

SOME STATUS AND CONFORMITY EFFECTS ON COMPLIANCE

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An experiment was conducted which manipulated the status and number of previous signatures on a request by a lecturer in Psychology to participate in a psychological experiment. No significant effects were found on the response rate which averaged 53 per cent. Effects due to sex of experimenter and sex of subject were examined but no significant differences were found. The general design, conduct and results of the experiment suggested no major flaws to account for the null results which appear anomalous in the light of the literature. It is suggested that either a maximal effect on compliance due to social factors was obtained through the form of request and in particular the source of the request; or that important cross cultural differences exist in susceptibility to the effects of status and number of previous signatures, which may considerably modify the usual generalizations about social factors in human behaviour; or that the lack of reports of null results have led to over-generalization in the literature.

There are a large number of experiments in the psychological literature which demonstrate that the status of the source of a communication has an effect on the recipients of a communication. In general, the results can be summarized as showing that the status of a comparison group can affect the performance of an experimental group (Moore, 1969, Sherif & Sherif, 1969), the comparative status of a group member or an information source will affect the extent to which other members will agree or disagree with judgements of the group member or information source (Luchins & Luchins, 1961, Bass, 1961) and that the status of the source of a request will affect the rate of compliance with the request (Milgram, 1965).

A similarly impressive number of findings support the general conclusion that conformity will be increased as the number of subjects agreeing with the request increases although there is disagreement as to the size of the group already in agreement which obtains the maximum effect on the yielding of an experimental subject (Asch, 1951, Jones & Gerard, 1967).

On the basis of these findings, it would seem logical to predict that compliance with a request to take part in a psychological experiment would be affected by both the status and the number of previous signatories on the sheet a subject is asked to sign.

METHOD

1. A sheet requesting participation in a psychological experiment was prepared. Space was left for 25 signatures, checking whether the

volunteer was a university staff member or a student, a contact 'phone no. or address and a check list of possible times when the volunteer may be available.

2. The sheets were prepared in the five following ways:

- (a) 33 sheets with no signatures (B)
- (b) 33 sheets with 1 student signature (S1)
- (c) 33 sheets with 10 student signatures (S10)
- (d) 33 sheets with 1 staff signature (L1)
- (e) 33 sheets with 10 staff signatures (L10)

All the sheets within each condition were identical in names and check markings. Students and staff were differentiated by the appropriate checks in the column identifying the subjects.

3. 33 Stage II students acted as experimenters. After detailed instructions in the design and execution of the experiment, each student was given one sheet in each condition. These were affixed to a clipboard in a random order. The experimenters were assigned to different parts of campus and instructed to start approaching students at 2.22 p.m.

4. Experimenters were instructed to approach only students who were alone, did not seem in a hurry and who were unfamiliar to them. Each experimenter was to approach five different students presenting each with a different sheet. An approach was deemed to have been made once the potential volunteer accepted the clipboard and started reading it. The responses were recorded on a tally sheet.

The experimenters all used the same introductory phrase "Excuse me—would you please read this and sign if you can help?" They were instructed to smile pleasantly when making the approach, stand at a normal contact distance of about two feet and avoid either prolonged eye contact or an absence of eye contact. They were also instructed to avoid saying anything else to the subject if possible, until the subject had decided on a response. If questioned, they were to say "I don't know any more than you do about the experiments". All subjects were to be thanked afterwards, whether they signed or refused.

Formally stated, the hypotheses to be tested were:

1. The proportion signing on sheets already signed by staff members (L1 and L10) will be greater than the proportion signing on sheets already signed by students (S1 and S10);
2. The proportion signing on sheets already signed by ten persons (S10 and L10) will be greater than the proportion on sheets signed by only one person (S1 and L1).
3. That the proportion on any sheets already signed (S1, L1, S10, L10) will be greater than the proportion signing on blank sheets (B).

