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FlashReport

Ask in person: You're less persuasive than you think over email

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HIGHLIGHTS

- People underestimate compliance when making requests of strangers in person.
- In two studies, we found the opposite pattern of results for emailed requests.
- Requesters *overestimated* compliance when making requests over email.
- This error was driven by a perspective-taking failure.
- Requesters failed to appreciate how untrustworthy their emails would seem to others.

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ABSTRACT

Research has found people underestimate the likelihood strangers will comply with their direct requests (Bohns, 2016; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008). Here we argue this "underestimation-of-compliance effect" may be limited to requests made face-to-face. We find when making direct requests over *email*, requesters instead *overestimate* compliance. In two studies, participants asked strangers to comply with requests either face-to-face or over email. Before making these requests, requesters estimated the number of people they expected to say "yes". While requesters underestimated compliance in face-to-face contexts, replicating previous research, they *overestimated* compliance in email contexts. Analyses of several theorized mechanisms for this finding suggest that requesters, anchored on their own perspectives, fail to appreciate the suspicion, and resulting lack of empathy, with which targets view email requests from strangers. Given the prevalence of email and text-based communication, this is an extremely important moderator of the underestimation-of-compliance effect.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of research finds people are underconfident in their ability to persuade others to comply with their requests (Bohns et al., 2011; Bohns, Roghanizad, & Xu, 2014; Bohns, Newark, & Xu, 2016; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark, Flynn, & Bohns, 2014). Across at least 12 studies in which participants collectively have asked over 14,000 strangers to comply with requests such as completing a questionnaire and borrowing a phone, participants appear consistently to underestimate—by a large margin—the likelihood people they approach will say "yes" (Bohns, 2016).

This phenomenon results from requesters' inability to appreciate the perspective of targets of their requests. Targets feel awkward and uncomfortable saying "no," both because of what it might insinuate about the requester (Bohns, 2016; Sah, 2012), and because it feels bad to let someone down (Newark, Bohns, & Flynn, 2016). However, requesters are anchored on their own perspectives and fail to recognize the pressure targets feel to comply (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). Consequently, requesters wrongly assume it is easy—and therefore likely—for targets to say "no."

Here we propose a moderator of the underestimation-of-compliance effect. We theorize the tendency to underestimate compliance is limited to face-to-face interactions. Specifically, we hypothesize when making direct requests over *email*, requesters will *overestimate*, not underestimate, compliance. Given the prevalence of email and text-based communication, this would be an extremely important moderator of the original effect.

The hypothesis that requesters will *overestimate* compliance when making requests over email follows from a theorized perspective-taking failure similar to that underlying the original effect. However, due to the considerable differences between email and face-to-face communication, the specific mechanisms involved—and resulting prediction—are notably different.

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Most relevant to the current research of the many ways in which email differs from face-to-face communication is its restriction of nonverbal cues that generate trust and empathy. Essentially, it is easier for an unfamiliar requester to appear well-meaning and sympathetic face-to-face than over email (Berry & McArthur, 1986; Brownlow, 1992; Burgoon, 1990; McGinley, LeFevre, & McGinley, 1975; Scharlemann, Eckel, Kacelnik, & Wilson, 2001; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Willis & Todorov, 2006). Indeed, requests made face-to-face are far more effective than those made otherwise (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996; Dabbish, Kraut, Fussell & Kiesler, 2005; Gerber & Green, 2000; Ling et al., 2005; Zhu et al., 2016).

Yet requesters likely do not recognize the effect of these limitations of email. Anchored on the intimate knowledge they have of their own trustworthiness and circumstances, we theorize requesters will struggle to envision what their targets see: a suspicious email from a stranger that generates little empathy. This error should lead requesters to *overestimate* compliance over email.

We tested this hypothesis in two studies in which participants made actual requests of strangers face-to-face or over email after predicting the likelihood targets would comply. For both studies, we report all measures, conditions, data exclusions, and how we determined sample sizes.

2. Study 1

506 university students participated (49 requesters, 457 targets). Four requesters in the face-to-face condition did not complete the study, leaving 495 participants (45 requesters [31 female], 450 targets). Requesters received $10; targets received no compensation. Sample size was determined by the sample size used by Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008); Study 1; $N = 23$ requesters) who originally identified the underestimation-of-compliance effect and whose paradigm we adapted. The original effect was large ($d = 1.096$), so this sample size ensured >80% power.

Requesters were randomly assigned to "face-to-face" or "email" conditions and instructed to ask 10 strangers to complete a questionnaire (a 44-item personality inventory; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). First, requesters were provided with complete information about their task; no information was withheld. They then predicted how many of the 10 people they approached/emailed would comply with their requests. Because of the role of discomfort in previous research, we also administered a measure of predicted discomfort (Appendix A).

