

Short Note

**Behavioural conversion in a compliance paradigm: A replication and a refinement**

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*Abstract*

*While a compliance strategy induced almost all subjects to agree to forego first a lunch and then a dinner and the following breakfast, simply observing an accomplice break his commitment to forego lunch was enough to produce a significant reduction in subjects' commitment to forego two meals, even though the effect was not immediate. This pattern of influence, similar to a 'behavioural conversion', appeared if the accomplice had first agreed to the initial request and only later refused to continue, but not if he refused to make the commitment at the outset.*

**INTRODUCTION**

In a previous experiment (Joule, Mugny and Pérez, 1988), we studied one limit of the effectiveness of a compliance programme (Joule, 1987). This was based on the introduction of an accomplice whose behaviour was numerically and normatively in the minority. After agreeing to participate in an experiment, the subjects, all smokers, then learned that it involved giving up smoking for 18 hours. Though free to refuse, the majority of subjects accepted this request and undertook a series of tests used as a pretext in the experiment, before being asked to participate in a new and more costly experiment, giving up smoking for three days. In a minority condition, a stooge who had initially agreed to go through with the tests then reneged on his prior commitment by refusing to stop smoking for 18 hours, thus breaking the previously agreed experimental contract. A conversion effect (Moscovici, 1980) was observed among the experimental subjects. Thus there was no direct minority

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influence: subjects kept to their agreement to stop smoking for 18 hours. But there was a strong indirect influence: most of the experimental subjects, unlike the control subjects, refused to participate in the new experiment.

In the present experiment we are seeking first of all to confirm this behavioural conversion effect using a similar compliance technique but a different behaviour, going without food, first for one meal and then for two meals. The minority dissent condition is replicated but a further condition is added, one of early dissent in which the accomplice at the outset rejects the initial request, in this case to forego lunch. In this latter condition there is thus no breach of the experimental contract but a clear refusal to accept the conditions of the experiment.

One might expect a more pronounced minority effect in the early dissent condition, on the basis of the hypothesized effect of social support via the breakdown of consensus (Allen, 1975; Milgram, 1974). However, studies on minority influence lead us to expect that a later deviation could have more influence than an early one. In the latter case subjects may seek to differentiate themselves from the responses of a deviant who defines himself at the outset contrary to the majority reaction (Doise and Moscovici, 1969-1970). Perseverance with the initial contract would then be more justifiable given this resistance; subjects could not dissociate their rejection of the deviant from the validation of his position (Pérez and Mugny, 1990). In the case of later deviance, the minority may appear to be changing its position after careful reflection rather than acting on a whim (Nemeth and Brilmayer, 1987), repudiating a contract which it had initially shared with the other subjects.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The participants in the experiment were 111 first year male students, recruited on the campus of the University of Provence. None were taking psychology courses. The accomplice was the same age and sex as the subjects.

### Procedure and design

The compliance strategy used to induce subjects to forego one meal and then a further two reflects two procedures (Joule, 1987): a low-ball/accomplished act procedure derived from the low-ball procedure (Cialdini, Basset, Cacioppo and Miller, 1978), and a link procedure derived from the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman and Fraser, 1966). The first induces subjects to forego a single meal, and the second should then induce them to go without two further meals supposedly in the context of a new experiment. The design comprised three experimental and two control conditions.

#### *Compliance condition*

Subjects ( $N = 20$ ) were recruited on the campus supposedly for an experiment on concentration. Two appointments were made with the volunteers, at 11.00 am and

at 5.00 pm on the same day, to take two short series of tests on concentration. They came to the laboratory in groups of five or six and on arrival learned that if they were to participate in the experiment they would have to go without food until the afternoon session, which meant missing lunch. This request was framed in terms of comparing their concentration tests before and after food deprivation. Students were given a free choice about participation but the effectiveness of this low-ball/accomplished act technique is such that everyone agreed. The subjects then undertook the first series of concentration tests lasting about 15 minutes. These were paper and pencil tests derived from Zazzo (1960). The experimenter then asked that they take part in a new experiment, scheduled for eight days time; this would require missing two meals, dinner and breakfast the following day.

#### *Minority conditions*

The procedures were identical to the compliance condition except that an accomplice at a specified moment refused to miss lunch. In the *early dissent* condition ( $N = 24$ ), the accomplice politely refused to commit himself to going without lunch at the point where the experimenter was explaining the need to miss lunch. After the accomplice had left the laboratory, the experimenter asked the subjects if they would go through with the experiment. Having won their voluntary agreement, he asked them to go through the first series of concentration tests before canvassing them for the second experiment.

