

Short Research Note

Tabacco deprivation: The foot-in-the-door technique versus the low-ball technique*

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Abstract

The present experiment was aimed at comparing the efficiency of the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman and Fraser, 1966) to that of the low-ball technique (Cialdini Bassett, Cacioppo and Miller, 1978). Subjects were requested to abstain from smoking for 18 hours. The results demonstrated the superiority of the low-ball technique. An original method of operationalizing the low-ball technique (the use of intermediate behaviours) is presented herein.

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper we wished to compare the efficiency of two compliance without pressure techniques: the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman and Fraser, 1966), and the low-ball technique (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett and Miller, 1978). These two techniques enable one to increase the probability that subjects will agree to accomplish a given request, in the absence of any obvious source of pressure (*cf.* Beauvois and Joule, 1981). In the foot-in-the-door technique, the subject is led to perform an initial low-cost behaviour (for example: display a small sign in the front window of their home) before being requested to perform the target behaviour (for example: put a large ugly billboard in their front yard). In the low-ball technique, the subject is led to immediately accept performing the target behaviour, without knowing the full cost of the behaviour. It is only after the subject has accepted to accomplish the behaviour that the full cost is revealed (for example: a student is first asked to participate in an experiment, and, after having agreed, he is then informed that the experiment will take place at 7.00 a.m.).

The two techniques rest upon the same principle: commit the subject to performing a target behaviour by having him accept to perform an initial request that is more or less linked to the target behaviour. They differ in the respect that in the low-ball technique subjects are requested to perform only one behaviour (the initial and the

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final request both pertain to the target behaviour), whereas in the foot-in-the-door technique subjects are asked to accomplish two behaviours (the initial and the final request pertain to distinct behaviours).

In so far as the degree of cognitive commitment to the performance of the target behaviour is greater in the low-ball than in the foot-in-the-door technique, we expected more compliance in the former than in the latter¹.

Experiment

In the present experiment, students were requested to stop smoking for 18 hours (from six o'clock in the evening until noon the following day) for a small monetary compensation (30 French francs).

Seven conditions were included: three foot-in-the-door conditions, three low-ball conditions, and a control condition.

Foot-in-the-door

In the foot-in-the-door conditions, the experimenter first made an initial request. A student that smoked was asked—either to answer a short questionnaire (condition 1: foot-in-the-door/with questionnaire)—or to perform concentration tasks for few minutes (condition 2: foot-in-the-door/tests without deprivation)—or to perform the same tests after having stopped smoking for two hours (condition 3: foot-in-the-door/tests with deprivation). The request relative to the target behaviour was formulated immediately afterwards by the same experimenter.

Low-ball

In the three low-ball conditions, the initial request was identical: a student that smoked was led to agree to participate in an experiment for which he would be paid 50 francs. The request relative to the target behaviour was emitted a few days later by the same experimenter. The subject was asked to uphold his decision to participate in the experiment, after having been informed of the full cost: (1) a decrease in payment from 50 to 30 francs²; (2) the agreement to stop smoking for 18 hours. In the first condition, this information was given to the subject over the phone before he was asked to set a date for participation (condition 4: low-ball/direct information). In the second condition, the information was also given over the phone, but only after a date of participation had been solicited and obtained from the subject (condition 5: low-ball/indirect information). In the last condition, this information was not provided over the phone at the time the appointment was set but rather at the last minute when the subject arrived at the laboratory (condition 6: low-ball/accomplished act).

¹ 'It was our feeling that the procedural difference between the two techniques would empower the low-ball technique as the more effective compliance inducer. That is, an individual who has already decided to perform the target behaviour may experience a greater sense of cognitive commitment to the performance of that behaviour than would an individual who has already decided to perform a different, though related action' (Cialdini *et al.*, 1978, p. 466).

² This information, concerning the reduction in payment, was aimed at reducing the importance of outside pressures at the last minute, and thereby increasing the subject's cognitive commitment.

Control

In this condition, no initial request was made. the experimenter straight-forwardly asked subjects to perform the target behaviour.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was collected from a subject pool 150 students (both male and female), mean age being 20.7 years, who smoked more than 15 cigarettes a day and who had never had a course in psychology.

Two dependent variables were considered: (1) verbal compliance; determined by the number of subjects having accepted to perform the target behaviour; (2) behavioural compliance, determined by the number of students that actually stopped smoking for 18 hours (or at least who attested to having done such).

Verbal compliance

As concerns verbal compliance, all of the experimental conditions except condition 1 differed significantly from the control condition (12.5 per cent): condition 2 (50 per cent), $\chi^2 = 5.40$, $p < 0.02$; condition 3 (50 per cent), $\chi^2 = 5.06$, $p < 0.05$; condition 4, 5, 6 (85 per cent, 91.3 per cent, and 95.2 per cent respectively), $\chi = 12.61$, 14.28 and 15.00, $p < 0.001$ in all cases.

Behavioural compliance

In respect to behavioural compliance, conditions 3, 4, 5, and 6 (44.4 per cent, 65 per cent, 69.6 per cent and 90.5 per cent respectively) differed significantly from the control condition (4.2 per cent): $\chi^2 = 7.78$, $p < 0.01$, and $\chi^2 = 12.68$, 13.88 and 18.77, $p < 0.001$ in all cases.

