected for this influence.

### Study 1: Exploration in the Field

The first study was conducted to explore our predictions in a real life setting. We tested

the effect of mere agreeing on compliance in a telephone survey. Particularly, we examined whether the level of agreement on statements would influence respondents' willingness to subscribe for participation in future questionnaires. For the data collection, we collaborated with a local market research company. In a correlational study (1a), we used secondary data and investigated whether the level of agreement with statements that were part of a larger market research correlated with compliance. In the experimental study (1b), the compliance and the setting was real life, but this time we manipulated the level of agreement by varying the set statements, just like we did in the following lab studies.

*Study 1A: correlational study using pre-existing statements*

*Method.* The first study was correlational on secondary data. Its purpose was to explore the link between mere agreeing and compliance outside the laboratory. Data were obtained from a local market research company that collected the data in 2005 for a well known publisher of newspapers. A telephone sample of 180 respondents was drawn by means of the Last-Birthday Method (e.g., Oldendick, Bishop, Sorenson, & Tuchfarber, 1988). This approach capitalizes on the fact that within households with multiple adults (i.e., more than one person who qualifies to serve as a respondent), selecting one adult on the basis of which has the most recent birthday is a random process. The sample was representative for the readers of this particular newspaper with respect to gender, age, family composition, social class, and region. The questionnaire contained 40 multiple choice items that explored all kinds of media related issues: reading habits, media interests, satisfaction with the newspaper.... As part of the original questionnaire, five statements probed the new smaller format of the newspaper (e.g., 'The new format encourages me to read more of the newspaper' and 'I do not like the new format, I prefer the old one'). Participants could (dis)agree on a five-point scale (ranging from 'I definitely do not agree' to 'I definitely agree'). At the end of the survey, after the demographics, the interviewers asked for the



participants' willingness to cooperate in future surveys, on other topics, organized by the market research company.

*Results and Discussion.* The average on the five (dis)agree statements proved to be significantly positively correlated with the respondents' willingness to leave their name and address for participation in future surveys ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ). In other words, the more participants agreed with the statements, the more likely they were to comply with the request for future participation in market research.

*Study 1B: experiment manipulating mere agreeing in a real life setting*

*Method.* A telephone sample of respondents was again drawn by means of the Last-Birthday Method (Oldendick et al., 1988). The sample was representative for the [country] population with respect to gender, age, family composition, social class, and region. Ninety-two participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: the agreeing condition or the control condition. In both conditions participants received eight statements to which they could (dis)agree on a three-point scale (agree = 1, neutral = 2, or disagree = 3). The agreeing condition consisted of eight items with a high probability of agreement. To keep the wording of the statements almost identical in both conditions, four out of eight presumably agreeing statements were reframed as to construct four presumably disagreeing items for the control condition. Hence, the control condition consisted of four presumably agreeing and four presumably disagreeing items (see appendix).

It was vital for the experimental test that the interviewers read the computerized script word by word, so we decided to run the survey with two rather inexperienced interviewers (one of each gender). Experienced interviewers are more likely to improvise and deviate from the script. In a brief introduction, participants were explained about the market research company and the purpose of the survey: Supposedly the market research company needed peoples' opinion on various topics in order to adjust their upcoming services. After

participants gave their permission to respond to the questionnaire, they (1) had to indicate whether or not they agreed on the eight statements on a three-point scale, (2) were asked to give their name and address if they were willing to participate in comparable surveys in the future (i.e. compliance measure), and (3) were asked for some demographics.

*Results and Discussion.* A manipulation check confirmed the significant difference between the level of agreement in the agreeing and the control condition,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 1.11 < M_{\text{control}} = 1.98$ ,  $t(90) = 27.45$ ;  $p < .0001$ . A logistic regression with the binary cooperation variable as the criterion, and experimental condition (agreeing vs. control), and interviewer (male versus female) as the categorical predictors, revealed a positive main effect of the experimental condition on the participants' willingness to cooperate in future surveys  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 37.5\%$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 31.8\%$ ,  $\beta = 0.854$ , LR  $\chi^2(1) = 2.66$ ,  $p = .05$  (one-sided). We also found a main effect of interviewer, LR  $\chi^2(1) = 9.51$ ,  $p < .005$  (i.e. the effect of agreeing was larger for the male than for the female interviewer), but there was no significant interaction between experimental condition and interviewer, LR  $\chi^2(1) < 1$ , *ns*. Also, respondents' gender did not exert any main or interaction effect and was therefore ignored in the analysis.

