

The Use of Interpersonal Touch in Securing Compliance

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ABSTRACT: Direct gaze and a personal approach distance have been shown to increase compliance in a face to face situation. In the present study touch was varied along with gender and difficulty of request to assess the effects upon rate of compliance. The results indicated that touch was important in securing compliance, moreso if the request was more difficult, and most important in securing same gender compliance.

Most of us are involved with requests for compliance on a daily basis. We are initiators or recipients of sales proposals, charity solicitations, political pitches, et cetera. Although behavioral science has had an obvious impact upon media presentations, we have a great deal to learn about the methods most likely to secure compliance in a face to face situation. It has been shown that subjects are more likely to lend money to others who are similar in appearance (Emswiller, Deaux, & Willits, 1971). Subjects are more likely to comply with liked as compared to disliked others (Baron, 1971). Males have been shown to be more likely to comply with a request from a female (Regan & Brehm, 1972; Bickman, 1974). Walsh (1977) found that an experimenter who was dressed formally (suit and tie) was less likely to secure compliance than one who was dressed more casually, regardless of the dress of the subject. Several studies have shown that nonverbal behaviors

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that increase intimacy result in greater compliance. Ernest and Cooper (1974) for example, found that increased eye contact and decreased interpersonal space between experimenter and subject resulted in greater compliance. Compliance may be decreased, however, when the decrease in interpersonal distance is sufficient to constitute a violation of personal space (Konecni, Libuser, Morton, Ebbesen, 1975).

Touching another person during a request for compliance might increase intimacy. Most literature on interpersonal touch has been descriptive (e.g. Jourard, 1966; Henley, 1973; Williams & Willis, 1978) with few studies examining touch as an independent variable. The studies that have manipulated touch have shown that: touch increased self disclosure (Jourard & Rubin, 1968; Pattison, 1973), touch improved the rating of a library for female subjects (Fisher, Rytting, & Heslin, 1976), touch increased verbalization among psychiatric patients (Aguilera, 1967), touch increased preference for geometric patterns (Silverthorne, Noreen, Hunt, & Rota, 1972), touch increased preference by children for counselors (Raiche, 1977), and touch decreased level of arousal (Geis and Viskne, 1972). One study that has involved the effects of touch upon compliance was reported by Kleinke (1977). In two experiments, subjects were approached with constant gaze or no gaze and a light touch on the arm or no touch during a request to return a dime left in a telephone booth or to lend the experimenter a dime. It was found that both gaze and touch resulted in increased compliance. The importance of the touch was difficult to evaluate in these experiments, however, because the touch subjects were approached at a distance of one and one half feet while no-touch subjects were approached at a distance of three feet. Distance alone has been shown to affect compliance as mentioned above. In addition, the requests in Kleinke's studies were all made by females.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of touch on compliance with approach distance held constant. Experimenters of both gender were used, and requests were made requiring two levels of effort on the part of subjects. The first request involved university students who were asked to sign a petition for a popular cause. The second involved shoppers who were asked to take a few minutes of their time to make several ratings of photographs.

EXPERIMENT 1

Methods

Subjects. 160 male and 160 female students were approached when they were standing alone on the sidewalks of the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus.

Procedure. Four male and four female experimenters who were naive with regard to the issues in the study each approached 40 male and 40 female students. The experimenters were casually and neatly dressed. The subjects were asked to sign a petition supporting the renovation of the Union Railroad Station in Kansas City for use as a science museum. The cause had been popular in the press, but a bond issue for the purpose had recently been narrowly defeated. Each petition contained at least eight signatures, but not more than 25 signatures when it was presented to the subjects, in order to avoid the implications that subjects were being asked to be pioneers or on the other hand, being a small part of a mass movement. If the subjects asked questions about the petition, they were told that experimenters were merely workers and knew nothing about the issue. Experimenters were trained to approach all subjects in an identical manner except that one half of all male and one half of all female subjects were touched lightly on the upper arm prior to the request and the other subjects were not touched. The touch condition was randomly assigned. Each subject was thanked for the time involved and the experimenter recorded gender, touch condition, and compliance.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Subjects. 128 female and 128 male shoppers ranging in age from 18 to 60 (estimated) were approached while they were standing alone on the mall of an enclosed shopping center in Kansas City.

