Effects of Flattery in Obtaining Compliance

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Abstract

This research investigated the relationship of flattery in obtaining compliance. Thirty male and thirty female students from Carnegie Mellon University were approached by a confederate of the opposite gender and asked to complete a one-page questionnaire. Afterwards, the confederates either flattered the participant using specific or non-specific flattery or did not flatter the participants at all. These assignments were random and the confederate had no knowledge of the treatment prior to approaching the participant. The confederate then asked the participant to complete a five-page questionnaire. We hypothesized that the most compliance would be obtained in the specific flattery condition, followed by the non-specific flattery condition, with the no flattery condition eliciting the least compliance. Our findings supported this hypothesis. We also examined whether women showed more compliance than men across all conditions. Our results indicated that women did show more compliance but only for the two types of flattery conditions. The implications of this study can be applied to areas where flattery would be helpful in obtaining compliance such as in advertising, sales and politics. There are many situations in life in when people are able to convince a person or even an entire group to comply with their wishes. These situations are probably most apparent in the sales industry, advertising industry, and political realm. It is conceivable that in these situations, flattery was used to gain compliance. It is important to research and test this social phenomenon because the findings can be highly relevant not only in the advertising and sales industries and the political realm, but also on a basic level of interactions between people on a daily basis.

One theory to explain why flattery would elicit compliance suggests that when people are in a good mood, they are more susceptible to persuasion. A study done by Janis, Kaye and Kirschner (1965) demonstrated that
when participants were given food to consume while reading persuasive messages, they were more likely to be influenced by the message than those participants who were not given anything to eat. Janis, Kaye and Kirschner (1965) concluded that the snacks produced a good feeling in the participants, making them more sensitive to the persuasion. To explain this phenomenon, Schwarz, Bless and Bohner (1991) theorized that people who are happy do not rely as much on systematic thinking or heuristic cues in order to arrive at a decision. Thus, these people are more impulsive and make quicker decisions. Since being flattered or complimented would put most people in a good mood, they would tend to agree to a request made of them initially without thinking about it.

Another theory which would support why people would comply to the wishes or suggestions of another is that of behavioral confirmation. Behavioral Confirmation Theory or Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Theory states that people act in ways which confirm others’ expectations of them. For example, people who are considered intelligent by others, might act in ways which would confirm their perception of them, such as by reading more books or going to the library more often. A study by Christensen and Rosenthal (1982) illustrated this in an experiment in which participants interviewed each other in a biased and unbiased condition. Each pair consisted of one participant, the interviewer, and a partner who was also a participant. In the biased condition, the interviewers were told that their partners was chosen especially because of their friendly attitude. In the unbiased condition, interviewers were told that their partners were randomly chosen. The participant partners in the biased condition were rated as acting friendlier than those in the unbiased condition. This demonstrated behavioral conformity. Since the interviewers in the biased condition expected their partners to be friendly and treated them as such, the participants who were the partners acted friendlier. Since flattery is a way of attributing a characteristic to a person, it would therefore evoke a behavior from the person being flattered that should be consistent with the flattery itself. Their study also examined the occurrence of behavioral conformity in same gender and mixed gender dyads. Their results indicated that behavioral conformity operates in both types of dyads, with additional findings emphasizing increased behavioral conformity in women more so than men.

Another study by Barry and Shapiro (1992) examined the effect of flattery as a “soft tactic” to elicit compliance. In their experiment, graduate business students were placed in an imaginary situation in which an interviewer from their ideal firm had to change the time of their interview. The interviewer used either “soft tactics”—flattery and an apology, or “hard tactics”—a direct request. Although their results were not significant, there was some evidence that soft tactics worked better than hard tactics in eliciting compliance.

