

# When opportunity knocks: The effect of a perceived unique opportunity on compliance

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# Jerry M. Burger<sup>1</sup> and David F. Caldwell<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Four studies examined the effect of a perceived unique opportunity on compliance. In all four studies, participants who believed they had an opportunity available to few others were more likely to agree with a request than participants who believed the opportunity was widely available or participants who received no opportunity information. We attribute the effect to a widely held heuristic that one should take advantage of unique opportunities. Study results demonstrated that people respond to a perceived unique opportunity even when supplies are not limited and when the opportunity is the result of pure chance. The results of a mediation analysis supported the interpretation that the perceived uniqueness of the opportunity underlies the effect.

### Keywords

compliance, heuristics, opportunity, scarcity

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He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he had failed. —William James

When asked a simple favor, such as lending a co-worker \$10 or buying a bar of chocolate for a fund-raiser, most of us respond with little or no hesitation. Rather than investing the time and effort to ponder the pluses and minuses of each option, we tend to rely on what researchers refer to as heuristic processing (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). That is, over the course of a lifetime, we have learned various heuristics, or rules of thumb, that we apply in a near-automatic fashion. The advantage of heuristic processing is that it allows us to navigate through our days without investing unnecessary cognitive effort each time we encounter a familiar situation. The disadvantage is that we occasionally apply heuristics in inappropriate situations and may make ourselves vulnerable to exploitation by individuals who

Corresponding author:

Jerry M. Burger, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053, USA. Email: jburger@scu.edu

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Santa Clara University <sup>2</sup>Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University

understand how these heuristics work (Cialdini, 2009; Levine, 2003).

A great deal of research has examined the use of heuristics in compliance situations (Burger, 2007). For example, most people rely on a rule of thumb that says we agree to requests from friends. However, researchers find that individuals also are more likely to agree to a request when it comes from someone who simply acts like a friend. Participants in one study complied at higher rates after they engaged in a short dialogue (as compared to a monologue) with the requester (Dolinski, Nawrat, & Rudak, 2001). Presumably the two-way dialogue resembled the way friends interact, and the participants responded to the request as if it came from a friend.

We were interested in compliance and heuristics based on the scarcity principle, i.e., the notion that the less available an opportunity, the more valuable it appears (Worchel, Lee, & Adewole, 1975). Researchers have identified two ways the scarcity principle may come into play in compliance situations (Cialdini, 2009). First, a product can be described as being in short supply. We see this principle in operation when a sale is said to continue only "while supplies last". Second, the scarcity principle can affect compliance when an opportunity is described as available for a limited amount of time. We see examples of this use of the principle when sale prices are limited to "this weekend only". Because scare objects are seen as more valuable, the consumer is more likely to purchase the product under these circumstances than when no information about a short supply or time limit is given.

The present set of studies was designed to examine another way the scarcity principle might affect compliance. We propose that most adults in this culture have come to rely on a rule of thumb that says one should take advantage of a unique opportunity. Specifically, the rule says that we should take advantage of opportunities that few others have access to. For example, if I believe I can purchase tickets to a play at a low price that is unavailable to most people, I am more likely to buy the tickets than if I believe many people have access to this same price. Note that a perceived unique opportunity can affect compliance independently of either a perceived short supply or a perceived time limit. I am more likely to buy the tickets in the above example even if there are plenty of tickets available and even if there is no looming time limit to make my purchase. In short, we are proposing a widely used heuristic that affects compliance above and beyond the effects of limited supplies or limited time demonstrated in previous investigations. Attempts to exploit this heuristic can be seen when salespeople and marketers proclaim a product is "not available to the public" or that the recipient of a piece of mail has been "specially selected" to receive the offer inside. We conducted four studies to examine the effect of the unique opportunity heuristic on compliance.

# Study 1

The first study was designed to demonstrate the basic unique opportunity effect. We led some participants to believe that they were among a relatively small percentage of people to receive an opportunity. We expected these individuals to agree to the request more often than participants not given this impression. We also included a condition in which participants were selected to receive the opportunity, but their selection did not place them in a particularly unique category. This common opportunity condition allows us to rule out explanations based on having a short interaction with the requester or simply being selected. We predicted an increase in compliance only when participants believed their opportunity was relatively unique.

### Method

**Participants** One hundred and fifty three undergraduates (73 men, 80 women) were randomly selected from a phone directory of undergraduate students at a private liberal arts university.

