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# For a dollar, would you…? How (we think) money affects compliance with our requests

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown a robust tendency for people to underestimate their ability to get others to comply with their requests. In five studies, we demonstrate that this underestimation-of-compliance effect is reduced when requesters offer money in exchange for compliance. In Studies 1 and 2, participants assigned to a no-incentive or monetary-incentive condition made actual requests of others. In both studies, requesters who offered no incentives underestimated the likelihood that those they approached would grant their requests; however, when requesters offered monetary incentives, this prediction error was mitigated. In Studies 3–5, we present evidence in support of a model to explain the underlying mechanism for this attenuation effect. Studies 3 and 4 demonstrate that offering monetary incentives activates a money-market frame. In Study 5, we find that this activation reduces the discomfort associated with asking, allowing requesters to more accurately assess the size of their request and, consequently, the likelihood of compliance.



## 1. Introduction

Have you ever offered someone gas money in exchange for a ride, or beer money in exchange for helping with a tough move? Maybe you've given too much money to someone who was going out to pick up lunch anyway and told them they could keep the change if they brought you back something, too. Many of us do this, but why? Do we think we are less likely to be rejected when we offer money in exchange for compliance with a request? If so, are we right?

A simple request is a powerful tool of influence that often requires no additional incentive to elicit compliance. Yet, absent any exchange of money, people tend to underestimate their ability to get others to comply with their requests (Bohns, 2016). In the initial demonstration of this phenomenon, Flynn and Lake (Bohns) (2008) had participants ask people to do them a favor. Some participants asked random strangers to fill out a questionnaire or to lend them a cell phone, while others asked for donations for a charity run or for help finding a location on their college campus. In each case, participants substantially underestimated—often by as much as 50%—the number of people who would comply with their requests. These findings have proved robust, having been replicated in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and China; by student and non-student samples; in urban and suburban settings; with different measures of compliance; and using a variety of prosocial and unethical requests (Aaldering & Handgraaf, 2011; Bohns et al., 2011; Bohns, Roghanizad, & Xu, 2014; Flynn & Bohns, 2012; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark, Flynn, & Bohns, 2014).

The explanation for this phenomenon is that requesters fail to appreciate the impact of social-emotional mechanisms of influence. But what about other mechanisms of influence, such as economic means? Do requesters make the same error when attempting to influence others with money?

In the current research, we hypothesize that offering money in exchange for compliance will moderate this robust social prediction error. Previous research has found that when a request is framed as asking for a favor, pertinent social norms combined with the anxieties of asking lead requesters to overestimate the instrumental costs to targets of saying "yes" (Flynn, 2003, 2006; McGuire, 2003) and underestimate the social-emotional costs to targets of saying "no" (Bohns et al., 2011; Bohns et al., 2014; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark et al., 2014). This biased cost-benefit analysis leads requesters to expect—erroneously—that rejection is imminent (Greenberg, 1980; Greenberg, Block, & Silverman, 1971). In exchanges involving money, however, the

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norms and emotions that bias requesters' evaluations of a favor request are either reduced or eliminated entirely (Blau, 1964, 1994; Fiske, 1992; Kouchaki, Smith-Crowe, Brief, & Sousa, 2013; Pillutla & Chen, 1999). Consequently, requesters who offer money in exchange for compliance should be less likely to commit this social prediction error.

### *1.1. Why people underestimate compliance with favor requests*

Why do requesters tend to exaggerate the likelihood of rejection when asking for a favor? One reason is the strong interaction norms that characterize these requests (Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1971; Goldschmidt, 1998; Grice, 1975). Both predicted and actual compliance depend on assessments of the costs and benefits of compliance (Greenberg, 1980; Greenberg et al., 1971). However, the implicit norms of favor exchange encourage requesters to exaggerate just how much of an imposition they are actually proposing, whereas targets are encouraged to minimize it. When asking for a favor, requesters are expected to "save face" for both themselves and their targets by politely conveying their appreciation through apologies and expressions of gratitude (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1971). The feelings of humility and thanks that should accompany even the smallest of favor requests increase requesters' judgments about the costs of compliance (Blau, 1964, 1994; Flynn, 2003, 2006). On the other hand, while requesters are encouraged to be appreciative and to avoid trivializing or taking for granted another's help, targets wishing to be courteous are expected to downplay the effort or hassle that helping entails (Flynn, 2003; Grice, 1975). Flynn (2003, 2006) has demonstrated that these interaction norms push requesters' and targets' subjective evaluations of the magnitude of a favor in opposite directions. In particular, requesters' focus on expressing gratitude ("Thank you so much"; "I'm so sorry to impose...") leads them to believe that what they are asking for is relatively large, while targets' focus on graciously minimizing their contributions ("It's no big deal") leads them to believe that the request is relatively small. Together, these politeness norms cause requesters to overestimate the instrumental costs of complying with a request relative to targets (Flynn, 2003; McGuire, 2003).

