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Original article

Foot-in-the-door and action identification. Binding communication applied to environmental conservation[☆]

Pied-dans-la-porte et identification de l'action. La communication engageante appliquée à l'environnement

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Growing concern for the environment gives rise to the development of projects aimed at changing attitudes and/or behaviors of individuals in a more ecological way. While the traditional levers of change (information/persuasion) have clear limitations (Perloff, 2003), the promising results of Binding Communication (Joule et al., 2004) present a relevant alternative.

Objective. – Our research, based on the Binding Communication paradigm, aimed to encourage participation in a project to reduce energy consumption and CO₂ emission. The underlying theoretical aim was to identify the impact of action identification (Vallacher and Wegner, 1985) on individual behavior. A variable that commitment theorists (Girandola, 2003; Joule and Beauvois, 1998; Joule et al., 2004) consider as decisive in the paradigm effect although it has not yet been empirically studied.

Method. – One hundred and twenty-three households in Brittany, France received a letter inviting them to participate in the presented project. According to three experimental conditions, some households had already received a phone call in order to answer a questionnaire about the environment (8–10 days earlier), wording in reference to two distinct identification levels.

Results. – Statistical analyses showed a positive effect of procedure on intention to participate when the wording of the initial questionnaire referred to a high and adequate level of identification.

Conclusion. – Discussed in the context of commitment (Joule and Beauvois, 1998, 2002; Kiesler, 1971), self-perception (Bem, 1972) and action identification (Vallacher and Wegner, 1985); the results provide the first empirical validation of the effect of action identification on Binding Communication.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les préoccupations croissantes pour l'environnement donnent lieu à l'élaboration de nombreux projets visant à modifier les attitudes et/ou comportements des individus dans un sens plus écologique. Si les leviers de changement traditionnels (information/persuasion) tendent à montrer leurs limites (Perloff, 2003). La communication engageante (Joule et al., 2004), de par ces résultats prometteurs, se présente comme une alternative pertinente.

Objectif. – Notre recherche, basée sur le paradigme de la communication engageante, visait à inciter des individus à participer à un dispositif leur permettant de réduire leurs consommations d'énergie et émissions de CO₂. L'objectif théorique sous-jacent était de cerner l'impact d'une variable que des théoriciens de l'engagement (Girandola, 2003 ; Joule et Beauvois, 1998 ; Joule et al., 2004) tiennent pour déterminante dans l'effet du paradigme bien qu'elle n'ait pas encore fait l'objet d'une étude empirique : l'identification de l'action (Vallacher et Wegner, 1985).

Méthode. – Cent vingt-trois foyers bretons ont reçu un courrier leur proposant de participer au dispositif présenté. En fonction de leur appartenance aux conditions expérimentales, certains de ces foyers s'étaient vus proposer huit à dix jours de répondre à un questionnaire par téléphone, présenté en référence à deux niveaux distincts d'identification.

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Résultats. – Les analyses statistiques pratiquées révèlent un effet positif de la procédure sur les intentions des foyers de participer au dispositif, mais seulement lorsque la formulation de la requête préparatoire se réfère à une identité de niveau élevé.

Conclusion. – Les résultats, discutés en référence aux théories de l'engagement (Joule et Beauvois, 1998, 2002; Kiesler, 1971), de l'auto-perception (Bem, 1972) et de l'identification de l'action (Vallacher et Wegner, 1985) offrent des arguments en faveur d'une première validation empirique de l'effet de l'identification de l'action dans le paradigme de la communication engageante.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, in France, as in many other Western countries, environmental concerns have become some of the major issues of our time. Therefore, with government support, as well as that of independent organizations, new actions are regularly implemented to raise population awareness, opinions, and behaviors in a more environmentally friendly way.

