

THE EFFECT OF THE “EVOKING FREEDOM” TECHNIQUE ON AN UNUSUAL AND DISTURBING REQUEST¹

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Summary.—The “evoking freedom” technique consists in soliciting someone to comply with a request by simply saying that she is free to accept or to refuse the request. However, previous studies used low cost requests. The present study examined the magnitude of this technique associated with a more disturbing and costly request. Sixty men and 60 women aged approximately 20–25 years walking in the street were asked by a male confederate to hold a closed transparent box containing a live trap-door spider while he went into the post office to pick up a package. In the evoking freedom condition, the confederate added in his request that the participant was “free to accept or to refuse.” More compliance occurred in the “evoking freedom” condition (53.3%) than in the control condition (36.7%). These results confirm the robustness and the magnitude of the evoking freedom technique on compliance and show that this technique remained effective even when the request was psychologically costly to perform and was associated with fear.

The “evoking freedom” technique is a verbal compliance procedure that consists of soliciting someone to comply with a request by simply saying that she is free to accept or to refuse the request. Guéguen and Pascual (2000) asked passersby in a street to give them money to take the bus. In the experimental condition, the request ended with the phrase “but you are free to accept or to refuse,” whereas this phrase was not used in the control condition. More participants gave money and gave a larger amount to the requester in the “evoking freedom” condition. This effect was found with both male and female passersby. Recently, Guéguen, Joule, Halimi-Falkowicz, Pascual, Fischer-Lokou, and Dufourcq-Brana (2013) reported in a series of field experiments that the “evoking freedom” technique increased the rate of compliance to various requests: asking smokers for a cigarette, soliciting passersby to respond to a survey, and soliciting homeowners to buy pancakes during a fundraising for a humanitarian action. Several studies also reported that in a computer-mediated communication, the sentence “but you are free to accept ... ” was associated with greater compliance with a request addressed by e-mail, such as accepting a request

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to visit the web site of a charitable organization for children (Guéguen, Pascual, Jacob, & Morineau, 2002; Guéguen, *et al.*, 2013).

Guéguen and Pascual (2000) explained the effect of the evoking freedom technique by referring to the commitment theory (Kiesler, 1971): telling an individual that she is free to comply could increase the degree of volition which, in turn, would lead her to comply more favorably with the request. Guéguen, *et al.* (2013) recently stated that a second process, based on the reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981) could help to explain the evoking freedom technique. When a stranger solicits a request from a person, an aversive tension arises and decreases the likelihood of complying with the request. When the sentence "but you are free ..." is included in the request, the feeling that freedom of behavior is threatened or restricted is lessened, which increases compliance.

In a meta-analysis of the "evoking-freedom" technique, Carpenter (2013) observed that the previous studies on this technique only used low-cost requests (e.g., asking someone for a dime, asking passersby to respond to a short survey, etc.). Thus, the effect of "evoking freedom" on more costly requests still remained in question because previous research on further compliance-gaining procedures showed that the cost of the request addressed to the participant was an important factor to control. It was reported that the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) was effective to gain compliance with low cost requests (giving a dime, responding to a short survey) but failed to influence compliance to a more costly request such as a blood donation request (Cialdini & Ascani, 1976; Foss & Dempsey, 1979). Similarly, the low-ball technique (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller, 1978) was examined and it was also reported that this technique failed to increase compliance with costly requests such as responding to a very long survey (Katzew & Brownstein, 1988) or accepting to buy a product (Motes & Woodside, 1979). The results reported with these two well-known compliance-gaining procedures suggest that the cost of the request is an important factor to control to evaluate the magnitude of the technique. Thus, in order to test the magnitude of the "evoking freedom" technique with a high cost request, participants in the street were asked by a confederate to hold a closed transparent box containing a live trap-door spider while he went into the post office to pick up a package. The confederate added or left out in his request that the participant was "free to accept or to refuse." In France, where this study was conducted, surveys reported that more than 40% of the population has a fear of spiders (Rougeyron, 2010). Indeed, an adult trap-door spider is not really a conventional spider, and people are probably more reluctant to interact with such a spider. It was hypothesized that more compliance with the request would be observed in the "freedom evocation" condition.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 60 men and 60 women (between the ages of approximately 20 & 25 yr.) chosen at random while they were walking alone in pedestrian areas of a town (between 60,000 & 70,000 inhabitants) situated on the south coast of Brittany in France. The authors used young male and female participants because it was reported in France that fear of spiders decreases with age and is higher among women than among men (Rougeyron, 2010).