In addition to the norms of favor interactions, the anxiety and discomfort one often feels when asking for a favor also bias requesters' estimation of the costs of compliance. Requesters put their self-esteem on the line and expose themselves to the possibility of rejection (Bohns & Flynn, 2010; DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Goffman, 1971). Even seemingly modest requests, such as asking for a seat on the subway, have been shown to cause requesters extreme distress (Blass, 2009; Milgram, 1974). Using their emotions as information about the task, requesters are likely to assume that if it feels so unpleasant to ask for something, they must be asking for something imposing or unreasonable (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Schwarz, 2011). Further, negative emotions focus requesters' attention on the undesirable consequences of complying—for example, the risks or costs to the target of saying "yes" (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Schwarz, 2000).

Finally, requesters' focus on their own anxieties also means that, while they exaggerate the instrumental costs a target incurs by saying "yes," they tend to overlook important benefits of compliance (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973; Cialdini et al., 1987). In particular, the social-emotional costs a target incurs by saying "no" (and, consequently, avoids by saying "yes") are considerable (Bohns & Flynn, 2015; Flynn, 2003, 2006; Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2005; Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005; Van Boven, Loewenstein, Dunning, & Nordgren, 2013). Unable to assume the perspective of their targets, requesters in the throes of asking for a favor fail to appreciate how often targets will agree to requests—even those they would rather not grant—simply to escape the discomfort of refusing (Bohns et al., 2014; Flynn & Lake (Bohns), 2008; Newark et al., 2014).

Altogether, the norms and emotions that characterize the act of asking for a favor lead requesters to overestimate the likelihood that targets will say "no" to their requests. However, offering money in exchange for compliance should mitigate many of these considerations, allowing requesters to more realistically assess the likelihood that their requests will be fulfilled.

### *1.2. Why money should attenuate the underestimation-of-compliance effect*

There are several terms for interactions characterized by the exchange of money for services, including a market pricing relationship (Fiske, 1992), a monetary market (Heyman & Ariely, 2004), a business decision frame (Kouchaki et al., 2013), and an economic exchange, schema, or context (Blau, 1964, 1994; Molinsky, Grant, & Margolis, 2012; Pillutla & Chen, 1999). Although there are noteworthy differences among these classifications, they all agree that requests involving money (a) have more objectively defined criteria for determining value, (b) emphasize rationality and self-interest over politeness, and (c) are less personal, sentimental, and emotionally wrought than requests that do not involve money or involve non-monetary incentives. These qualities of monetary exchanges are likely to attenuate requesters' tendency to underestimate compliance by reducing or eliminating the aforementioned sources of bias in requesters' predictions.

Favor exchanges involve subjective, often tacit, evaluations of the magnitude of a request (Blau, 1964, 1994; Flynn, 2003, 2006). And, as has been argued, an actor who is concerned with conveying adequate gratitude or consumed by his or her anxiety is likely to exaggerate the costs to a target of agreeing to a request, for example, believing that asking someone to complete a small survey is a "big deal."

The norms of monetary exchanges, however, emphasize "rationality, efficiency, and self-interest, concepts at the heart of economics" (Molinksy et al., 2012, p. 28; see also Blau, 1964, 1994; Etzioni, 1988; Fiske, 1992; Frank, 1988; Frank, Gilovich, & Regan, 1993; Kouchaki et al., 2013; Pillutla & Chen, 1999). According to Blau (1994), "social exchange engenders diffuse obligations, whereas those in economic exchange are specified" (pp. 152–156, as cited in Flynn, 2006). In economic exchanges, things are given a specific monetary value, and market mentalities encourage ascertaining a good or service's true value. Actors are encouraged to plainly specify the value of items and labor in order to facilitate the "comparison of many qualitatively and quantitatively diverse factors" (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2008, p. 209, as cited in Kouchaki et al., 2013).

These interaction norms are unlikely to bias requesters' assessments of the instrumental costs of saying "yes" in the same way as the expressions of gratitude that characterize a favor request. An actor concerned with rationality, efficiency, and self-interest (and who believes the other party is concerned with the same) has no reason to overstate what he or she is asking. Rather, he or she should be concerned with evaluating a request posed as a monetary exchange in an unbiased manner, for example, recognizing that completing a small survey is, in fact, a fairly minor task.

In addition, exchanges involving money tend to be less emotional than those that characterize favor exchanges, hence reducing another source of bias. According to Kouchaki et al. (2013), within a business decision frame, "individual targets are objectified and the social bonds with them weakened" (p. 54). In essence, exchanges involving money are less personal than favor requests, a quality that reduces the threatening nature of both the act of asking and the meaning of rejection: it all becomes "just business."