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(Mis)Understanding Our Influence over Others: A Review of the Underestimation-of-Compliance Effect

Abstract

I review a burgeoning program of research examining people's perceptions of their influence over others. This research demonstrates that people are overly pessimistic about their ability to get others to comply with their requests. Participants in our studies have asked more than 14,000 strangers a variety of requests. We find that participants underestimate the likelihood that the people they approach will comply with their requests. This error is robust (it persists across various samples and requests) and substantial (on average, requesters underestimate compliance by 48%). We find that this error results from requesters' failure to appreciate the awkwardness of saying "no" to a request. In addition to reviewing evidence for the underestimation-of-compliance effect and its underlying mechanism, I discuss some factors that have been found to strengthen, attenuate, and reverse the effect. This research offers a starting point for examining a neglected perspective in influence research: the psychological perspective of the influence *source*.

Keywords

underestimation-of-compliance effect, influence research, perception

Disciplines

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Comments

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Running Head: UNDERESTIMATING COMPLIANCE

(Mis)Understanding Our Influence over Others:
A Review of the Underestimation-of-Compliance Effect

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Forthcoming in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*

ABSTRACT

I review a burgeoning program of research examining people's perceptions of their influence over others. This research demonstrates that people are overly pessimistic about their ability to get others to comply with their requests. Participants in our studies have asked more than 14,000 strangers a variety of requests. We find that participants underestimate the likelihood that the people they approach will comply with their requests. This error is robust (it persists across various samples and requests) and substantial (on average, requesters underestimate compliance by 48%). We find that this error results from requesters' failure to appreciate the awkwardness of saying "no" to a request. In addition to reviewing evidence for the underestimation-of-compliance effect and its underlying mechanism, I discuss some factors that have been found to strengthen, attenuate, and reverse the effect. This research offers a starting point for examining a neglected perspective in influence research: the psychological perspective of the influence *source*.

We are constantly influenced by others—other people regularly goad us into doing, saying, believing, and buying things. Thanks to an extensive and enduring literature on conformity, compliance, and persuasion, social psychologists have a fairly good understanding of what makes us susceptible to others' influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). But, just as significantly, we are constantly *influencing* other people—getting *them* to do, say, believe, and buy things. Yet relatively little research has focused on the psychological perspective of the person doing the influencing.

In this article, I review a small, but growing, area of research examining people's perceptions of their influence over others. Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have asked participants in our studies to make a variety of requests of more than 14,000 strangers: Can I borrow your phone? Would you sponsor me for a race? Will you lie for me? In each case, before they made these requests, we asked participants their expectations of compliance. We then compared participants' predictions of compliance to actual compliance. Our findings reveal that people are overly pessimistic about their ability to get others to comply with their requests. By examining people's intuitions about the effectiveness of their own influence attempts, this research offers a starting point for exploring the important and largely neglected question of how people view the influence process from their role as wielders of social influence over others.

THE UNDERESTIMATION-OF-COMPLIANCE EFFECT

One of the most basic influence tactics is a direct request. To procure a higher salary, we can ask our boss for a raise. To garner support for our cause, we can ask people to sign a petition. Yet the simplicity of this tactic belies the dread many people feel at the prospect of asking. Potential requesters stress about imposing on others, feel self-conscious about revealing their

shortcomings, and fear the worst—rejection (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Milgram, 1977).

However, research by my colleagues and me suggests this latter concern is often unfounded.

Imagine the following situation: You need to make a phone call, but your cellphone is dead. Your only option is to approach random strangers one by one in order to borrow a phone. How many people will you need to approach before someone agrees to loan you his phone? In one study, we asked participants to get three random strangers to agree to this very request. But first, we asked them to predict the number of people they would need to approach to get three people to agree. Participants predicted they would need to ask an average of 10.1 people. In actuality, they had to ask an average of 6.2 people. In other words, approximately one out of every two people they approached agreed to loan our participants their phones; participants had overestimated the number of people they would need to ask by more than 60% (Flynn & Lake, 2008).

We have found the same pattern of results—and similarly large effects—when we have instructed participants to persuade strangers to fill out a questionnaire (Bohns et al., 2011), provide intricate directions to a specified location (Flynn & Lake, 2008), or commit a small act of vandalism (Bohns, Roghanizad & Xu, 2014). In one study, 91 participants in a charity run predicted they would need to ask an average of 210.3 people to reach their fundraising goals (ranging from \$2,100 to \$5,000). In fact, they only had to ask an average of 122.2 people—88 fewer than they expected (Flynn & Lake, 2008). Table 1 summarizes 12 studies from five recent articles documenting this phenomenon across a diverse range of requests. The upshot is that the underestimation-of-compliance effect is both large and robust.