In the *late dissent* condition ( $N = 19$ ), the accomplice agreed to the initial request and completed the first series of concentration tests along with the genuine subjects. Only then did he say that on reflection he preferred not to miss lunch. He politely excused himself and left the laboratory. At this point, the experimenter offered the genuine subjects the opportunity to go back on their commitment to forego lunch and then solicited them for the second experiment which involved missing two meals.

#### *Control conditions*

Two control conditions were established to determine the probability that subjects would agree to participate in an experiment that required missing either one or two meals following a simple request and therefore without recourse to the compliance procedures used in the experimental conditions. In *control condition 1* ( $N = 24$ ), subjects were simply asked, when they were recruited on the campus, if they wished to take part in an experiment on concentration which would mean missing lunch the same day. In *control condition 2* ( $N = 24$ ), the request implied giving up two meals in eight days time, dinner and breakfast on the following day.

#### **Measures**

The dependent variables were the acceptance rates for the experimenter's requests. Note that in the experimental conditions, the first response (agreement or not to miss lunch) could be considered as an index of direct influence and the second (agreement or not to miss two meals) as an index of indirect influence, given that the minority (the accomplice) has not taken a position on this request (Mugny and Pérez, 1991).

Table 1. Frequencies of subjects accepting and refusing the first request (missing one meal) and the second request (missing two meals)

Conditions	One meal		Two meals <sup>1</sup>	
	Accept	Refuse	Accept	Refuse
Control 1 (1 meal)	4	20	—	—
Control 2 (2 meals)	—	—	1	23
Compliance	20	0	12	8
Early dissent	22	2	17	5
Late dissent	18	1	4	14

<sup>1</sup> Only subjects who had previously agreed to forego one meal in the experimental conditions are included here.

## RESULTS

### Commitment to forego one meal

In the control condition four subjects agreed to go without a meal the same day. Under all three experimental conditions an overwhelming majority agreed to abide by their initial commitment (see Table 1); *compliance*:  $X = 27.29$   $p < 0.001$ ; *early dissent*:  $X = 24.25$   $p < 0.001$ ; *late dissent*:  $X = 22.84$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

### Commitment to forego two meals

Whereas in control condition 2 a single subject agreed to miss two meals eight days later, a majority accepted this request in the *compliance* condition ( $X = 22.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and in the *early dissent* condition ( $X = 13.77$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In contrast the *late dissent* condition does not differ from this control condition; subjects are significantly less inclined to agree to miss two meals than either those in the *compliance* condition ( $X = 4.10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) or those in the *early dissent* condition ( $X = 9.92$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The recovery of autonomy by subjects in the late dissent condition shows itself to be linked to the resistance displayed by one minority dissenter. The effect is not one of mere compliance; it takes the form of a veritable 'behavioural conversion'. In effect, the subjects kept the experimental contract (to miss one meal) to which they had previously committed themselves, as did those in the early dissent condition. However, in rejecting the higher experimental bid (to miss two meals) they freed themselves from the constraint of the compliance procedure. Moreover, the indirect or delayed nature of this influence excludes the effect of social support via a breach in the consensus as an explanation (*cf.* Allen, 1975; Milgram, 1974). The nature of the minority influence is such that subjects do not respond to the overt content of the minority response. Rather they absorb in a more indirect way one of the organizing principles underlying that response (*cf.* Mugny and Pérez, 1991); in this case it is the principle of autonomous social functioning (Nemeth and Chiles, 1988).

The absence of a minority effect in the case of early dissent relates to the functioning which makes voluntary compliance possible (Joule and Beauvois, 1987; Joule,

Gouilloux and Weber, 1989). This is based on a succession of commitments which trap the subject in a mesh of compliance to experimental demands. In the late dissent condition the minority showed itself to have been influenced given that it had previously submitted to the experimental contract and displayed the same submission as the genuine subjects. If the majority decides not to continue with the experiment then the experimental contract is put into question allowing subjects to resist when a new and more costly contract is proposed. When there is early dissent, before any contract has been established, that dissent is not associated with the contract and thereby does not put it into question. Another difference between late and early dissent is that in the late condition the accomplice is in fact under a false oath†. In the early condition the accomplice declines to participate of his own free will since the terms of the contract were changed by the experimenter. This would suggest that this condition would be less conflictual. Whatever the case, further experiments will be required to resolve the issue but even this interpretation suggests that the minority effect observed was due to a more conflictual situation, which is consistent with the theory of conversion behaviour (Moscovici, 1980).

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