Next, requesters in the face-to-face condition went onto the university campus with a stack of questionnaires and a tally sheet to record the responses of the 10 strangers they approached. In the email condition, requesters were given 10 email addresses from the university directory and asked if they recognized any addresses. They then sent emails with the request to complete an online questionnaire one at a time using their own university email accounts.[1] We recorded actual compliance in this condition through the online questionnaire.

To ensure the face-to-face and email conditions were comparable in all respects aside from communication medium, the scripts participants used when making their requests were written to be as similar as possible, while also conveying the same information in the email that would be implicitly conveyed in a face-to-face interaction on campus—namely, that the requester was a student asking a fellow student (Appendix A).

To determine whether participants in the face-to-face condition were strategically approaching participants in ways that would be impossible in the email condition, we analyzed targets' gender composition. Requesters may have approached slightly more female targets (54%) than would be expected had they been approaching targets randomly compared to the general campus population (45% female), $t(25) = -3.52$, $p = 0.002$, but not compared to the population of the social sciences campus where the study took place (60% female), $t(25) = 1.73$, $p = 0.095$ (CUDO, 2015). Importantly, female targets were no more likely to comply (71.1%) than male targets (72.9%), $\chi^2(N = 260) = 0.098$, $p = 0.75$, so any employed strategy was misguided.

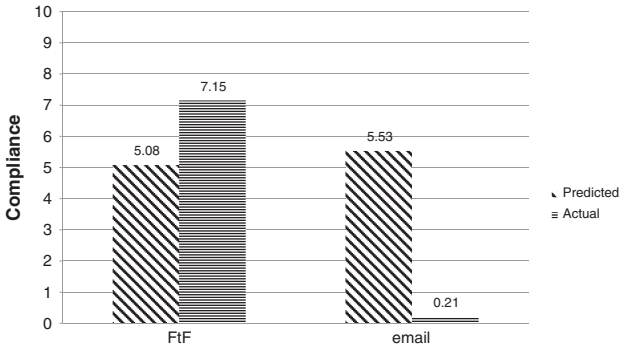

Fig. 1. Actual vs. predicted compliance in the face-to-face and email conditions in Study 1.

2.1. Results

A 2 × 2 mixed-model ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor revealed an interaction between Request Medium (face-to-face, email) and compliance (predicted, actual), $F(1,43) = 121.10$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.73$ (Fig. 1).[2] Requesters *underestimated* the likelihood targets would comply with their requests face-to-face (Predicted: $M = 5.08$, $SD = 2.23$; Actual: $M = 7.15$, $SD = 1.81$), $F(1,25) = 17.45$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.00$), replicating previous research. However, requesters *overestimated* the likelihood targets would comply with their emailed requests (Predicted: $M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.71$; Actual: $M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.54$), $F(1,18) = 185.47$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 4.20$). Although targets asked to complete a questionnaire face-to-face were 34 times more likely to comply than those asked over email, $F(1,44) = 260.78$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 5.20$, requesters' predictions of compliance did not differ between the conditions, $F(1,44) = 0.53$, $p > 0.250$, $d = 0.21$.

Notably, requesters recognized it would be more difficult for targets to say "no" face-to-face $M = 3.14$ ($SD = 1.08$) than over email ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.87$), $F(1,44) = 21.47$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.42$, suggesting that inaccurate assumptions about the discomfort of saying "no" were not driving our main finding.

2.2. Discussion

Despite finding a large effect of Request Medium on the direction of requesters' prediction error, we were unable to identify the mechanism underlying this reversal of the original effect. Further, the paradigm we used only allowed us to capture requesters', not targets', responses to our mechanism questions. Notably, collecting the latter measures would require questionnaire data both from targets who agreed to complete a questionnaire and those who *refused* to complete a questionnaire. In Study 2, we used a unique study design to collect this data. We also refined our procedure to address the possibility that participants in the face-to-face condition approached targets strategically. Finally, we included items to test the mechanism proposed earlier—namely, that requesters fail to appreciate the implicit trust granted in face-to-face interactions, but not over email, which leads to

[1] Towards the end of Study 1, our university ethics board became concerned that university students were spamming other students. We were asked to stop collecting data and reassess the email condition of the study. Thus, there is a smaller number of participants in the email condition than the face-to-face condition, and some changes to our method were imposed in Study 2.

[2] Fluctuations in degrees of freedom within a study occur when a participant did not answer a question, thus reducing the sample size for that question.

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