In sum, these two field studies explore the effect of mere agreeing on compliance with a subsequent request for help. The second study in particular illustrates the potential impact of incorporating mere agreeing statements in a real life telephone survey.

#### Study 2: The Effect of Mere Agreeing on Perceived Similarity

In Study 1B we only manipulated an agreeing and a control condition. However, to be able to investigate *how* mere agreeing influences perceived similarity with the requester and/or subsequent compliance, adding a disagreeing condition is essential. Therefore, Study 2 was set up to test whether mere agreeing, compared to mere disagreeing or responding neutrally, can cause people to believe that the person presenting the statements is more similar

to them. We manipulated the extent to which participants agreed or disagreed on eight statements. Next, we measured the perceived similarity with the requester.

*Method.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: the agreeing condition, the disagreeing condition, or the control condition. In the agreeing condition, participants received eight statements with respect to ecological behavior to which presumably they would all agree (e.g., ‘I sometimes commute by bike rather than by car’). In the disagreeing condition, participants received eight statements with respect to ecological behavior to which presumably they would all disagree (e.g., ‘I always use public transportation instead of my car’). In the control condition, like in Study 1B, participants received four agreeing and four disagreeing statements.

Forty-seven subjects were invited to participate in a number of unrelated computerized experiments in exchange for course credit. Participants came to the laboratory in groups of maximum eight people and were tested in individual cubicles. In the first computerized questionnaire, participants had to indicate for each of the eight statements whether or not they agreed on a seven-point scale (ranging from ‘I definitely do not agree’ to ‘I definitely agree’). Next, we looked at the extent to which participants associated or disassociated themselves with the person who made up the statements. Participants were instructed to imagine the person who had made up the statements when answering the following three items on a seven-point scale (Hafer, 2000): (1) ‘To what extent do you think this person is like you’, (2) ‘To what extent do you think this person and yourself share the same interests’, (3) Overall, how much do you identify with this person?. As an additional indicator of perceived similarity we also included a pictorial measure of interpersonal closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This measure of closeness uses seven pictures of two circles, one representing the self and the other representing the interviewer. The seven pictures differ with respect to the overlap between the two circles, ranging from no overlap to full overlap. We used the average

of the three association items and the interpersonal closeness measure as a proxy for the perceived similarity between the participants and their requester ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Results and Discussion.* A manipulation check confirmed that the overall agreement between the agreeing, control, and disagreeing condition, differed significantly in the predicted direction,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 5.7 > M_{\text{control}} = 4.2 > M_{\text{disagreeing}} = 3.3$ ;  $F(2, 44) = 21.43$ ;  $p < .0001$ . A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of the experimental condition (agreeing vs. control vs. disagreeing) on perceived similarity,  $F(2, 44) = 5.96$ ,  $p < .006$ : Participants in the agreeing condition perceived the interviewer as more similar than participants in the disagreeing ( $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 4.3$  versus  $M_{\text{disagreeing}} = 3.0$ ;  $t(30) = 3.4$ ;  $p < .003$ ) or the control condition ( $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 4.3$  versus  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.4$ ;  $t(29) = 2.6$ ;  $p < .02$ ). The disagreeing and the control condition did not significantly differ ( $M_{\text{disagreeing}} = 3.0$  versus  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.4$ ;  $t < 1$ ; *ns*). The results suggest that agreeing participants perceive the person presenting the statements as more similar to them than disagreeing or neutrally responding participants.

