

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

‘Ask and Ye Shall Receive’: Underestimating Our Social Power

by David G. Myers

[Bohns, V. K. \(2016\). \(Mis\)understanding our influence over others: A review of the underestimation-of-compliance effect. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25, 119–123.](#)

In one of Stanley Milgram’s lesser-known experiments, he and John Sabini (1978) asked students to violate a simple social norm — to ask New York City subway riders for their seats (“Excuse me. May I please have your seat?”). To their and their students’ surprise, even when no justification was given, 56% of riders complied.

After inviting students to make similar varied requests of more than 14,000 strangers, Vanessa Bohns (formerly Vanessa Lake) has likewise found a much-greater-than-expected compliance rate. Some examples from Francis Flynn and Lake’s (2008) studies with Columbia University students:

“Will you fill out a questionnaire?” Instructors asked, “How many people do you think you will have to approach before you get five people to fill out a questionnaire?” The average student estimated 20.5, but it took only half that many “asks” — 10.5.

“Can I use your cell phone to make a call?” Students guessed it would take 10.1 requests to get three people to agree, but it only took 6.2.

“Can you show me where the gym is? Will you walk me there?” Students expected to ask 7.2 students to find someone willing to escort them the two blocks to within sight of the gym, but it only took 2.3.

The bottom line: People underestimate the power of the ask. That’s even true when people are asked to electrically shock someone (as in Milgram’s famous experiments), donate to charity, sign their name to a white lie, or write a prank word in a library book (as in Bohns’s

experiments). The common result: When making requests, people tend to expect a “no” but often get a “yes.”

These findings, which testify to our influence on others (not just others’ influence on us), suggest a demonstration activity. Students could be asked, “If you asked 10 strangers to loan you their cell phones to make a call, how many would agree?” Then, before the next class period, have them perform this experiment and report their findings.

Invite students to reflect on their (dis)comfort in making this simple request. Most of Milgram and Sabini’s students found it excruciatingly difficult to make the norm-breaching request for a subway seat. Often, the words got stuck in their throats, and they had to withdraw. Once they made the request and got a seat, they sometimes justified their norm violation by pretending to be (or actually being) sick. Years later, one student recalled being “afraid I was going to throw up” (Luo, 2004).

Did your students find even the simple phone ask a bit awkward? And are there real-life situations during which they have dreaded or felt anxious making asks — perhaps knocking on doors to sell cookies, requesting a recommendation letter, or asking someone on a date? If so, might their knowledge of the underestimation-of-compliance phenomenon give them greater courage in making future asks?

Bohns’s findings bring to mind the famous finding that when approached by someone of the other sex — “Hi, I’ve been noticing you around campus lately, and I find you very attractive. Would you have sex with me tonight?” — most men but no women on one university campus answered yes (Clark & Hatfield, 1989). But the lesser-known finding from this study — which perhaps can embolden students making an ask — is that half the students of both sexes answered “yes” when simply asked for a date (“Would you go out with me tonight?”).

Why Do We Underestimate Compliance?

Can your students anticipate Bohns’s explanations for people’s underestimating their own social power?

People don’t appreciate the discomfort of saying “no” to a personal, face-to-face request. Invite your students to “imagine that a student comes up to *you* and asks to borrow your phone. Would you agree?” Students likely will understand that they would probably say “yes” lest they appear to not trust the person or to be unhelpful.

People focus too much on the costs of others’ compliance (and too little on the embarrassment and awkwardness of saying “no”).

Factors That Do and Don’t Influence Compliance

Size of request. Bohns reports that people expected that a more burdensome request — completing a 10-page rather than a 1-page questionnaire — would yield a much higher rate of noncompliance. But it didn’t.

Culture. Compared with people in the individualistic United States, people in China better appreciate the social awkwardness of saying “no” (and therefore exhibit less underestimation of compliance).

The door in the face. People expect that those who say “no” to an initial request to fill out a questionnaire will then be more likely to refuse another request (to mail a letter). Actually,

compliance went *up* following a prior refusal. Saying “no” twice apparently is more uncomfortable than doing so once.

How the request is conveyed. People find it harder to say “no” when approached face-to-face (rather than via e-mail or flyers) and with a direct request (“Will you lend me your phone?”) rather than with an indirect one (“I could really use a phone right now”).

Bohns’s findings ring true as I reflect on my own responses to the many asks for money that my wife and I receive (related to a family foundation). Saying “no” is easy when requests are conveyed by mail and from strangers and more difficult when made directly, face-to-face, and by acquaintances. We humans are, after all, social animals. Our ancestors flourished in groups that practiced mutual support and reciprocity. So perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised at the compelling power of a reasonable ask.

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