Our research hypothesizes that flattery induces compliance. Two experimental conditions and one control condition were tested. The first
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experimental condition consisted of participants who were flattered by the confederate with an attribute that was specific to the task. The second experimental condition was non-specific flattery in which confederates also flattered the participants but with an attribute that was not relevant to the task. In the control condition, the confederates did not flatter the participants. We expected to find the least compliance in the control (no flattery) condition, some compliance in the non-specific flattery condition and the most compliance in the specific flattery condition. In addition, we examined whether or not there were any gender effects since our confederates were always the opposite gender of our participants. We examined this possible gender difference as an exploratory variable.

Method

Participants

A total number of sixty undergraduates at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania were used as participants in this experiment—thirty males and thirty females. The average age of the male participants was 20.7 years and the average age of the female participants was 20.4 years.

Design and Materials

Our study was a 2 x 3, between-participants, experimental design. The independent variables were gender and flattery. The two levels of gender were male and female, and the three levels of flattery were the no flattery condition, the flattery specific to the task condition, and the flattery non-specific to the task condition. The people assigned to our no flattery condition were our control group. The people assigned to the flattery specific and flattery non-specific conditions were our experimental groups. Our single dependent variable was compliance to the task.

As a validity check for flattery, we designed the Flattery Assessment Test (appendix A) as a pilot test to test the validity of our flattering statements. We created three different versions of this test simply by changing the order of questions one, two, and three. We also designed a one-page Quality of Life at CMU survey (appendix B) which all participants must fill out to qualify as participants. As a manipulation check, we designed questions two and five for participants to rate their general feelings of helpfulness and intelligence. We also designed the Follow-up Survey (appendix C) to assess the validity and reliability of our measures. We expected that people who complied to the second part of our experiment, after the manipulation, would feel more helpful when they were told that they looked helpful and more intelligent when they were told that they looked intelligent.

Since our manipulation of what we perceived to be flattering state-
ments is novel, the validity of our statements will be based on the responses to the Flattery Assessment Test and the responses to the Follow-up Survey. It will be reliable if everyone in the same condition answers on the same end of the scale. The validity and reliability of the person’s gender is straightforward based on their appearance. However, as a check on the person’s gender, we included a gender question in our Follow-up Survey. The validity and reliability of the person’s compliance is straightforward based on whether or not the person complies to the second part of our experiment, after the manipulation.

Procedure

Participants were approached during times when the experimenters felt that people were not rushing off to class so that people were not likely to say that they did not have time to fill out the questionnaire. Participants were approached in areas central to the campus and which most people from different colleges and backgrounds were most likely to pass. Female participants were approached by a male experimenter and male participants were approached by a female experimenter. This was to test the effect of gender as an exploratory variable in our analysis. The same two experimenters were used across the genders to increase the internal validity of our study. In addition, experimenters did not approach people who they knew because that would have distorted our test of flattery.

Experimenters, with a neutral facial expression and neutral tone of voice, asked all participants to fill out a “short, one-page” questionnaire regarding the quality of life at CMU. After participants complied to the first request, the experimenters determined which condition they were in based on a randomly pre-assigned code on the back of all the one-page questionnaires, and acted accordingly. This was to eliminate any potential experimenter bias. The specific script that was used is given in appendix D. In the flattery specific condition, the participants were told that they look helpful and then asked to fill out an additional, optional five-page questionnaire. In the flattery non-specific condition, the participants were told that they look intelligent and then asked to fill out an additional, optional five-page questionnaire. In the control condition, participants were not flattered, but were simply asked to fill out an additional, optional five-page questionnaire. This is how flattery was operationalized. Compliance to this second request is how the dependent variable—compliance—was operationalized.