### Study 3: The Effect of Mere Agreeing on Compliance through Perceived Similarity

We conducted Study 3 to investigate whether the effect of mere agreeing on perceived similarity would spill over to the participants' compliance with a subsequent request for help. Because the disagreeing and the control condition did not significantly differ in Study 2, we decided to continue our research with only two conditions, the agreeing and the control.

*Method.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: the agreeing or the control condition. In the agreeing condition, participants received eight statements with a high probability of agreement (e.g., 'I get happy when the weather is nice'). In the control condition, like in Study 1B, participants received four items with a high probability of agreement (e.g., 'I get happy when the weather is nice') and four reframed items with a high probability of disagreement (e.g., 'I think doping in sports should be allowed'). Unlike in Study 2, however, the statements in Study 3 covered different kinds of

topics, not just ecological behaviors.

Participants were invited to the lab in groups of maximum eight people to take part in a series of unrelated computerized experiments. Sixty-four undergraduates participated in return for a participation fee. As in Study 2, upon entering the lab, participants first received the eight statements for which they had to indicate on a seven- point scale (ranging from ‘I definitely do not agree’ to ‘I definitely agree’) whether or not they agreed. After a filler task, the participants were instructed to imagine a scenario about the person who constructed the eight statements they had just judged. This person was said to be a student who needed some help for his/her master’s thesis. In the scenario, this student had to conduct about 100 surveys (15-item questionnaire) by telephone, as a part of a larger personality research. In order to do that s/he was looking for volunteers to make some of the phone calls. Participants could indicate whether they were willing to conduct more (1) or less (0) phone calls than the average participant.

We deliberately framed the cooperation measure as a choice between conducting more (1) or less (0) phone calls than the average number of phone calls people in general are willing to make (see e.g., Nelson and Norton 2004) because prior research revealed that quantified prosocial intention measures are fraught with noise. First, there is strong anchoring round numerical tags presented in a scale, which is an indication that many statements of value and belief are not directly retrieved from memory but rather are constructed online in response to a query (Chapman & Johnson, 1999). Second, because people have different norms of what is appropriate, a self-generated numeric value of their cooperation (e.g., the number of phone calls they intend to make) is unreliable (Briers, Pandelaere, & Warlop, 2006).

After the cooperation measure, we again administered the same perceived similarity scales as in Study 2. They allowed us to construct a proxy for the perceived similarity with the requester ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Next, because the mere agreeing manipulation might affect mood and

because mood can have an effect on cooperative behavior (e.g., Berkowitz, 1987), we measured the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Finally, participants had to rate themselves on a visual analogue scale (80 points) with endpoints ‘cooperative’ and ‘uncooperative’, to be able to control for their specific disposition to cooperate.

*Results and Discussion.* We conducted a logistic regression with the binary cooperation variable as the criterion, and experimental condition (agreeing vs. control) as the categorical predictor. We also controlled for negative mood, positive mood, and one’s disposition to cooperate. A manipulation check confirmed that the overall agreement between the agreeing and the control condition, differed significantly in the predicted direction,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 5.9 > M_{\text{control}} = 4.4$ ;  $t(62) = 12.26$ ,  $p < .0001$ . In line with our hypothesis, the probability of cooperation was higher in the agreeing condition than in the control condition,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 0.45$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 0.22$ ; LR  $\chi^2(1) = 4.27$ ,  $p < .04$ . To provide evidence that the cooperation effect was mediated at least in part by the perceived similarity with the interviewer, we conducted a mediation analysis using the technique recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, in addition to the significant effect of the experimental condition on the willingness to cooperate in the telephone scenario, there was a significant effect of experimental condition on perceived similarity with the interviewer,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 4.1$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.6$ ;  $F(1, 59) = 4.92$ ,  $p < .04$ . Second, perceived similarity and willingness to cooperate were positively related, LR  $\chi^2(1) = 9.42$ ,  $p < .004$ . Finally, when both experimental condition and perceived similarity were entered as predictors in the equation, perceived similarity still predicted cooperation significantly, LR  $\chi^2(1) = 6.92$ ,  $p < .009$ , whereas the effect of experimental condition on cooperation was attenuated, LR  $\chi^2(1) < 2$ ,  $p > .18$ . Further, using a version of the Sobel test recommended by Baron and Kenny, the reduction in the direct effect of the experimental condition on cooperation, was significantly different from zero, 95% CI  $[-.2121 < Z < -.0041]$ , providing support for mediation of perceived similarity.