WHY DO PEOPLE UNDERESTIMATE COMPLIANCE?

Why do people err so considerably when predicting the likelihood that others will comply with their requests? We have found that this phenomenon is the result of requesters' failure to appreciate how uncomfortable it would be for targets to say "no" to a request. A target's refusal would constitute a "face-threatening act," potentially calling into question the requester's trustworthiness or the appropriateness of the request: refusing to turn over one's cellphone could imply one does not trust the requester to give it back; refusing to engage in an act that seems ethically questionable could be seen as an attack on the requester's morality (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1971). In essence, by refusing a request one risks offending one's interaction partner—a violation of intrinsic social norms that would ultimately embarrass both parties (Sabini, Siepmann & Stein, 2001). As a result, many people agree to things—even things they would prefer not to do—simply to avoid the considerable discomfort of saying "no."

Yet people tend to underestimate the extent to which others' behavior is affected by such concerns. Although the motivation to avoid embarrassment drives much of social behavior, outside observers consider this motivation to be trivial and discount its impact on others' behavior and decisions (Bohns & Flynn, 2010; Sabini et al. 2001; Van Boven, Loewenstein & Dunning, 2005). Accordingly, when requesters estimate the likelihood that others will comply with their requests, they tend to focus on more tangible information, such as the instrumental costs (e.g., time, money) a target would incur by agreeing to a request, and largely ignore a target's concerns with embarrassment. The erroneous belief that a target can easily say "no" to a request if she is so inclined leads requesters to exaggerate the likelihood of rejection. Indeed, in our studies we have found that the underestimation-of-compliance effect is reliably explained by

requesters' paltry estimates of how awkward targets would feel saying "no" (Bohns et al., 2011; Flynn & Lake, 2008; Newark, Flynn & Bohns, 2014).

FACTORS THAT DO AND DO NOT IMPACT THE UNDERESTIMATION- OF-COMPLIANCE EFFECT

The psychological mechanism described above has informed our search for factors that might attenuate or reverse this robust effect. It also explains why the effect persists across so many variations of the original paradigm: It is awkward to say "no" to a request regardless of what or how big it is (within reason). However, requesters, oblivious to how uncomfortable it is for targets to say "no" to *any* request, think changing various features of the request will have a greater effect on compliance than is actually the case. Below I describe some of the experimental variations we have conducted and the factors that have been found to impact—and not to impact—the underestimation-of-compliance effect.

Request Size & Type

We have found that the underestimation-of-compliance effect persists for requests of different sizes, as well as for requests people find particularly discomfiting, such as ethically dubious requests. In one study, half of our participants asked strangers to complete a brief one-page questionnaire, while the other half asked them to complete an extensive ten-page questionnaire—a tenfold increase in the time commitment for those who complied. Requesters who were randomly assigned to make the larger request predicted lower levels of compliance than those assigned to make the smaller request. However, actual compliance was unaffected by request size; targets found it equally difficult to say "no" to both requests (Flynn & Lake, 2008).

In another study, participants asked strangers to vandalize a purported library book by writing the word “pickle” in pen on one of the pages. A number of individuals approached by our participants voiced their discomfort, expressing concern with getting into trouble, referring to the request as vandalism, and conveying a general reluctance to participate. Nevertheless, more than 64% agreed to vandalize the book—a far cry from requesters’ prediction of 28% (Bohns et al., 2014).

Repeated Requests

Classic research has explored the effect of repeated requests on actual compliance, finding that an initial refusal can, under certain circumstances, pave the way for future compliance (Cialdini et al., 1975). In contrast, we have explored requesters’ *intuitions* about the effect of repeated requests on compliance. We have found that requesters mistakenly assume someone who says “no” to an initial request is inevitably more likely to say “no” to a subsequent request.

In one study, participants approached strangers and asked them to fill out a questionnaire. Regardless of whether their targets said “yes” or “no” to this initial request, participants asked them to complete another request—to mail a letter. Although participants thought the compliance rate for targets who refused the initial request would go down 16%, compliance rates actually went *up* 10% following a refusal (Newark et al., 2014). In contrast to requesters’ expectations, targets found it just as uncomfortable—seemingly more so—to refuse someone a second time.

