

Short Note

When a compliance without pressure strategy fails
due to a minority dissenter:
A case of "behavioral conversion"

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Abstract

While a strategy of compliance without pressure (Joule, 1987) had the effect of inducing almost all of a group of smoking subjects to stop smoking first for 18 hours then for 3 days, simply observing someone (an accomplice) break his or her own initial agreement to abstain from smoking for 18 hours was enough to bring about a substantial reduction in the willingness of other subjects to later abstain for 3 days. However, subjects did not follow the lead of the accomplice immediately, and persisted in their agreement to abstain for 18 hours. This pattern of indirect, but not direct influence, suggests that there may be a type of minority influence at work here that represents a sort of behavioral conversion.

INTRODUCTION

This research report is the product of a melding of two separate research programs. One of these lines of research has focused on the use of compliance without pressure techniques aimed at inducing individuals to produce various pro-social behaviors that they would not otherwise emit (Joule, 1986), such as stopping smoking. In this context, attention was focused on those converging cognitive processes that facilitate commitments to increasingly costly forms of behavior. Drawing upon earlier work in commitment theory (Kiesler, 1971; Beauvois and Joule, 1981; Joule and Beauvois, 1987), this work has employed a paradigm (Joule, 1986) incorporating both the 'foot-in-the-door' technique (Freedman and Fraser, 1966) and the 'low-ball' technique (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Basset and Miller, 1978).

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The second of these research programs (Mugny and Pérez, 1986) has focused upon the circumstances under which individuals exposed to minority influence undergo a type of conversion (Moscovici, 1980), and, while continuing to follow overtly the position of the majority, give evidence of a latent, private, indirect or delayed shift toward the minority position (Moscovici and Mugny, 1987). In this context the observed effects presuppose divergent thinking (Nemeth, 1986), and imply the workings of a joint process of social comparison and validation (cf. Pérez and Mugny, 1987).

The attempted integration of these two research programs focuses upon the limits of the extremely powerful effects which a compliance without pressure technique (Joule, 1986) has been shown to have upon abstinence from smoking behaviors. The subjects of their earlier study, all of whom were university students who smoked, were contacted on campus by an experimenter who offered them a little amount of money (50 French Francs) to take part in an experiment supposedly having to do with the ability of smokers to concentrate. Those who agreed to participate (almost everyone approached) were required to fill out a subject card. Several days later the experimenter recontacted the subjects by telephone to make an appointment. He explained at that point that they would be having to come to the laboratory twice, once at 6 pm the same day and again at noon on the following day. Once in the laboratory the subjects were told, contrary to their earlier expectations, that they would be paid only 30 rather than 50 Francs and that they would be required to abstain from smoking for 18 hours. Despite the fact that at that point the experimenter gave the subjects a free choice as to whether to participate in the study, practically all subjects agreed to take part (law-ball/accomplished act, Joule, 1987). After having completed a first series of tests of concentration the subjects were requested to participate in a further experiment for which they would be paid 150 Francs and which required that they abstain from smoking for three days. Again almost all of the subjects agreed to participate.

A variety of factors contribute to a weakening of the effects of this compliance without pressure technique (Joule, 1986). One such factor will be considered for the first time here, the influence of a minority or dissenting view. The following question was posed: what will happen if, just prior to being asked to agree to give up smoking for 3 days, the subjects were exposed to a confederate who, after having committed him or herself to stop smoking for 18 hours, reneged on that decision (minority influence condition)? Will the subjects also be prompted to abandon their own decision to abstain from smoking for 18 hours? Will they back out on their agreement to abstain for three days?

On the basis of commitment theory one can predict that the attitude of the accomplice should have no effect, since the decision to abstain from smoking for 18 hours is supposed to commit the subjects *de facto*. Viewed in another light, one could regard the accomplice as engaged in a truly minority form of behavior. Minority influences do often reveal themselves in the form of conversion, and especially in the absence of the minority source (Moscovici and Nève, 1971). Consequently one can anticipate from this point of view that the dissenting behavior of the accomplice will not affect the subjects' decision to deprive themselves of tobacco for 18 hours, but could prompt them to have second thoughts before committing themselves to a still longer period of abstinence.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Two experimental and two control conditions were employed. The compliance without pressure procedure was identical in every detail with that outlined above. Subjects were tested in groups of 4 or 6. The minority influence condition was also identical except that just after having committed themselves for 18 hours and having just completed the concentration tests, one of the subjects (an accomplice) said to the experimenter in a loud voice that he didn't intend to give up smoking until the next day as he had already said he would, and left the laboratory. The experimenter made then explicit that the other subjects were free to follow the accomplice.

In the first control condition subjects were simply asked to take part in a study that necessitated that they abstain from smoking for 18 hours and for which they would be paid 30 Francs. The second control condition was identical, except that subjects were required to abstain from smoking for 3 days (for a sum of 150 Francs).

The response measures consisted of the number of subjects who agreed to commit themselves to the 18 hours study (and for the condition involving a dissenting accomplice, those who stuck to their decision even after the untimely departure of the accomplice) and the number of subjects who committed themselves to the 3 days experiment (in the minority influence condition, after the departure of the accomplice).