Overall, the third study shows that the effect of mere agreeing on perceived similarity spills over to the participants' likelihood to comply with a subsequent request for help: Perceived similarity between participants and requester mediated the effect of mere agreeing on compliance.

#### Study 4: The Effect of Mere Agreeing on Compliance as a Result of Heuristic Processing

In Study 4 we examined the heuristic versus effortful nature of the underlying process that is responsible for the effect of mere agreeing on compliance. Specifically, we made the number of times a respondent had agreed salient. If mere agreeing changes compliance through an elaborative mechanism, then raising awareness of the prior agreement should not attenuate the effect, or may even increase the effect size. On the other hand, if the mechanism is largely heuristic, then raising awareness may give respondents the opportunity to actually correct for this automatic influence. A similar attenuation effect was found for the that's-not-all technique by Pollock and colleagues (1998).

*Method.* One hundred and forty-five participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 level of agreement (agreeing versus control) by 2 reminder condition (reminder versus no reminder) between-subjects design. Apart from the reminder manipulation, the procedure of Study 4 was identical to the one we used in Study 3. In the reminder condition, prior to the telephone scenario, we told participants that before they would have to answer some questions about the person who constructed the statements they had read, they would first be provided with an overview of their agreement with the eight statements. Next, the computer program automatically generated a table with an overview of their level of agreement with the eight statements. Only the agreement levels were given, the statements were not repeated. For example, if a person in the agreeing condition previously agreed on 6 out of 8 items, the computer program automatically generated a table with 6 times 'I agree' and 2 times 'I do not agree'. In the no reminder condition, like in Study 3, the

telephone scenario followed the eight statements without an overview of the agreement levels.

As in Study 3, we used a dichotomous cooperation measure: Participants could indicate whether they were willing to conduct more (1) or less (0) phone calls than the average participant.

*Results.* A manipulation check again showed a significant difference between the agreeing and the control condition in the predicted direction,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 6.0 > M_{\text{control}} = 4.3$ ;  $t(143) = 21.3$ ,  $p < .0001$ . We conducted a logistic regression with level of agreement (agreeing versus control) and reminder condition (reminder versus no reminder) as the categorical predictors, and the binary cooperation variable as the criterion. Again we controlled for negative mood, positive mood, and one's disposition to cooperate.

The analysis revealed a significant interaction between level of agreement and reminder condition,  $\text{LR } \chi^2(1) = 4.22$ ,  $p < .04$  (Figure 1). Without reminder, participants in the agreeing condition were more likely to cooperate than participants in the control condition,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 0.42$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 0.22$ ;  $\text{LR } \chi^2(1) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .05$ , replicating Study 3. In the reminder condition, however, the effect of agreeing on compliance disappeared,  $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 0.29$ ,  $M_{\text{control}} = 0.33$ ;  $\text{LR } \chi^2(1) < 1$ , *ns*.

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Insert figure 1 about here

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In addition, when we included the interaction between perceived similarity ( $\alpha = .81$ ) and reminder condition in the equation, we found a marginally significant interaction between reminder and the mediator,  $\text{LR } \chi^2(2) = 4.76$ ,  $p < .10$ . Perceived similarity was not related to compliance for participants who received an overview of their answers (i.e. in the reminder condition). However, for participants who were not reminded of their answers (like in Study 3), a mediation analysis (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986) indicated that perceived similarity