PROCEDURE

A 20-yr.-old male confederate waited in front of the main post office until he saw a person corresponding to the profile (men or women of roughly 20–25 years of age walking alone) coming in his direction. Children, teenagers, older people, or groups of people were not included in this study. The confederate held a 25 × 15 cm transparent plastic box with a transparent lid which contained a live adult trap-door spider that was bigger than the hand of an adult man. In the “evoking freedom” condition, the confederate made contact with the participant by saying: “Excuse me. I have something to ask you but, of course, you’re free to accept or to refuse. Would you agree to hold this box with my trap-door spider for a few minutes while I pick up a package in the post office?” In the control condition, the confederate said: “Excuse me. I have something to ask you. Would you agree to hold this box with my trap-door spider for a few minutes while I pick up a package in the post office?” Participants who refused were thanked. Those who complied were immediately debriefed. The order of the experimental conditions was randomized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 2 (participants’ sex) × 2 (experimental conditions) log-linear analysis using the frequency of participants who complied with the request as the dependent variable was used. The main effect of the experimental condition was statistically significant ($\chi^2_1 = 5.83, p = .02, \phi = 0.21$), indicating that overall the “evoking freedom” technique was associated with significantly more compliance (58.3%, 35 of 60 participants; men: 63.3%, 19 of 30 participants; women: 53.3%, 16 of 30 participants) than the control condition (36.7%, 22 of 60; men: 46.7%, 14 of 30 participants; women: 26.7%, 8 of 30 participants). Neither the main effect of sex ($\chi^2_1 = 2.85, p = .09$) nor the interaction effect between the participants’ sex and experimental condition ($\chi^2_1 = 0.14, p = .71$) were statistically significant.

In keeping with previous studies on the “freedom evoking” technique (Guéguen & Pascual, 2002; Guéguen, *et al.*, 2013), it was found that more

passersby agreed to take the box with the trap-door spider when the request included the “evoking freedom” sentence.

These results confirm the robustness and the magnitude of the evoking freedom technique on compliance. Indeed, previous research on this topic used low-cost requests (e.g., asking someone for a cigarette or asking passersby to respond to a short survey). In this case, the cost of the request was considerably higher because it has been reported that young people in France have a fear of spiders (Rougeyron, 2010). Thus, the results suggest that the evoking freedom technique increases compliance even when the request has a high cost for the participants. The magnitude observed here is important, because previous studies reported that when fear was associated with the request some compliance-gaining techniques failed to increase compliance. For example, it was reported that the foot-in-the-door technique did not increase compliance with a blood donation request (Cialdini & Ascani, 1976; Foss & Dempsey, 1979). Research has found that people express some fear of blood donation (Bazin & Malet, 2006) and that using a foot-in-the-door is probably not sufficient to alleviate this fear. The “evoking freedom” technique was reported to increase compliance even with a request which is psychologically costly to perform and is associated with fear. This result confirms the magnitude of this technique with a high cost request.

This experiment has some limitations. The confederate was a man, and a possible generalization to female solicitors should be investigated in the future even if Carpenter (2013) reported no effect of the solicitor's sex in his meta-analysis on the “evoking freedom” technique. This experiment was conducted in France, and generalization to other countries should be examined in the future given the fact that it was reported that this technique was more effective in individualistic cultures than in collectivist cultures (Pascual, Oteme, Samson, Wang, Halimi-Falkowicz, Souchet, *et al.*, 2012). Finally, only one costly request was used in this study to examine compliance. Therefore, it will be interesting in further studies to examine the magnitude of “evoking freedom” compliance with other requests that are psychologically costly to perform and associated with fear. For future meta-analysis studies, it could be interesting to evaluate the relation between the effect size of the “evoking freedom” technique and the perceived cost of the request by the participants.

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