Table 1. Foot-in-the-door and low-ball: Verbal compliance and behavioural compliance (abstention from smoking for 18 hours)

Conditions	Verbal compliance	Behavioural compliance
Control condition	12.5% (3/24)	4.2% (1/24)
Condition 1: foot-in-the-door/ with questionnaire	25% (5/20)	10% (2/20)
Condition 2: foot-in-the-door/ tests without deprivation	50% (12/24)	16.7% (4/24)
Condition 3: foot-in-the-door/ tests with deprivation	50% (9/18)	44.4% (8/18)
Condition 4: low-ball/ direct information	85% (17/20)	65% (13/20)
Condition 5: low-ball/ indirect information	91.3% (21/23)	69.6% (16/23)
Condition 6: low-ball/ accomplished act	95.2% (20/21)	90.5% (19/21)

n's are given in parentheses.

Low-ball versus the foot-in-the-door technique

As expected, the low-ball technique revealed to be globally more effective than the foot-in-the-door technique, in terms of both verbal and behavioural compliance. For these two criterion, the three low-ball conditions indeed revealed to be more effective than the three foot-in-the-door conditions: 41.94 per cent compared to 90.62 per cent ($\chi^2 = 11.19$, $p < 0.001$) for verbal compliance, and 22.58 per cent compared to 75 per cent ($\chi^2 = 17.58$, $p < 0.001$) for behavioural compliance. It can also be noted that the most efficient low-ball condition (condition 6) differed, though somewhat weakly, from the most efficient foot-in-the-door condition (condition 3): $\chi^2 = 3.22$ for verbal compliance and $\chi^2 = 2.96$ for behavioural compliance ($p < 0.10$ in both cases).

Low-ball/accomplished act: a new low-ball procedure

Let us look at condition 6 (low-ball/accomplished act), which turned out to be the most efficient of all conditions. In contrast to the classical low-ball technique (Cialdini *et al.*, 1978), the low-ball/accomplished act procedure implies the performing of one (or several) intermediate behaviour(s) between the initial and the final request, for example, in the present study: the various more or less costly behaviours that the subject had to accomplish in order to participate in the experiment (first fill out and sign a questionnaire, then set an appointment by phone, and finally actually go to the laboratory). Whereas in the classical low-ball technique the experimenter only attempts to obtain a positive response from the subject concerning the initial request, in the low-ball/accomplished act procedure the experimenter attempts as well to have the subject perform one or several intermediate behaviours. In this sense, it is clear that conditions 4 and 5 pertain more to the low-ball/accomplished act procedure than to the classical low-ball technique since, in both conditions, agreeing to the first request during subject recruiting implied accepting to immediately perform an intermediate behaviour: the filling out and signing of a short questionnaire. Moreover, in condition 5, subjects were led to perform another intermediate behaviour at the time contact was made by phone (noting an appointment in their datebook). Thus, in an attempt to discover the best possible way to operationalize the low-ball technique, we were led to somewhat modify its principle through the use of intermediate behaviours. It can be questioned whether each of these intermediate behaviours may have somewhat the same status as the first behaviour (of low cost) in the foot-in-the-door technique, and consequently if conditions 4 and 5, and necessarily 6, do not thus pertain to both the low-ball and the foot-in-the-door technique. Whatever be the case, these intermediate behaviours are aimed at engaging subjects to an even greater extent in their acceptance of the first request by having them commit themselves further³. It can be concluded that it will be all the more difficult for them to refuse to perform the final request—and thus to backout—the greater their commitment. Clearly, in this experiment, subjects were led to commit themselves the most in

³ This type of development indeed conforms to the commitment theory advanced by Kiesler (1971): 'Consider an experiment in which the subject is induced to carry out a series of small relatively innocuous behaviours. Although each of these acts may have little importance for the individual and not cause him to think twice while performing it, the collection of behaviours may have an intense freezing action' (p. 72–73).

condition 6. Hence, it is not surprising that the highest level of compliance was obtained in this condition. In other words, and contrarily to the foot-in-the-door technique with which a curvilinear relationship has been observed between the level of acceptance of the final request and the cost of the initial request (Miller and Suls, 1977), it appears as though in the low-ball/accomplished act procedure the level of acceptance of the final request can be considered as a direct function of the cost of the intermediate behaviour(s) that the subject led to perform. This indeed appears to be an area worthy of further research.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette expérience a été réalisée pour comparer l'efficacité de la technique du pied-dans-la-porte (Freedman et Fraser, 1966) et de celle de l'amorçage (Cialdini, Bassett, Cacioppo et Miller, 1978). Il s'agissait d'amener des sujets fumeurs à s'arrêter de fumer durant 18 heures. Les résultats montrent la supériorité de la technique de l'amorçage. Une opérationnalisation originale de la technique de l'amorçage (recours à des comportements intermédiaires) est proposée.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das vorliegende Experiment verfolgt das Ziel, die Effizienz der "foot-in-the-door"-Technik (Freedman and Fraser 1966) und der "low-ball"-Technik zu vergleichen. Die Vpn wurden aufgefordert, 18 Stunden lang vom Rauchen abzusehen. Die Ergebnisse zeigten die Überlegenheit der "low-ball"-Technik. Eine neuartige Methode zur Operationalisierung dieser Technik (die Nutzung von intermediaten Verhalten) wird dargestellt.