mediated the effect of mere agreeing on subsequent compliance. In particular, the following three conditions for mediation were supported in the condition without reminder (i.e. replicating Study 3): (1) the independent variable (agreeing versus control) significantly affected the mediator (i.e. similarity),  $F(1, 69) = 7.91, p < .007$ ; (2) the independent variable (agreeing versus control) affected the dependent variable (likelihood to make phone calls), LR  $\chi^2(1) = 4.17, p < .05$ ; (3) the mediator significantly affected the dependent variable, LR  $\chi^2(1) = 5.76, p < .02$ . Most importantly, when the mediator and the independent variable were both included in the analysis, the effect of perceived similarity on subsequent compliance remained, LR  $\chi^2(1) = 3.60, p < .06$ , whereas the effect of mere agreeing on compliance was attenuated, LR  $\chi^2(1) < 2, p > .22$ . Once again, a Sobel test indicated that the reduction in the direct effect of mere agreeing on compliance was significantly different from zero, 95% CI  $[-.3361 < Z < -.0052]$ , providing support for mediation of perceived similarity in the no-reminder condition.

We should note, however, that the interaction between level of agreement and reminder condition on perceived similarity was not significant,  $F(1, 138) < 1, ns$ . In other words, raising awareness of prior agreement did not attenuate the effect of mere agreeing on perceived similarity, but impeded this effect to spill over to an increase in compliance rates.

*Discussion.* Study 4 illustrates that the effect of mere agreeing on compliance is caused at least in part by heuristic, as opposed to effortful, processing. Reminding participants about the extent to which they previously agreed with an unknown other, apparently makes them aware of the superfluous nature of “feeling similar” and prompts them to correct for its effect. In the reminder condition, mere agreeing still enhanced perceived similarity with the requester, however, the increased perceived similarity with the requester was no longer sufficient to make respondents more compliant. Furthermore, among the participants who were not reminded of their level of agreement, we replicated the findings of Study 3: perceived

similarity between participant and requester mediated the effect of mere agreeing on the willingness to help the requester afterwards.

### General Discussion

Consistent findings across four studies demonstrated the applicability of mere agreeing statements as a subtle compliance increasing tool. In Study 1, we explored the effect of mere agreeing on compliance in the setting of a real life telephone survey, using both a correlational and an experimental research methodology. Study 2 illustrated agreeing respondents to perceive the person presenting the statements as more similar to them than disagreeing or neutral respondents. In Study 3, the more participants agreed with a set of statements, the more they were willing to help the requester afterwards. This effect was mediated by the perceived similarity between participants and requester. Study 4, finally, suggested that the effect of mere agreeing on compliance is primarily the result of heuristic processing: after notifying participants of the former mere agreeing the effect of mere agreeing on compliance disappeared.

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to show that ‘agreeing with someone’ eventuates in the assumption that this person resembles you. Next, as people often automatically respond to similar others in a manner that parallels their responding to friends or acquaintances (Burger et al., 2004), the increased perceived similarity with the requester may be sufficient to make respondents more compliant. This finding complements to the literature on influence processes that are more subtle, indirect, and unconscious (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). What is more, it contributes to a growing number of studies that find people typically responding to requests by relying on heuristic information processing (Chaiken & Trope, 1999). In sum, we like to introduce ‘mere agreeing with statements’ as a novel tool that subtly increases compliance with participation requests. In a telephone survey this increased cooperation can lead to subscribing as a panel member; in a charity context this

cooperation might contribute to an increased likelihood of donating money. Since a rather basal mechanism through similarity is driving the effect, we assume it to be a rather robust strategy. In fact, four consistent studies were able to show this robustness: The agreeing statements worked equally well in a computerized questionnaire among students, as in a real life telephone survey with respondents of all ages and social classes. Nevertheless, on a practical level, illustrating an increase in compliance through such a subtle technique as prior agreement, automatically brings about a ‘warning’ message for protecting ourselves from those who would exploit this effect against us.