Incentives for Compliance

People often offer incentives when making requests. For example, someone might offer gas money in exchange for a ride. We have found that offering money in exchange for

compliance mitigates the underestimation-of-compliance effect. In one study, participants who offered strangers dollars to vandalize a library book were less likely to underestimate compliance than those who offered no incentives or non-monetary (candy) incentives (Bohns, Newark, & Xu, 2015).

Additional data revealed that monetary incentives affected requesters' reactions to the task more so than targets'. Despite the fact that requesters felt more comfortable and confident when offering money in exchange for compliance, the people they approached were just as willing to comply for free.

Culture

We have found that the underestimation-of-compliance effect is more pronounced in individualistic cultures, such as the United States, than collectivistic cultures, such as China. When participants in China and the United States asked strangers to complete a questionnaire, Chinese participants were less likely than American participants to underestimate compliance (Bohns et al. 2011).

These cross-cultural differences were explained by the greater consideration paid by Chinese participants to the awkwardness targets would experience saying “no” to their requests. This finding is consistent with the presumed tendency of Americans to emphasize the role of individual choice over social pressure and embarrassment when explaining others' behavior (Sabini et al., 2001).

Request Directness & Medium

It is much more awkward—and therefore less likely—for someone to say “no” to a request asked directly and face-to-face than one asked indirectly or over email. However, we

have found that requesters are largely oblivious to this fact. When we have varied request directness by manipulating how a request is posed—either indirectly by dropping hints (“I could really use a phone right now...”), or via a direct request (“Will you lend me your phone?”)—we have found that targets say they would be more likely to comply with a direct request. However, requesters *expect* indirect requests to be more effective (Flynn & Lake, 2008).

We have found similar effects for the medium through which a request is made. In one study, participants asked strangers to fill out a questionnaire in person, or handed out flyers printed with the same request (“Will you fill out a questionnaire?”). Participants who asked targets to complete a questionnaire face-to-face underestimated compliance, but participants who made the same request using flyers overestimated compliance (Flynn & Lake, 2008). In another study, participants similarly overestimated compliance when asking strangers to fill out a questionnaire over email (Roghanizad & Bohns, 2015). Altogether, the manner by which a request is made seems to impact the underestimation-of-compliance effect in important ways.

Other Factors

There are numerous other potential moderators of the underestimation-of-compliance effect. One factor of interest is gender (Eagly, 1983); however, we have found no reliable gender effects in our studies. Another potential moderator is requesters’ relationship to their targets, including attributes such as power and closeness. Despite the large sample of people our participants have approached, most of their targets have been strangers.

This latter factor may help to explain a remaining puzzle: Given that most people have ample experience asking for things, why are they so bad at predicting compliance? One possibility is that in daily life, we typically make requests of people whom we expect will say,

“yes,” such as close friends. Consequently, we are rarely surprised when others comply with our requests, and thus have no cause to update our preconceptions about the likelihood of compliance in general.

CONCLUSION: THE INFLUENCER’S PERSPECTIVE

How well do we understand the influence we have over others? Can we tell when another person feels uncomfortable with our request, but feels she can’t say “no”? Do we know how much more effective our persuasive appeal is likely to be face-to-face rather than over email? Do we realize when our playful suggestion emboldened someone to engage in a behavior we didn’t mean to condone?

Research on social influence has been largely silent on such questions, focusing on understanding the psychology of *influencees*, the targets or objects of various forms of influence, while mostly neglecting the perspective of *influencers*. When perspectives beyond the influencee are considered, they are typically those of neutral observers asked to predict what the “average” person is likely to do or explain why some mysterious individual did what they did, a task that is different both cognitively and motivationally from predicting one’s own influence over another person [Dunning & Helzer, 2014; see Gilbert & Jones (1986) for a noteworthy exception]. Similarly, when people are asked to forecast their own performance on a task, such tasks typically do not rely on the kinds of perspective-taking skills necessary to predict one’s capacity for influence (Zell & Krizan, 2014).

The research reviewed here offers a rare glimpse into the influencer’s view of the influence process. My colleagues and I hope researchers will continue to explore this meaningful perspective and identify not only the factors that make us more or less influential, but also the factors that make us more or less *aware* of our influence over others.

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