If the participants complied to the second request, they did not actually have to fill out a five-page questionnaire, but instead were debriefed and asked to fill out the Follow-up Survey. They were told that all responses would be confidential and that the experimenter would not be able to identify them by the questionnaire. The participants who did not comply to the second request, were also debriefed and asked to fill out the Follow-up Survey.
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Results

Of the sixty participants asked to do the second optional questionnaire, in the no flattery condition, we received a 40% compliance rate as compared to 70% compliance rate for the non-specific flattery condition and 95% compliance rate for the specific flattery condition (figure 1). Across the different conditions, we used chi-squared tests to check for significance in the compliance rates. In our first comparison of flattery versus non-flattery, we found a significant relationship between flattery and compliance ($\chi^2 (1, N=60) = 11.144, p < .005$). Our next comparison of the flattery specific condition and the flattery non-specific condition also showed a significant relationship between the type of flattery and compliance ($\chi^2 (1, N=40) = 4.33, p < .05$). These results indicate that people who were flattered were more likely to comply and that people who were in the flattery specific condition were even more likely to comply to the task.

Overall, men had a 40% compliance rate for the no flattery condition, 60% compliance rate for the non-specific flattery condition and 90% for the specific flattery condition. Women also had a 40% compliance rate for the no flattery condition. However, for the non-specific flattery condition they had an 80% compliance rate and a 100% compliance rate for the specific flattery condition. In our gender analysis of flattery versus non-flattery, we found a slight gender effect. Males had a weaker relation to flattery ($\chi^2 (1, N=30) = 3.568, p < .10$) than females ($\chi^2 (1, N=30) = 8.941, p < .005$). This indicates that females were more influenced by flattery than males. In our analysis of the flattery specific versus the flattery non-specific across gender, there were no gender differences. The males ($\chi^2 (1, N=20) = 2.4, p > 0.10$) showed about the same relationship between the different types of flattery as did the females ($\chi^2 (1, N=20) = 2.22, p > 0.10$). The effects within each gender, indicate a greater relationship than by only examining an overall effect of specific versus non-specific flattery on gender ($\chi^2 (1, N=33) = .066, p > .25$). Males and females complied at relatively the same rate across the different flattery conditions.

The results we obtained from the Flattery Assessment Test which was our pilot test and our manipulation check for flattery, did not show any statistical significance. In addition, an analysis of our follow-up questionnaire, our validity check for flattery, did not show any significant results.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the effects of flattery on compliance. We found significant results indicating that flattery does induce compliance. Furthermore, we found significant results indicating that flattery specific to the task yielded more compliance than flattery non-specific to the task. This implies that the behavioral confirmation theory, in which participants would comply to fulfill the experimenter's expectancies, is more salient than the
affective theories, in which participants would comply because the flattery would induce a good mood. This finding is consistent with Christensen and Rosenthal's (1982) finding of support for behavioral confirmation.

The design of our study was also very similar to Barry and Shapiro's (1992) study of "soft" versus "hard" tactics. Their results, however, failed to reach significance. This is possibly due to the hypothetical situation in their experiment and the power imbalance. The participants were put in a subordinate position because they wanted the job interview with their ideal company. In our study, the situation was real, not hypothetical, and there was no power imbalance since we used peer interactions.

Possible limitations to our study are threats to the external and internal validity. Threats to the internal validity of our study is experimenter bias because the experimenter could choose who to approach and could have influenced the participant. In the future, to possibly rectify this problem, experimenters should stand in one location and be required to approach every person that passes by within a certain time period. Another threat to the internal validity is selection bias. People could only participate if they agreed to comply to the first request. This problem seems harder to rectify since participants had to agree to an initial request before being flattered. This is a problem that most experimental psychologists encounter since they cannot force participants to partake in their studies but must rely upon the participant's decision to do it.

Threats to the external validity of our study involves the setting of our study. All participants were approached in a non-controlled environment, in which they could have been easily distracted by noise and people passing by. This could have affected our results. In addition, people may have been in a rush and may have not carefully considered the choices in the questionnaires. A possible solution to this problem in future studies would be to approach people in quiet areas and to approach people who did not look like they were in a rush. Another threat to the external validity of our study is the population we used. Since we used only college students at CMU, it is possible that our findings cannot be generalized for the whole population of people at large. In future studies of this kind, it is advisable that a random sampling of many different kinds of people be used.