RESULTS

Results were collated when the experimenters returned. All except one experimenter made the required five approaches, one in each condition. The missing approach arose because a training college student who was not eligible was asked and not replaced in the sample. Four people refused to read the sheet as they were in a hurry and three had already been approached. These seven were discarded from the sample and replaced by others.

TABLE 1

RESPONSES BY CONDITIONS

	B	S1	S10	L1	L10	Total		Totals
						M	F	
Signed	17	21	14	15	20	49	38	87
Refused	15	12	19	18	13	46	31	77
Total	32	33	33	33	33	95	69	164
Percentage signing	53.1	63.6	42.4	45.5	60.6	51.6	55.1	53.0

1. **Overall effect.** A χ^2 test was performed on the above results to see whether there were any overall differences in the numbers signing and refusing in the various conditions: $\chi^2 = 4.5$, d.f. = 4 .50 $p > .30$. Thus there was no significant overall effect due to conditions.
2. **Status effects** (Hypothesis 1). As the proportion of students signing after staff members was exactly the same as the proportion signing after students (53 per cent in both cases), there is clearly no status effect.
3. **Effect of number of prior signatures** (Hypothesis 2). The percentage of signatures obtained after one signature was 54.5 and the percentage after ten signatures was 51.5. This represents actually a difference of only two signatures and is clearly of no significance. The difference is not even in the predicted direction.
4. **Effect of having some signatures** (Hypothesis 3). The percentage signing blank sheets was 53.1 and the percentage signing sheets already containing signatures was 53.0. Again there is clearly no difference.
5. **Effect of sex of subjects.** 51.6 per cent of the males approached signed, compared with 55.1 per cent of the females. A check was made to see whether this difference was significant using a t test: $t = .44$ d.f. = 162. $p > .10$. The result was not significant.

6. **Effect of sex of experimenters.** The response rate for female experimenters was 53.2 per cent and for male experimenters 52.9 per cent. A t test was performed for significance of difference between proportions giving a t of .04 with 162 d.f. which was not significant.
7. **Interaction of sex of subject and sex of experimenter.** For male experimenters the expected frequency of responses for male and female subjects was exactly duplicated. For female experimenters there was only one more male and one less female signature than expected: $\chi^2 = .318$; d.f. = 3; $p > .10$. Thus there was no significant interaction.

DISCUSSION

The complete absence of any effect due to status or number of signatures is somewhat surprising in view of the literature. From discussion with the experimenters there do not seem to have been any anomalies in the execution of the experiment that can account for the null result.

One possible explanation is that the maximal effect due to status has already been obtained from the official heading on the form, the wording of the appeal and the signature at the bottom of the request, which is identified as being that of a lecturer in psychology. To test this possibility it is intended on a future occasion to vary the heading and the signature on the appeal according to status.

It could be suggested that many students made their decision without regard to the status of other signatories as they did not notice the check marks indicating status. Discussion with some of the subjects and the fact that some students themselves checked the staff column, indicates that the status manipulation may not have been entirely successful. However, it would be difficult to argue that the number of signatories was not noticed and yet no effect due to number was obtained.

If opinions are distributed bimodally, so that the peaks occur away from a neutral point in the judgmental continuum, the effects of slight changes in attitude due to single exposure to pressure may not result in any detectable change in a Yes/No response situation. In addition, there is considerable support in the literature to suggest that intensity of response is associated with resistance to pressure. However, as other investigators (Bennett, 1955) have found that the decision to volunteer as an experimental subject is susceptible to social influence, the explanation in terms of a bimodality of commitment here is not *a priori* plausible. It is not impossible, however, that the tendency to polarisation of attitudes varies between populations studied.

If changes in the form and substance of the request fail to produce differences in response rate, the question of cross-cultural variation in conformity and status effects on compliance must be raised. It should be noted that attempts to replicate experiments on status and experimenter effects with student populations in Otago in the past, have met with a notable lack of success and the whole question warrants further investigation.

It is also possible that as there is a tendency for null results to remain unpublished, the case for status and conformity effects on compliance has been overstated.

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