**Procedure** Experimenters telephoned randomly selected participants from the undergraduate directory. Students who did not answer were not called back. In all conditions, the experimenter introduced himself or herself as a student at the university working on a research project with two faculty members. The experimenter explained that he or she was looking for participants for a 15-minute study and that students who participated would be eligible for a raffle for a \$25 gift certificate at the campus bookstore. The experimenter said that the odds of winning the certificate were approximately 1 in 30.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the unique condition, the experimenter said, "We can't use everyone in the study. So could I ask you two short questions first? First, which foreign language did you study in high school? Second, how many brothers and sisters do you have?" Regardless of how participants responded to the two questions, the experimenter acted as if the answers matched what he or she was looking for. The experimenter said, "That's perfect. We are looking for students who took (language mentioned by student) in high school and who have (no/one/two/more than two) siblings".

The experimenter asked participants assigned to the common condition two different questions. These participants were asked, "First, how old are you? Second, you are a (male/female), correct?" Regardless of the participant's answers, the experimenter said, "That's perfect. We are looking for a (participant's gender) student between the ages of 18 and 22". Approximately half of the undergraduates at the university where the study was conducted are male and half female. Moreover, all but a very small percentage are between the ages of 18 and 22. In fact, no participant contacted in this condition was older than 22. Thus, participants in the common condition should have realized that they were given an opportunity that virtually every other undergraduate their gender also qualified for.

Participants assigned to the control condition received no questions. At this point all participants were told: "I've got several times next week when you can participate. Again, it only takes about 15 minutes, and you could win a \$25 gift certificate. Are you interested?" Experimenters waited until they received a clear yes or no answer, but did not repeat the request or try to persuade the participant. If participants agreed to the request, they were scheduled for one of several experimental sessions the following week.

When participants arrived at the session, they were given blank index cards and asked to put their names and e-mail addresses on the card. The experimenter explained that they would be used for the raffle at the end of the session. The cards also allowed the experimenter to record which participants showed up for the session. The experimenter passed out and collected a short questionnaire unrelated to the present study. Then the experimenter drew one of the index cards from a basket and awarded a \$25 gift certificate to the winner of the raffle.

### Results and discussion

A compliance score was calculated for each participant, with 2 = verbal and behavioral compliance (agreed over the phone and showed up), 1 = verbal compliance only, 0 = neither verbal nor behavioral compliance. The mean scores for each condition are shown in Table 1. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect across the three conditions, F(2, 150) = 3.90, p = .02, partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ . As shown in the table, participants in the unique condition complied at a higher rate than participants in either the control condition (p = .01, LSD test). The common condition and the control condition did not differ significantly (p = .76, LSD test).<sup>1</sup>

The findings are entirely in line with our predictions. Participants were more likely to agree with the request when led to believe they had an opportunity that relatively few others had.

Moreover, there was no reason for participants in the unique opportunity condition to believe that their chances of participating or winning the gift certificate were more scarce than

Control	Common	Unique
.57	.61	.90
(.70)	(.60)	(.67)

Table 1. Mean compliance score

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses

they were in the other two conditions. Thus, the increase in compliance appears to reflect the unique opportunity heuristic.

# Study 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate the effect demonstrated in the first study using a different procedure for manipulating perceived uniqueness of the opportunity. Although it seems fair to assume that participants in Study 1 were able to roughly calculate the extent to which their opportunity was unique, Study 2 participants were provided unambiguous figures. The study was also designed to rule out a possible alternative explanation for the Study 1 results. It is possible that participants in the unique opportunity condition felt an obligation to help the requester that was not experienced by participants in the other two conditions. That is, participants led to believe few people qualified for the study may have felt that the requester especially needed them to participate in the investigation. Thus, the higher rates of compliance in this condition could have been aided by a desire to help the requester. To rule out this interpretation, we included statements in the requester's script that made it clear the requester did not particularly need the participant to agree with the request.

### Method

**Participants** One hundred and twenty-four undergraduates (40 men, 84 women) participated in the study in exchange for class credit.

**Procedure** Participants took part in the experiment one at a time. The experimenter explained that the study was concerned with the development of a new personality scale. Participants were told they would complete the new scale and then some additional measures. The experimenter handed participants the first scale, which was identified at the top of the page as the Interpersonal Orientation Test. The scale was a bogus test comprised of 40 general descriptive statements. Test takers were instructed to mark True of False on each item to indicate whether the statement described them. When completed, the experimenter collected the bogus test and gave the participant a second short personality scale to complete. The experimenter said he or she would grade the first test and pretended to grade the test while the participant worked on the second test.