We do have to emphasize that the process beneath the mere agreeing effect is different from the need for consistency explanation that has proven to be the driver of many compliance increasing tools such as the foot-in-the-door technique (FITD) or the low-ball technique (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). As previously said, a core assumption regarding consistency-based compliance techniques is that targets act consistently with their prior *commitments* like a modest request in the FITD technique or a first acceptable deal in the low-ball technique. In our research, however, we enlarged compliance rates by triggering agreement with statements, and thus *without* having participants to commit to a proceeding modest request or a first acceptable deal. Second, we fully acknowledge that responding eight times ‘I (definitely) agree,’ might be at least partly responsible for an automatic (or heuristic) ‘yes’ in a subsequent request for help. However, this need for consistency reasoning can not explain the mediation by perceived similarity in Study 3 and 4, nor the reminder by perceived similarity interaction in Study 4. Consistency-based compliance techniques are based on people’s strong need to enhance their self-concepts by behaving consistently with their actions, statements, commitments .... ; Similarity-based compliance techniques, on the other hand, are more based upon humans’ fundamental motivation to create and maintain meaningful social relationships with others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Hence, while we

cannot fully rule out the alternative need for consistently explanation for the mere agreeing effect on compliance, this research has provided evidence for a different mechanism that is based upon people's need to affiliate with 'similar' others.

We believe that this research holds important implications regarding survey and scale development. More specifically, we have to warn scale and survey developers not only to use 'agreeing' framed items in a Likert-like questionnaire (Likert, 1932). The Likert scale is a measurement scale with response categories usually ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' that requires respondents to indicate their degree of (dis)agreement with a series of statements related to the topic. In all our studies the only difference between the agreeing and the control condition was the amount of 'agreeing' framed statements: eight in the agreeing condition versus four in the control condition. This research demonstrates that using too much items with a high probability of agreement may influence the answers of subsequent questions, that is *if* participants want to use their answers to these questions to get 'approved' by a requester who seems to resemble them.

An avenue for future research concerns the scope of the effect. First, it is possible that the more respondents 'learn' about the person presenting the statements, for instance through visual appearance in a face-to-face context, the less likely it is that mere agreeing will enhance their willingness to help this person afterwards. Respondents' perceived similarity with the requester might then be based upon the actual perception they have with respect to this person's personality and looks, rather than upon the extent of prior agreement. Hence, the more respondents are 'familiar' with the requester, the less likely it is that prior agreement will lead to the assumption of 'resemblance' and thus, the less likely it is that prior agreement will lead to increased compliance with a help request.

Second, since the increased compliance that we demonstrated in the studies presented here, is the result of heuristic processing, any condition that triggers more systematic

processing may reduce or eliminate the effect. Salient cues in the situation often can force us into a more thoughtful consideration of information (Macrae & Johnston, 1998). One possibility is the size of the request (Pollock et al., 1998); that is, a request implying a large donation or a high effort for example might cause individuals to think more carefully about the request and the implications of saying ‘yes’ and thereby pull them into thoughtful processing. Next, under some circumstances the mere agreeing strategy might be too obvious for respondents. For example, increasing the number of agreeing statements (e.g., from 8 to 15), or using a very friendly or pushy requester to begin with, might cause participants to detect the mere agreeing technique, which then gives them the opportunity to (over)correct for the influence. Just like the mere-measurement effect disappears when the intention question is perceived as a persuasion attempt (Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004), the influence of mere agreeing on compliance should be attenuated if the respondents become suspicious about the level of agreement with a total stranger.

Finally, it might be interesting to investigate why mere disagreeing compared to responding neutrally does not *decrease* the perceived similarity with the person posing the statements. In previous research on the effect of similarity on compliance there usually was no dissimilar condition included and/or the control condition was conceptually very close to a dissimilar condition. For example, in the experiments of Burger et al. (2004) and Garner (2005), the name of the respondent was either similar or different (i.e. the control condition) from the requester. Using mere agreeing statements, however, it is theoretically possible to manipulate three different conditions, like we did in Study 2: mere agreeing, mere disagreeing, and a neutral (control) condition. In this one study, we found no difference between the mere disagreeing condition and the control condition. Further research is needed, however, to investigate whether this would always be the case and if so, what the underlying mechanism would be.