Possible reasons why our manipulation check did not work is because it was a self-report and because of the effect of social desirability. Participants may have wanted to seem helpful or intelligent in front of the experimenter and therefore rated themselves as really helpful or intelligent. The questions we used to tap into helpfulness and intelligence in the Quality of Life at CMU survey and the Follow-up survey may not have been comparable. In other words, they may not have tapped into the same thing, especially in terms of helpfulness. People may also have different definitions of helpfulness. Furthermore, people may have become sensitive to our asking of their helpfulness and intelligence between the Quality of Life at CMU survey and the Follow-up survey.
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Possible reasons why our pilot test did not show significance was because of the small sample size. We only had ten people in each condition. In addition, it was a self-report of a hypothetical situation. People's responses in a hypothetical situation can be very different from their responses in realistic situations. Since we did not formally administer it, people may have not taken it seriously and perhaps did not think about it.

Although, we only tested possible gender differences in being influenced by flattery as an exploratory variable, our findings did show that there was a slight gender effect, in which females were more influenced by flattery, in general, than males. This is consistent with Christensen and Rosenthal's (1982) finding that females were more easily influenced than males. A possible reason why there was no significant result across the two flattery conditions is because our participants were a non-traditional, closed college population. The college students may not have discriminated across the different types of flattery and may not have carefully considered their responses.

In conclusion, based on our results, flattery does seem to induce compliance. Furthermore, flattery specific to the task at hand is more effective than flattery non-specific to the task at hand. Thus, our study provides more support for the theory of behavioral confirmation, in which a person acts to fulfill another person’s expectancies. Future studies should examine other possible gender effects, especially across same-sex dyads, in which the male experimenter approaches prospective male participants, and the female experimenter approaches prospective female participants.

References


Figure 1
A Comparison of Compliance Rates Across Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITIONS</th>
<th>Compliance Rates by Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Flattery</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Specific Flattery</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Flattery</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A

Flattery Assessment Test

Thank you for taking out the time to fill out this questionnaire. Please think the questions out carefully and be as honest as possible.

A person approaches you to fill out a one-page questionnaire on the quality of student life at CMU. You agree. After you fill out the questionnaire, the person says to you:

1) “You look like a real helpful person. Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”

   a) Would you fill it out? yes no

      If you answered no, go directly to question 2.
      If you answered yes, answer (b) and (c) and then go to question 2

   b) How good did you feel when the person said, “You look like a real helpful person. Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”?

      1 2 3 4 5 6
      not at all very good

   c) How helpful did you feel when the person said, “You look like a real helpful person. Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”?

      1 2 3 4 5 6
      not at all very good

2) “You look like an intelligent person. Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”

   a) Would you fill it out? yes no

      If you answered no, go directly to question 3.
      If you answered yes, answer (b) and (c) and then go to question 3.

   b) How good did you feel when the person said, “You look like an intelligent person. Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”?

      1 2 3 4 5 6
      not at all very good

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c) How helpful did you feel when the person said, “You look like an intelligent person. Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”?

1  2  3  4  5  6
not at all very good

3) “Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire?”

a) Would you fill it out?  yes  no
   If you answered no, you’re done.
   If you answered yes, answer (b) and (c).

b) How good did you feel when the person said, “Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire.”?

1  2  3  4  5  6
not at all very good

c) How helpful did you feel when the person said, “Will you fill out this optional five-page questionnaire.”?

1  2  3  4  5  6
not at all very good

Thanks for filling this out.

Appendix B

Quality of Life at CMU

We are interested in obtaining a measure of the quality of life at CMU. Below are a list of statements containing attitudes towards CMU. Please read them carefully and answer as honestly as possible. There are no correct answers. We are only interested in opinions.