Procedure. Four female and four male experimenters who were naive with regard to the issues in the study each approached 32 female and 32 male subjects. Experimenters were dressed as in Experiment 1. The experimenters introduced themselves as students working on a research project, and asked the subject if he/she would take the time to

complete a brief rating scale. Experimenters were trained to approach each subject in an identical manner except that one half of all female and one half of all male subjects were touched lightly on the upper arm prior to the request, and other subjects were not touched. The touch condition was randomly assigned. The rating task was part of another experiment that was not relevant to the present study. Each subject was thanked for the time involved, and the experimenter recorded subject gender, touch condition, and compliance.

The setting and task in the second experiment were chosen to provide a situation in which compliance would be more difficult to secure than in the first experiment.

The results of the two experiments were sufficiently simple that we decided to present the results and discussion of the two experiments in the same section.

RESULTS

The overall percentages of compliance were 68% for the petition signing and 54.7% for the participation in ratings. This supports our assumption that compliance in the second experiment would be more difficult. Apparently our requests for compliance were midway between the requests used by Kleinke (1977) who reported compliance percentages of 96 (touch) and 63 (no-touch) to a request to return a dime left in a phone booth and compliance percentages of 51 (touch) and 29 (no-touch) to a request to borrow a dime.

Table 1 contains the numbers of subjects who complied and who failed to comply in the two experiments in relation to the gender of the experimenter, the gender of the subjects, and the touch condition. In both experiments, compliance was more likely in the touch condition. In the first experiment, 130 subjects complied (81%) in the touch condition vs. 30 who did not comply, but in the no-touch condition, 88 complied (55%) and 72 did not ($\chi^2 = 25.39, p < .0001$). In the second experiment 89 complied (70%) in the touch condition vs. 39 who did not, and in the no-touch condition 51 complied (40%) and 77 did not ($\chi^2 (1) = 22.76, p < .001$). Subject gender was not related to compliance in either experiment for either touch condition. Female experimenters were more likely to secure compliance in the first experiment under both touch conditions, but in the second experiment compliance

was not related to experimenter gender. The numbers complying in the first experiment were: with touch, 71 (88%) to females and 59 (74%) to males ($\chi^2(1) = 5.90, p < .05$), without touch 53 (66%) to females and 35 (44%) to males ($\chi^2(1) = 8.18, p < .01$). A comparison of compliance rates with same gender vs. other gender experimenters showed that compliance was more likely with other gender experimenters in Experiment 2 under the no touch condition. With other gender experimenters 32 complied (50%) and 32 did not while for same gender experimenters, 19 complied (30%) and 45 (70%) did not ($\chi^2(1) = 5.51, p < .05$). There was no difference under the touch condition in Experiment 2 or under either condition in Experiment 1.

DISCUSSION

The results of these studies suggest that interpersonal touch can be an important aid in securing compliance. Ellsworth and Langer (1976) conclude that gaze increased compliance by increasing attention and involvement. Touch may operate in a similar way. We did not obtain the finding reported in previous studies that male compliance is more likely with female experimenters. Subjects of both gender were more likely to sign a petition for females but not more likely to take part in a study. Perhaps the general public as represented in a shopping center are more likely to accept a male in the role of requesting participation in research. We were particularly interested in the same vs. other gender effects, for the request to take part in the study. In the less personal (no touch) condition the shoppers were more likely to comply with cross gender experimenters, but with the more personal (touch) condition compliance was higher in every gender combination, and no gender difference was found. We had expected a negative reaction from males who were touched by other males whom they did not know, but the data did not reflect a negative reaction, nor did we observe these actions during the data collection.

It would appear that touch is important in securing compliance; moreover if the request is more difficult, and most important in securing same gender compliance. Obviously we cannot recommend unqualified support for interpersonal touch in attempts to gain compliance. Kleinke (1977) used a light touch on the arm and we have used the same pattern in these and other

studies. It is easy to imagine patterns of touch that would not only decrease compliance, but also result in an attack on our experimenters. An obvious next step is the variation of body areas involved in touch. There may well be patterns of touch that are more effective than a light touch on the upper arm in increasing compliance. In conclusion we believe that increasing compliance in a face to face situation is more important than the present state of the art would seem to indicate.

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