If people are really attracted to similar other because similar others validate people's own beliefs and attitudes (Byrne & Clore, 1970), it is possible that people tend to focus more on the presence of similarities than the presence of dissimilarities. In fact considerable evidence in social comparison literature suggests that similarity testing constitutes the default (Mussweiler, 2003). Thus, in most comparison situations, judges are likely to initially focus on ways in which the target and the standard are similar. Furthermore, it is also known that when encountering an unknown person, people tend to assume relatively high levels of similarity between that person and themselves. This phenomenon of assuming that others behave and believe like oneself has been studied in numerous settings and hence a variety of terms have been used to describe it, such as *attributive projection* (e.g., Holmes, 1968), *assumed similarity* (e.g., Cronbach, 1955), *egocentric attribution* (e.g., Heider, 1958), a *lack of empathy* in developmental research (e.g., Flavell, 1985), and *false-consensus effect* (e.g., Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). In sum, according to this perspective, people might have a tendency to look for similarities, and do not care about dissimilarities, because similarity to others provides them with consensual validation of their own attitudes. At the same time, this need for consensual validation, might lead the mere agreeing effect to be even stronger for people who have just experienced a self-concept threat. Comparable findings are illustrated in the literature on implicit egotism, specifically on the name letter effect (e.g., Brendl et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2002). For example, respondents' liking for name letters increased after writing about a personal flaw. Interestingly, if that is the case, very important decisions like donating a lot of money, which can be considered as threatening the self, might render people even *more* vulnerable to mere agreeing as a compliance increasing tool. Of course, large and important requests may trigger elaborative processing that may reduce the impact of the mere agreeing tool. Future research may examine moderators for the mere agreeing effect, but for now, triggering agreement seems a novel and promising tool for gaining compliance.

## Appendix

## Example of agreeing and disagreeing statements used in Study 1B

## A) Agreeing Condition

- 1 I think women should be paid equally as men
- 2 I sort my garbage
- 3 I get happy when the weather is nice
- 4 I think doping in sports should be forbidden
- 5 I think people generally pay too much attention to beauty
- 6 [X] is a cyclist with charisma
- 7 I think life has become more expensive with the introduction of the Euro
- 8 I can really look forward to having a nice meal

## B) Control Condition (italicized items are reframed compared to the items in the agreeing condition to yield 'disagreeing' items)

- 1 *I think women may be paid less than men*
- 2 I sort my garbage
- 3 I get happy when the weather is nice
- 4 *I think doping in sports should be allowed*
- 5 I think people generally pay too much attention to beauty
- 6 *[X] is a cyclist with no charisma*
- 7 *I think life has become less expensive with the introduction of the Euro*
- 8 I can really look forward to having a nice meal

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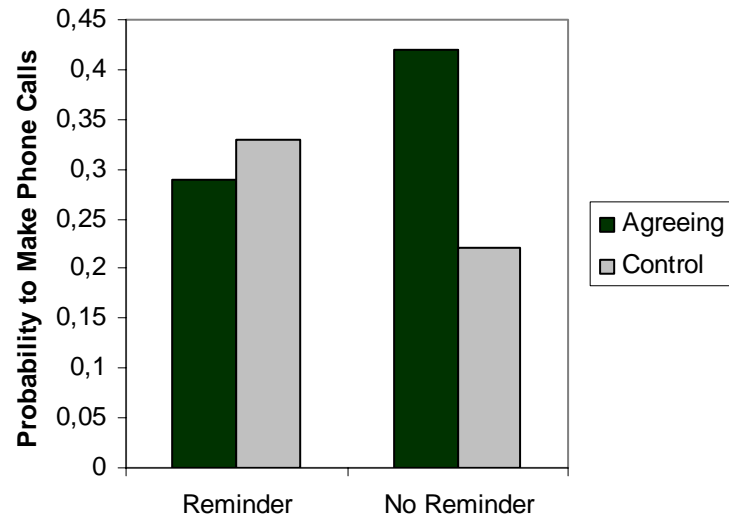
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**FIGURE 1**

STUDY 4: MEANS FOR THE PROBABILITY TO MAKE PHONE CALLS IN THE AGREEING AND CONTROL CONDITION FOR REMINDER AND NO REMINDER



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