Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Transportation Research Part F

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/trf

Short communication

Foot-in-the-door technique and reduction of driver's aggressiveness: A field study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history: Received 26 February 2015 Received in revised form 8 September 2015 Accepted 7 October 2015 Available online 14 December 2015

Keywords: Foot-in-the-door Driver Aggressiveness Self-perception

ABSTRACT

Research has reported that the foot-in-the-door technique is effective at increasing helping behavior. However, the effect of this technique on negative social behavior has never been examined. A field experiment was conducted to explore whether this technique could reduce aggressiveness. Drivers waiting at a traffic light were blocked by an experimental car. In the Foot-in-the-door condition, when the traffic light was red, a passerby confederate asked the driver for directions to a well-known store located in the area of the experiment. The confederate then thanked the driver and walked off in the direction indicated. In the control condition, no request was addressed to the car driver. When the traffic light turned green, the experimental car pretended to be blocked by an engine problem. The number of drivers who honked at the target car and the amount of time that elapsed before the drivers responded by honking their horns were the dependent variables. It was found that fewer drivers honked in the Foot-in-the-door condition. Self-perception theory was used to explain these results.

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1. Introduction

For a long time, social psychologists have studied several procedures used for gaining compliance with various requests (Pratkanis, 2007). In 1966, Freedman and Fraser convinced forty-three percent of the women in a group of housewives to allow a team of 5 or 6 investigators to come to their homes for 2 h to make an inventory of all their cleaning and cooking products. Three days before this visit, the women were asked to fill out a short questionnaire containing eight questions about their consumption. Only twenty-two percent of the women accepted the investigators' visit without this preliminary request. The act of preparing the individual with a small request before making the target request has been called the "foot-in-the-door" technique (FITD).

Various meta-analyses of numerous studies on this technique have shown its effects on compliance (Beaman, Cole, Preston, Klentz, & Mehrkens-Steblay, 1983; Burger, 1999; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986; Pascual & Guéguen, 2005). It is well-known that this technique is particularly effective for influencing people to respond positively to various requests. Most of them are helping requests: examples of such requests are giving someone a dime (Guéguen & Fischer-Lokou, 1999; Harris, 1972), answering a questionnaire (Hornik, Zaig, & Shadmon, 1991) and persuading students to take a card designating them as organ donors (Carducci, Deuser, Bauer, Large, & Ramaekers, 1989). It has also







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been found that the FITD was an effective method for increasing compliance in phone interactions (Goldman, Creason, & McCall, 1981) or in computer-medicated communications (Guéguen & Jacob, 2001).

Research has also found that the effectiveness of the FITD technique is not limited to helping requests. Studies have found that the FITD was effective in decreasing people's energy consumption at home (Katzev & Johnson, 1983) or increasing the number of home-owners who accepted to record a month's worth of their household waste on a form (Guéguen, Meineri, Martin, & Grandjean, 2010). Dolin and Booth-Butterfield (1995) found that adult women who were given an FITD request during a shopping mall health fair agreed more favorably to a second request to schedule a gynecological examination. Guéguen, Marchand, Lourel, and Pascual (2008) reported that the FITD was effective in a dating context. In their research, women who were solicited by a male confederate to give directions or for a cigarette light first, accepted more favorably to have a drink several seconds later. Joule (1987) reported the results of a study that used the FITD technique in a smoking cessation program.

In the literature, the "foot-in-the-door" effect is theoretically explained in two ways. The first and more frequent explanation is the self-perception theory (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). This theory assumes that the preliminary request makes participants feel that they are helpful and care about other people. Once this perception is activated, it favors compliance with the second request. The explanation based on self-perception is perhaps readily explained by the fact that a host of requests tested were helping requests. According to other scientists (Cialdini, 2008; Joule, 1987), the effect of FITD is explained by commitment theory (Kiesler, 1971). When accepting to comply with an initial request, an individual is committed to complying with a later request in order to act consistently.

Overall, the literature on the FITD confirms the effectiveness of this technique at eliciting positive social relationships or influencing behaviors that have an interest for the community. However, most of studies published used helping behavior as the dependent variable (see Burger, 1999). The objective of the present study was to see if the positive effect of the FITD on social relationships (helping or altruism can easily be considered positive social behavior) could be extended to other types of positive human behavior such as the reduction of aggressiveness toward someone else. In this way it could be possible to more readily test the self-perception explanation of the FITD effect. Joule (1987) stated that the commitment effect occurred more readily if there is a strong relationship between the first request and the second request: for example when the first and the second request were related to the same topic or behavior (i.e., responding to a very short survey in a first step and responding to a longer survey on the same topic in the second step). However, if the FITD occurred when different behaviors were measured (helping in the first step and aggressiveness in the second step) commitment appeared to less adequately explain the FITD and argued for a self-perception explanation. Someone who perceived himself/herself as a good person after the first request could probably not act aggressively afterward because a good person is both a helper and a non-aggressive individual. Thus, if the FITD increases willingness to interact positively with someone, for example by helping him/her, it could also be hypothesized that this technique could decrease the probability of performing negative behaviors toward a person. In this experiment, we used the experimental paradigm developed by Doob and Gross (1968) to evaluate the effect of the FITD on drivers' aggressive behavior.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 85 drivers (57 men and 38 women) who appeared to be between the ages of 20 and 60 sitting alone in their cars at a red light. Five drivers (1 man and 4 women) were excluded from the analysis because it was not possible for them to respond to the first request addressed in the FITD condition. The experiment was conducted at the beginning of the summer vacation on sunny days. Drivers with an "A" sign (drivers considered as learners in France) and those who were sitting in car with apparent commercial signs on the body were excluded from the experiment.

2.2. Materials

Unlike Doob and Gross (1968) who tested the effect of the status of a frustrator based on the model of his car which was blocking drivers after the traffic light turned green, we did not vary the type of car that was used by the frustrator throughout the experiment: a white Renault Clio rated middle class by the French Automobile Association.

2.3. Procedure

A 20 year-old male confederate was alone in the car used to block the drivers. He was instructed to fake a mechanical problem with his car when the traffic light turned green. A male observer, trained during a pre-test period to report accurate values and observations, stood alone at about 40 m from the experimental car. He was instructed to time the latency period between the blocking (measured when the traffic light turned green) and the blocked driver's reaction, and to note the blocked driver's type of reaction (horn-honking or no reaction). Two two-hour observational periods were defined for observations: the first from 9 to 11 am and the second from 3 to 5 pm. The experiment was conducted in the same location: a road with moderate traffic, with a traffic light, and near an important commercial area. The experiment began when the traffic light turned yellow and the confederate's car stopped and, of course, the participant driver stopped his/her car just behind the first confederate. Then the two experimental conditions were carried out.

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