1. “Compared to my friends at other colleges, I am very satisfied.”

strongly disagree 1  2  3  4  5  6 strongly agree

2. “If another person asks me for assistance, academic or personal, I would help that person.”

strongly disagree 1  2  3  4  5  6 strongly agree

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3. “I meet many diverse and interesting people on a daily basis.”

| strongly disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | strongly agree |

4. “My professors seem to take a personal interest in me and my work.”

| strongly disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | strongly agree |

5. “On a scale of 1-6, rate your intelligence as compared to other students.”

| not very intelligent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | not very intelligent |

6. “On a scale of 1-6, rate your overall college experience.”

| not very intelligent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | not very intelligent |

Appendix C

Follow-up Survey

Thank you for taking out the time to fill out this questionnaire. Please think the questions out carefully and be as honest as possible. Your identity will remain confidential and unknown to the experimenter.

Gender (circle one): M   F   Age: _____ College: _________________

Did you agree to fill out the additional five-page questionnaire?

Yes   No

How creative do you feel?
not creative at all

| not creative | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | extremely creative |

How intelligent do you feel?
not intelligent at all

| not intelligent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | extremely intelligent |

How confident do you feel?
not confident at all

| not confident | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | extremely confident |
How helpful do you feel?
not helpful 1 2 3 4 5 6 extremely helpful
at all

How generous do you feel?
not generous 1 2 3 4 5 6 extremely generous
at all

How friendly was the person who asked you to fill out the questionnaire?
not friendly 1 2 3 4 5 6 extremely friendly
at all

How sincere was the person who asked you to fill out the questionnaire?
not sincere 1 2 3 4 5 6 extremely sincere
at all

(Optional) Please use the remaining space or reverse side to write any comments or feelings you had about the experiment, the survey, or the experimenter.

Appendix D

SCRIPT

- Participants should be approached during times which the experimenters feel that people are not rushing off to class. Given that most classes start on the half hour, potential participants should be approached from approximately quarter before the hour to quarter after the hour.
- Participants should be approached in areas central to the campus, in which most people from different colleges and backgrounds should pass by, such as Doherty Hall. (other places: Morewood Cafeteria, area between Wean & Porter, in front of Hunt library, Baker Hall)
- Experimenters cannot approach people that they know.
- The female experimenter will approach only males, and the male experimenter will approach only females. (ideally 30 each)
- Keep track of the number of people you ask, even if they say no to the first request. Also, keep track of people that agree to the first request, but refuse to fill out the follow-up survey.
- Make note of any details that is possibly affecting our results that we can include in the discussion section. (i.e. Seniors not wanting to fill out the quality of life survey because changes won't affect them.)
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What to say when first approaching? [Experimenters should have a neutral facial expression and a neutral tone of voice that cannot be interpreted as flattering.]

"I am doing this study on the quality of life at CMU. Will you fill out this short, one-page questionnaire? There are no correct answers. We are only interested in opinions. This is for a class."

After the person agrees and gives back the questionnaire, look at the pre-assigned code on the bottom of their questionnaire to determine which condition the person is in and what to say next.

For participants in the control condition:

"Will you fill out this additional, optional five-page questionnaire?"

For participants in the flattery specific condition:

"You look like a really helpful person. Will you fill out this additional, optional five-page questionnaire?"

For participants in the flattery non-specific condition:

"You look like a really intelligent person. Will you fill out this additional, optional five-page questionnaire?"

Whether or not the participant complies to the second request, they will not actually have to fill out an additional five-page questionnaire. Instead, they will be told that we are researching the effects of flattery on compliance.

If participants ask what five-page questionnaire is for, say:

"The five-page questionnaire is a more in depth quality of life survey."

For participants that agree to the second request:

"You don’t actually have to fill out an additional five-page questionnaire. I am actually researching the effects of flattery on compliance for a psychology class. Can you please fill out this short follow-up survey? Please be as honest as possible. Your responses will be confidential, and I will not be able to identify you by them. When you are done, you can put them into this envelope, which contains many other responses. Thank you for your time."
For participants that do not agree to the second request:
"I am actually researching the effects of flattery on compliance for a psychology class. Can you please fill out this short follow-up survey? Please be as honest as possible. Your responses will be confidential, and I will not be able to identify you by them. When you are done, you can put them into this envelope, which contains many other responses. Thank you for your time."