The experimenter, blind to condition to this point, checked a sheet to see whether the participant had been randomly assigned to the unique, common or control condition. In the unique condition, after collecting the second test, the experimenter said, "We're looking for people who score between 21 and 30 on the new test". The experimenter showed the participant what appeared to be a computer printout that indicated the number of previous test takers with scores falling into various categories. The experimenter continued, "It's pretty uncommon. Only about 10 percent of the people who take the test fall in that range. But you are one of those people". To enhance the message, the lines on the printout for scores between 21 and 30 (toward the middle of the distribution) were circled with a bold black marker, and "10.3%" was written next to the circle.

In the common condition, the experimenter said, "We're looking for people who score between 21 and 30 on the new test". The experimenter again held up what appeared to be a printout of the test score distribution and said, "It's not that uncommon. About 75 percent of the people who take the test fall in that range. And you are one of those people". The lines for scores between 21 and 30 again were circled, and "74.9%" was written next to the circle. Participants assigned to the control condition received no feedback about their score on the first test. In all conditions, the experimenter then presented the request:

We'd like to ask you to come back another time to fill out a few more personality scales. It would take about 45 minutes. We can't give you any more class credit, but in exchange for your time, you would be entered into a raffle for a \$25 gift certificate for the campus bookstore.

To prevent participants from thinking that the experimenter was especially in need of their participation, the experimenter then told participants in all three conditions, "Actually, I think we probably have plenty of people doing the second part already. But it can't hurt to get a few extras".

The experimenter then handed the participant a sheet asking for some basic demographic information and a form identified as a Volunteer Sheet and said, "After you finish with the last form, could you read this, fill it out, and turn it in?" The experimenter explained that he or she would be leaving now, but that the participant should put the completed demographic form and the volunteer sheet in a large envelope on a nearby table. The envelope appeared to contain several previous participants' forms. The Volunteer Sheet repeated the request to complete some additional personality scales and the opportunity to be entered into a raffle for the gift certificate. The sheet explained that participants would be e-mailed by the experimenter to arrange participation times. Participants were asked to check one of two spaces indicating that they either would or would not like to participate in the next phase of data collection.

The experimenter closed the door as he or she left the room. When the participant left the room a few minutes later, he or she was met by the experimenter who asked the participant to return to the room for debriefing. The experimenter explained that there was no second phase of data collection and that all participants would be entered into the raffle.

Table 2.	Percent and number of participants
agreeing	to the request

Control	Common	Unique
54.0%	64.3%	87.5%
(23/42)	(27/42)	(35/40)

# Results and discussion

The percentages of participants who agreed to the request in each condition are shown in Table 2. There was an overall effect for compliance rate across the three conditions,  $\chi^2$  (2, N = 124) = 10.72, p = .006,  $\phi = .29$ . Specific cell comparisons revealed significantly higher rates of compliance in the unique condition than in either the control condition,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 82) = 9.08, p = .003,  $\phi = .33$ , or the common condition,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 82) = 4.79, p = .03,  $\phi = .24$ . The common condition and the control condition did not differ from one another,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 84) = .44, p = .50.

The findings parallel those from the first study. Participants who believed they were among the one in ten who qualified for the opportunity were more likely to agree to the request than those who believed they were among the three in four who qualified. Moreover, the requester made it clear to participants in all conditions that he or she had no particular need for the participant to agree with the request. Thus, the increase in compliance appears to be due to triggering a unique opportunity heuristic rather than an increased sense of obligation to help the requester.

# Study 3

The results of the first two studies provide consistent support for the notion that individuals are more likely to comply with a request when they perceive it to be a unique opportunity. We argue that people respond to a perceived opportunity by applying a useful heuristic in a semi-automatic fashion. To that end, Study 3 was designed to rule out an alternative interpretation of the effect, i.e., that being selected for a unique opportunity might lead individuals to feel they have somehow earned or are entitled to the opportunity. It is possible that participants in the unique opportunity conditions in Studies 1 and 2 felt they had earned their opportunity by virtue of possessing a special characteristic. Of course, an objective analysis of the situation would reveal that taking one language over another or having a certain number of siblings falls short of a personal achievement. Similarly, having a middle-of-thedistribution score on an unknown personality variable that the experimenter happens to want to know more about is not much of an accomplishment. Nonetheless, it is possible that some participants in these conditions felt a small sense of achievement or entitlement, and this reaction conceivably could have increased their agreement with the request.

