



Being inconsistent and compliant: The moderating role of the preference for consistency in the door-in-the-face technique[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 February 2016

Received in revised form 4 July 2016

Accepted 6 July 2016

Available online 13 July 2016

Keywords:

Door-in-the-face technique

Social influence

Compliance

Preference for consistency

Individual differences

ABSTRACT

Preference for consistency (PFC) refers to individual differences in the desire to be congruent, to be perceived as such, and the preference for others to be consistent. There are studies that show PFC as a moderator of consistency-based social influence strategies. The present article proposes PFC as a moderator of the social influence technique known as “door-in-the-face” (DITF), and suggests that DITF effectiveness also depends on consistency processes. The results of our study ($N = 191$) indicate that although the DITF effect was generally strong, the technique was most effective when PFC was low. These results are in line with theoretical assumptions that posit a preference for consistency. Low PFC individuals prefer change and unpredictability, and therefore tend to display inconsistent behavior. As a consequence, their refusal of an initial request leads to a higher probability that they will consent to the target one. These results are the first to show individual differences in DITF and reliance on (in)consistency in the effectiveness of the technique.

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1. Introduction

There are few theories in the history of psychology that have generated as much interest, inspired as much empirical research, and acquired as many followers as the consistency theories of human motivation (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1953). Although there are a large number of studies supporting the assumption that people feel a need to be consistent with their previous behaviours and attitudes, this is not always the case. It has been shown, for example, that people addicted to nicotine do not always believe that smoking is reasonable: on the contrary, they frequently associate their addiction with a greater risk of getting cancer (Quaife, McEwen, Janes, & Wardle, 2015). Cialdini, Trost, and Newsom (1995) claimed that the reason why consistency effects are sometimes difficult to obtain is due to the potential moderator that is individual differences in the preference for consistency. These researchers developed a preference for consistency (PFC) scale measuring variation in the desire to both be a consistent person and to be seen as such. Individuals who score high on PFC value personal congruency, while, in contrast, those who score low on PFC seem to prefer spontaneity, change and unpredictability in their responses. A series of studies has provided strong support for the validity of the PFC scale (Bator & Cialdini, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1995;

Guadagno, Asher, Demaine, & Cialdini, 2001; Nail et al., 2001; for review see: Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010).

Cialdini et al. (1995, see also Guadagno et al. (2001)) indicated that high PFC participants were more susceptible to the foot-in-the-door strategy (FITD), a technique that consists of getting a person to fulfil an initial small request, which then triggers compliance with a greater request (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). The FITD is frequently discussed within the broader context of social influence techniques, and its procedure and effectiveness is compared with the door-in-the-face (DITF) strategy (e.g. Cann, Shelman, & Elkes, 1975; Dillard, 1991; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986; Goldman, 1985; Pascual & Guéguen, 2005; Rodafinos, Vucevic, & Sideridis, 2005; Tybout, Sternthal, & Calder, 1983). The door-in-the-face (DITF) strategy involves making a costly initial large request that the addressee will refuse, and then following it with a second, less costly target request (Cialdini et al., 1975). In the literature so far the emphasis regarding the DITF mechanism has been narrowed to either reciprocity (Cialdini et al., 1975; Hale & Laliker, 1999; Turner, Tamborini, Limon, & Zuckerman-Hyman, 2007) or guilt (O’Keefe & Figge, 1997, 1999). Since consistency is argued to be one of the core mechanism underlying the FITD strategy (e.g. Petrova, Cialdini, & Sils, 2007), we suggest that it may also play an important role in the door-in-the-face technique, a mirror strategy to FITD.

The DITF strategy is one of the few social influence techniques eliciting compliance (for review see Dolinski, 2016; Pratkanis, 2007) which has received such extensive attention in the social psychology literature (e.g. Feeley, Anker, & Aloe, 2012; Gamian-Wilk & Lachowicz-Tabaczek, 2009; Henderson & Burgoon, 2013; Spiewak,

[☆] The paper was prepared on the basis of Katarzyna Cantarero's student project.

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2002). In conducting studies on the DITF technique, researchers have aimed mainly at examining the mechanisms underlying its effectiveness (e.g. O'Keefe & Figge, 1997). Although some moderators of DITF have been identified (e.g. Cann et al., 1975; Dillard et al., 1984; Fennis & Janssen, 2010; Turner et al., 2007), to date little attention has been focused on individual differences and DITF effectiveness.

It has previously been demonstrated that individuals who prefer consistency are more susceptible to the FITD strategy (Cialdini et al., 1995; Guadagno et al., 2001). As Guadagno and Cialdini (2010, p. 157) conclude, "the studies examining compliance with consistency-based social influence tactics have demonstrated that preference for consistency does significantly moderate behavior, with high-PFC individuals demonstrating consistency in behavior and low-PFC individuals demonstrating no consistency in behavior." The aim of the present study was to focus attention on compliance with an inconsistency-based social influence tactic such as DITF. While the FITD strategy is based on an "agree the initial request – agree the target request" sequence, DITF assumes the opposite pattern of responses in the form of "refuse the initial request – agree the target request". Although high PFC is linked to compliance with the FITD "agree – agree" sequence, we anticipate that individuals with low PFC will be more vulnerable to the DITF "refuse – agree" sequence. More specifically, those demonstrating high PFC should seek to be consistent in their behavior, and we expect that should they reject once, they will be more prone to reject again. The opposite should hold for people who do not personally value consistency and coherence but prefer change and unpredictability (i.e. those low in PFC). Should they reject an initial difficult request, they should be less prone to be consistent and to reject for the second time, making them more likely to be compliant with the target request. We therefore predicted that preference for consistency would play the role of moderator in complying with the DITF strategy. Hence:

Hypothesis: Preference for consistency will moderate compliance with the DITF strategy.

We hypothesize that the lower the preference for consistency, the higher the effectiveness of the door-in-the-face technique. Specifically, we tested whether compliance *increased* as a function of a low preference for consistency in the DITF technique.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and design

The participants were 196 undergraduate students (100 women, 96 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.37$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.74$) from a Polish university who were randomly assigned to the door-in-the-face or control condition.

3. Procedure and materials

3.1. PFC scale

The Preference for Consistency scale (Cialdini et al., 1995) measures individual differences in the desire for consistency in terms of internal, public, and other's consistency. The PFC consists of 18 items using a scale with endpoints ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 9 = *strongly agree*. The scale is reliable ($\alpha = 0.89$, Cialdini et al., 1995; $\alpha = 0.76$ in the current study, $\text{Min} = 2.67$, $\text{Max} = 8.56$, $M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.03$).

3.2. Type of request

In the DITF condition we first presented participants with an initial request, which was to sacrifice 3 h on a market research study concerning perfume preferences. The subsequent target request involved completing a long, time-consuming survey on perfume

preferences. The control condition participants were only asked to fill in the survey.

3.3. Procedure

The experimenter (a young woman) approached randomly selected students sitting in a canteen at Wroclaw University. To avoid conformity, only students who were sitting alone were approached. Additionally, this reduces the impact of gender differences in conformity, as these are especially salient in public situations (e.g. Eagly, Wood, & Fishbaugh, 1981). In each DITF condition the experimenter presented herself as a Research & Development officer of a fictitious market research company, after which she made the initial request. Generally, this initial request was found to be relatively difficult as 76 participants out of 92 (82.6%) who were approached with it refused to carry it out. Following Cialdini et al. (1975), all of the participants (both those who agreed and those who rejected the initial request) were then addressed with the target request.

After hearing the initial request, in the DITF condition participants were presented the target request. If participants agreed to the target request the experimenter thanked them and left, while when participants declined the target request the experimenter did not try to persuade them, but merely thanked them and left. In the control condition only the target request was presented.

After the participant responded to the target request, a second experimenter (also a young woman) approached the participant, presented herself as a psychology student, and asked her/him to complete the PFC scale.

4. Results

We excluded replies from 16 participants that had agreed to comply with the initial request, as refusal of the first request is crucial to the DITF technique.¹ We conducted logistic regression analysis with the experimental condition, preference for consistency and their interaction as predictors and compliance as a dependent variable. Though a female requester may elicit more compliance in women (for an overview see e.g. Carli, 2001), we did not find any differences between men and women in responding to the target request. Because gender differences were not the central interest of our study, we present results excluding the variable gender.² The continuous predictor was standardized. The results showed that this model was statistically significant $\chi^2(1) = 3.95$, $p = 0.047$, $R^2 = 0.33$ (Cox & Snell), 0.44 (Nagelkerke). Assessment of the model based on Nagelkerke's R^2 allows us to conclude that the contribution of the predictors it included provides significant assistance in explaining the dependent variable. Participants in the DITF condition were more likely to comply with the target request than in the control condition. There was no main effect of preference for consistency. The interaction term reached $p = 0.055$, 95% CI $[-1.68, 0.02]$, while the odds ratio was 2.30. Table 1 summarizes these results.

Probing the interaction using MODPROBE (Hayes & Matthes, 2009) showed that the DITF technique was most effective when preference for consistency was low ($-1SD$), $B = 3.71$, $SE = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[2.48, 4.94]$, odds ratio for DITF was 2.00, than when it was mean, $B = 2.87$, $SE = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[2.06, 3.68]$, odds ratio for DITF was 1.57 or when it was high ($+1SD$), $B = 2.03$, $SE = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[0.90, 3.16]$ odds ratio for DITF was 1.14. These results

¹ Analysis of the data without excluding these cases yields practically identical results $\chi^2(1) = 5.24$, $p = 0.022$, $R^2 = 0.22$ (Cox & Snell), 0.29 (Nagelkerke). The interaction term is statistically significant, $p = 0.025$, 95% CI $[-1.50, -0.10]$, odds ratio was 2.23.

² Results of the logistic regression analysis including the gender of participants yield virtually the same results: Door-in-the-face $B = 2.94$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[2.11, 3.77]$, odds ratio 0.05; Preference for consistency $B = 0.39$, $p = 0.124$, 95% CI $[-0.11, 0.89]$, odds ratio 0.65; interaction term $B = -0.82$, $p = 0.062$, 95% CI $[-1.67, 0.04]$, odds ratio 2.26; gender $B = -0.46$, $p = 0.237$, 95% CI $[-1.21, 0.30]$, odds ratio 1.58, $\chi^2(1) = 3.73$, $p = 0.053$, $R^2 = 0.34$ (Cox & Snell), 0.45 (Nagelkerke).

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