Data were collected from 101 male and female university students (mean age: 20.4 years) who smoked more than 15 cigarettes a day and who had never taken a psychology course.

RESULTS

Commitment to abstain from smoking for 18 hours

In the control condition only 3 out of 24 subjects agreed to abstain from smoking for 18 hours. By contrast, in the compliance without pressure only condition 24 of 26 subjects agreed to participate ($X^2/1=32.00$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, 25 of the 27 subjects

Table 1. Frequency of subjects who refused or agreed to give up smoking for 18 hours, and 3 days

Conditions:	18 hours		(n)	3 days		(n)
	refused	agreed		refused	agreed	
compliance without pressure	2	24 ^a	(26)	2	22 ^a	(24)*
minority influence	2	25 ^a	(27)	13	12 ^b	(25)
control (18 hours)	21	3 ^b	(24)	-	-	-
control (3 days)	-	-		18	6 ^b	(24)

* only those subjects who had previously committed themselves for 18 hours responded to this measure.

^awithin a given column, pairs of conditions with different subscripts differ at the 0.05 level at least

who would later constitute the minority influence condition also agreed to participate ($X^2/1=32.92$, $p<0.001$).

What happened in the minority influence condition after the accomplice had backed out on his commitment and the experimenter offered the other subjects the opportunity to do the same? It is noteworthy that not one of the 25 subjects who had already committed themselves for 18 hours reversed themselves after the desertion by the accomplice: that is, the accomplice had no direct influence, and remained a genuine minority figure.

Commitment to 3 days of abstinence from smoking

What happened, at this phase of the study, when subjects were asked to volunteer for a still more costly study which required that they abstain from smoking for 3 days? Results show that, under the compliance without technique only condition, almost all of the subjects (22 of the 24 who had already committed themselves for 18 hours) agreed to commit themselves for 3 days as well. These subjects differed significantly from those of the control group of whom only 6 of 24 agreed to participate ($X^2/1=21.94$, $p<0.001$). By contrast, the minority influence condition, where only 12 of the 25 subjects agreed to stop smoking for 3 days, was not significantly different from the control condition ($X^2/1=2.79$, $p<0.10$), but did clearly differ from the compliance without pressure only condition ($X^2/1=10.99$, $p<0.001$). The minority accomplice was therefore shown to have an influence, but one which was indirect in character.

DISCUSSION

In this experiment, the presence of an accomplice who speaks against the majority view was shown to dramatically reduce the strength of our compliance without pressure technique. These results suggest a familiar pattern of minority influence. In effect, the subjects, almost all of whom agreed to abstain from smoking for 3 days after having first agreed to an 18 hours abstinence, did not immediately follow the lead of an accomplice who reneged upon his commitment, but instead scrupulously adhered to their initial commitment. However, it is apparent that the reaction of the accomplice did have an impact since less than half of these subjects later committed themselves to a 3 days period of smoking abstinence. These exclusively 'indirect' effects are consistent with those that give rise to the 'psychology of conversion' (cf. Moscovici and Mugny, 1987) and particularly with the recent evidence of Nemeth and Chiles (in preparation) regarding the effect of a dissenting minority in fostering independence. These findings also confirm that a minority can have an indirect impact, not only in the perceptual and attitudinal response of others, but also on their behavior (here their behavioral decisions), and support our idea that we have demonstrated an instance of behavioral conversion.

In any case, this study has offered an opportunity to bring together two socio-psychological research perspectives that until now have been orthogonal. And this is perhaps not a luxury one can afford to pass up in a view of the cleavages that are often too evident in the diverse research domains of our discipline.

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RÉSUMÉ

Alors qu'une stratégie de soumission sans pression (Joule, 1987) amène la presque totalité des sujets fumeurs à s'engager à s'arrêter de fumer durant 18 heures, puis 3 jours, il suffit que quelqu'un (un compère) casse son engagement initial pour 18 heures pour que les autres sujets s'engagent beaucoup moins pour une abstinence de 3 jours. Cependant ils ne suivent pas immédiatement le compère, et ne reviennent donc pas, contrairement à lui, sur leur engagement pour 18 heures. Ce patron d'influences (directe nulle, indirecte positive) suggère que l'on serait en présence d'une influence de type minoritaire débouchant ici sur une sorte de "conversion en acte".

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Eine Strategie der zwanglosen Unterwerfung (Joule, 1987) führt dazu, dass die grosse Mehrheit der Raucher einer Gruppe bereit ist, während 18 Stunden, und im folgenden während drei Tagen, das Rauchen aufzugeben. Wenn aber einer (ein Komplize des Versuchsleiters) die 18-Stunden-Frist nicht einhält, hat dies zur Folge, dass die Bereitschaft der anderen Versuchspersonen, drei Tage lang nicht zu rauchen, stark abnimmt. Jedoch pflegen sie im allgemeinen dem Beispiel nich unmittelbar zu folgen und halten zunächst die für 18 Stunden eingegangene Verpflichtung ein. Diese Art der Beeinflussung (direkte Beeinflussung = Null; indirekte Beeinflussung = positive) lässt annehmen, dass es sich hier um Minoritätseinfluss handelt, der zu einer Verhaltensänderung führt.