To explore this possibility, we created a situation in which participants could clearly see that the unique opportunity was the result of chance and had nothing to do with personal characteristics. We also wanted to replicate the effect using a different kind of request. In addition to increasing the rate at which people donate their time and money, social influence researchers often attempt to increase the extent to which individuals purchase products. Thus, for Study 3 we created a situation that resembled a sales pitch.

### Method

**Participants** Eighty undergraduates (29 male, 51 female) participated in the study in exchange for class credit.

**Procedure** Participants took part in the study one at a time. The experimenter explained that the study was concerned with consumers' initial reactions to products and that the participant would be asked to provide evaluations for 15 different products commonly marketed on college campuses. The participant was handed a binder that contained color photographs of 12 products sold in the campus bookstore, each of which included the university's logo and/or name. The experimenter also handed the participant an evaluation form with spaces for evaluating each product on seven semantic differential scales. Participants were instructed to evaluate each of the 12 pictured products using the scale items and were told that the experimenter would then display examples of the last three items to be evaluated. When participants completed their evaluations of the 12 items pictured in the binder, the experimenter set the last three items on the table one at a time for the participant to evaluate. The last item evaluated was an insulated travel mug which retailed for \$15 in the campus bookstore.

When all the evaluations were complete, the experimenter thanked the participant and announced the session was over. Before the participant could rise to leave, the experimenter said,

One more thing before you go. We have a bunch of these travel mugs left over from an earlier version of this study. So we decided to offer them for sale to students who participate in this study. They cost \$15 at the bookstore, but we're selling them at the price we paid for them. Because we bought in bulk and because we were doing a study, they charged us only \$5 per mug.

In the unique condition, the experimenter then said, "So we decided to do a random drawing". The experimenter held up a bowl with six folded pieces of paper in it. The experimenter said, "One of these six slips of paper has a star on it". The participant was asked to select one of the slips from the bowl and unfold it. In truth, each of the six pieces of paper had a star on it. After the participant made his or her selection, the experimenter said, "You selected the star. That makes you eligible for one of the travel mugs at the reduced price".

Participants in the common condition heard a similar presentation. However, there were only two pieces of paper in the bowl, both of which had a star. Participants in the control condition were told nothing about a random drawing, and were thus left to believe that all participants had an opportunity to purchase a travel mug at the reduced price. In all conditions, the experimenter ended the request by asking, "Would you be interested in buying one?" Participants who expressed an interest in purchasing one of the travel mugs were told that they would be sent information via e-mail on when and where they could buy the mug. These participants were later sent an e-mail message explaining that they could purchase the mug in the psychology department office any time during the following week. When they arrived to buy the travel mug, participants were asked their name, handed a mug, and told that the experimenters decided to give the mugs away at no charge.

### Results and discussion

We first compared the percentage of participants in each condition who said they were interested in purchasing a mug. No significant difference was found on this measure,  $\chi^2$  (2, N = 80) = .38, p = .83. We then examined the percentages of participants in each condition who actually came to the office to purchase a travel mug. This analysis revealed a statistically significant effect,  $\chi^2$  (2, N = 80 = 7.58, p = .02,  $\phi = .31$ . As shown in Table 3, the pattern of results is similar to that found in the first two studies. Participants in the unique condition were more likely to pick up a mug than participants in either the common condition or the control condition. A comparison between the unique condition and the other two conditions combined revealed a significant difference,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 80) = 5.50, p = .02,  $\phi = .26$ . Specific cell comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference between the unique condition and the common condition,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 55) = 4.34, p = .04,  $\phi = .28$ , but the comparison between the unique condition and the control condition fell short of statistical significance,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 51) = 1.97, p = .16. The findings complement those from the first two studies. In addition, they suggest that individuals respond to a unique opportunity even when that opportunity came to them entirely as a result of chance.

It is interesting to note that the unique opportunity effect appeared in this study when we examined the participants' actual behavior but not when examining the percentage of participants

 Table 3. Percent and number of participants

 purchasing mugs

Control	Common	Unique
8.0%	3.4%	26.9%
(2/25)	(1/29)	(7/26)

who merely said they were interested in purchasing a mug. This pattern contrasts with the one we identified in Study 1 in which both verbal and behavioral data contributed to the effect. We can only speculate about the reasons for this difference between what our Study 3 participants said and what they did. Because they were sitting across the table from the requester (as compared to talking over the phone in Study 1), it may have been difficult for some participants to say no even when they did not want to purchase a mug. At any rate, the findings illustrate the importance of examining actual behavior in compliance research whenever possible.

## