

“YOU'RE HELPFUL” VERSUS “THAT'S CLEAR”. SOCIAL VERSUS FUNCTIONAL LABEL IN THE FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR PARADIGM

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In this experiment, the effect of two kinds of labels in the foot-in-the-door paradigm were tested. The first one refers to what the individual is (social label); the second refers to the usefulness of the performed behavior (functional label). It appears that the social label increases compliance whereas the functional label decreases compliance. Taking into account the social versus the functional dimension, rather than the classical positive/negative dimension should open a new area in research into compliance and resistance to persuasion.

Keywords: social label, functional label, FITD paradigm, self-perception

“Give them an inch, and they’ll take a mile”. This old saying illustrates the Foot-In-The-Door (FITD) strategy (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). In this research, housewives were telephoned and presented with the target-request: receive a crew of six persons to conduct an inventory of the products of consumption. Presented directly (control condition), only 22.2% complied. In the FITD condition, housewives were first asked to answer a few simple questions. Two days after, they were called again and the requester made the target-request: 52.8% complied. In terms of self-perception (Bem, 1972), agreeing to a small request led the participants to perceive themselves as the kinds of people who offer help to those who request it. So, when presented with the target-request they comply in order to be consistent with their new self-perception.

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Moreover, a positive (Goldman, Seever, & Seever, 1982) or a negative (Steele, 1975) label arising from the small request can affect the FITD strategy. Goldman et al. (1982) asked students a question. Of course, everybody agreed to help the experimenter. This altruistic behavior was labeled either positively (helpful), or negatively (non-helpful). A few minutes later, another confederate presented a larger target-request. As predicted, the positive-label condition increased compliance (67%) compared with the negative-label (40%) and the no label (20%) conditions. On the other hand, some empirical evidence shows that a negative label (qualifying somebody as individualistic) as in Steele's experiment (1975) or saying "you should be ashamed" as in Gueguen's experiment (2001), can also increase compliance.

Let us consider that a positive as well as a negative label refers to what the individual is. In this sense it refers to his/her social value. For this reason, we prefer to employ the term *social label* (Fointiat, Caillaud, & Martinie, 2004). The social label of an altruistic behavior will lead the individual to restore (when the label is negative) or to maintain (when the label is positive) a positive self-perception.

But in everyday life, our altruistic behaviors are not systematically social labeled. Sometimes, they could be labeled as functional. In this case, there is no reference to our own social value. What would be the consequences of such labels over the subsequent behaviours? We predict that labeling a behavior as functional, renders it difficult to attribute it to a social dimension. So it should break the compliance effect (FITD efficiency).

METHOD

We tested these predictions in the particular implicit Foot-In-The-Door paradigm (Uranowitz, 1975). In line with Freedman and Fraser's (1996) original paradigm, two behaviors were involved. But only the first request was explicitly formulated. In turn, the target behavior was not explicitly presented: the individual had the opportunity only to perform – or not to perform – it.

PROCEDURE

Visibly lost in the streets of a little town, the experimenter asked people: "Excuse me sir/madam, would you tell me the way ... I'm looking for the cathedral" (a famous place that everybody knows). At the end of the interaction, the experimenter thanked the subject either politely "thank you" (FITD/no-label condition) or warmly "you're helpful" (FITD/social-label condition) saying "that's clear" (FITD/functional-label condition). Afterwards, the experimenter walked in the direction of the monument. A few seconds later, she lost her shoulder sash. In a control condition, the confederate lost the shoulder sash in

front of the subject without any interaction.

A confederate observed the interaction carefully and noted what the subject did about the shoulder sash. This represents the dichotomous implicit dependent variable: the restitution or not of the lost shoulder sash.

RESULTS

The results reproduced a classical FITD effect. The rate of compliance was lower in the control condition (57/77, .74) than in the three FITD conditions collapsed (151/175 participants, .86), $\text{Chi}^2(1,252) = 5,58, p = .01$.

As predicted, the social label increases the compliance. Compared with the control condition, participants are more inclined to hand back the shoulder sash when their first small behavior has been socially valued (e.g., in the FITD/social-label condition) – respectively, 57/77, .74 vs. 48/53, .90, $\text{Chi}^2(1,130) = 5,530, p = .0187$.

As predicted too, the FITD effect disappeared when the initial behavior received a functional-label. In this condition, 43 out of 57 participants (.75) complied. In this condition, the participants were significantly less inclined to return the shoulder sash than were participants in the FITD/social-label condition (48/53, .90) and FITD/no-label condition (60/65, .92) – respectively, $\text{Chi}^2(1,110) = 4,40, p = .03$ and $\text{Chi}^2(1, 122) = 6,57, p = .01$.

Moreover, the control condition and FITD/functional-label condition do not differ significantly.

DISCUSSION

In our experiment, we manipulated the social-functional dimension of the label. This label was delivered immediately after the participant performed an altruistic behavior (i.e., small request). The social dimension of the label refers to what an individual is. As in the Goldman et al. (1982) experiment, we employed the term *helpful* to illustrate this dimension. In turn, we proposed to test a more original (and ecological) aspect of the label. This label – called *functional* – does not refer to any personological dimension of the individual, but rather to the usefulness of the previous behavior. One can consider that this functional label inhibits the spontaneous inferential activity, making the self-attribution processes difficult (Bem, 1972). As predicted, the results indicate that the social label increases compliance whereas the functional label decreases it.

These results are consistent with those of previous research (Fointiat, Caillaud, & Martinie, 2004), in which the authors manipulated the social-functional dimension of the label in the FITD paradigm. The experimental situation was as follows: an experimenter, apparently lost and holding a city map in her hands,

asked a passer-by the direction of a famous place. As soon as the information was given (e.g., altruistic behavior), the young woman thanked him or her and walked away. A few seconds later, the experimenter lost a banknote (around US\$8) in front of the subject. The target behavior was the restitution of the money, after receiving a social ("thank you, you're helpful") versus a functional label ("thank you for showing me the way on the city map") consecutively to the altruistic behavior. The results showed that the participants were more inclined to return the money when they had received the social label rather than the functional label.

Among the interpretations in terms of self-perception (Bem, 1972), our results and those obtained by Fointiat et al. (2004) can be understood in terms of action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987; Wegner et al., 1984). This theory holds that any action can be identified in many ways, ranging from low-level identities (how the action is performed) to high-level identities (why the action is performed). Moreover, one of the theoretical principles of action identification theory holds that action is maintained with respect to its prepotent identity (stability of the action) From this perspective, the social label ("you're helpful") can lead to a high-level identity. Such identity guarantees the maintenance of the action over time and over circumstances. In turn, the functional label ("that's clear") can lead to a low-level identity and consequently make possible the emergence of new identities.

Further research must explore these theoretical interpretations (self-perception vs. action identification). On the other hand, it would be fruitful to explore the effects of the functional-social dimension over compliance procedures such as door-in-the-face (Cialdini et al., 1975) or low-ball (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Basset, & Miller, 1978).

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