The present experimentation falls within these lines. From a practical point of view, the goal here is to encourage individuals to participate in a pro-environmental European project. From a theoretical point of view, it is based on the Foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique (Freedman and Frazer, 1966) and more broadly the paradigm of Binding Communication (Deschamps et al., 2005; Girandola, 2003; Girandola et al., 2010; Joule et al., 2004; Joule et al., 2008). It measures the impact of action identification (Vallacher and Wegner, 1985), a variable which is the subject of many discussions within the framework of this paradigm, although its effect has not yet been tested experimentally.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Binding Communication and Foot-in-the-door

The paradigm of Binding Communication proposes linking two previously distinct fields of research. First, Persuasion, based on the communication process described by Laswell (1948): *Who? Says What? To Whom? In Which Channel? To What Effect?* which measures the manipulation impact of these various factors on the efficiency of a message (Girandola, 2003), and that of Free Will Compliance (Joule, 1987; Joule and Beauvois, 1998), which is based on Lewin's (1947) discovery of "freezing effect" and identifies a number of procedures which may lead an individual to freely change his/her behaviors. Practically speaking, Binding Communication consists in delivering a persuasive message after a behavioral foundation has been carried out through the means of individuals complying to a low-cost preparatory request. Research conducted on the basis of this paradigm indicates that the acceptance of a preparatory request can potentially increase the effectiveness of a message (memorization: Courbet et al. (2007); implication: Girandola et al. (2002); implicit attitude: Marchioli et al. (2009) and compliance with costly requests related to the previous one).

As a major reference on the subject, the research of Freedman and Frazer (1966) on the FITD technique provides the first experimental validation of the impact of a low-cost preparatory request on ulterior compliance with a more costly one (Guéguen and Joule, 2010). The authors' first experimentation consisted in encouraging Californian residents to install billboards for road safety on their front lawns, which read "Drive carefully". In the control condition, the request was made directly to residents, while in the experimental conditions, other experimenters made a preparatory request two weeks prior to the second, asking individuals to sign a petition or put a small sticker on the front windshields of their cars, both also concerning road safety. The results show that the compliance rate to the targeted request went from 16% in the

control condition to 47.8 and 76% in the "Petition" and "Sticker" experimental conditions.

After forty years of research, four meta-analyses (Beaman et al., 1983; Burger, 1999; Dillard et al., 1984; Fern et al., 1986) and over 300 publications, there is a considerable amount of information available on this technique and the conditions of its effectiveness. However, the psychological mechanisms at work remain undefined.

Among the various theoretical interpretations put forth to account for the effect (Self-perception - Bem, 1972; Commitment - Kiesler, 1971; Joule and Beauvois, 1988; Social Norms - Harris, 1972; Contrast theory - Shanab and Isonio, 1982; Learning and Reinforcement - Crano and Civacek, 1982; Consistency - Channouf and Sénémeaud, 2000), the self-perception and commitment theories are those which have been the subject of the largest number of experimental validations; however, all the theories seem to contribute, on various levels, to the effect of the technique (Burger, 1999).

Interpretation in terms of self-perception (advanced by the same authors of the technique before being theorized by Bem, 1972; Bem and McConnell, 1970) postulates that people have only a vague idea of their internal states, as well as their real attitudes, and that they infer them in the same way as they infer those of others: through the observation of behaviors and the circumstances in which the behaviors are implemented. In the case of FITD, the people who carried out the preparatory request would then ask themselves the following question: "What must my attitude be if I am willing to behave in this fashion in this situation?" (Bem and McConnell, 1970, p. 24). The answer to this question, if they can explain their behaviors by the circumstances, will lead them to modify their self-perceptions according to the behaviors produced, making them thus more favorable to complying to the target behavior (in relation to the former). This interpretation, which is today the most popular, is yet debatable. Because, if much research has provided consistent results (including the lack of the effect when the preparatory behavior is rewarded, Reingen and Kernan, 1977; Zuckermann et al., 1979), the attitudinal change, which is thought to mediate the effect of the technique, is not consistently observed (Wilson et al., 1981).

The interpretation of the FITD effect through the commitment theory would, according to Joule (1987), account for the majority of the obtained results. Its specificity lies in the unsystematic character of behavior change. Proposed by Kiesler (1971), Kiesler and Sakumura (1966), the commitment theory asserts that the production of a behavior under certain circumstances creates "a binding of the individual to behavioral acts" (1966, p. 349), the strength of which is modulated by factors such as the number of behaviors, the importance of the behavior for the individual, the explicit and irrevocable character of the behavior, as well as the perceived degree of freedom by the individual when the behavior is produced. Redefined by Joule and Beauvois (1998), commitment corresponds more "to the conditions in which an act can but be attributed to the individual who produced it" (p.60, our translation). On the one hand, it is therefore essentially external to the individual; on the other hand, the postulated binding is but a consequence among others "which stems from or does not stem from a given situation" (our translation).

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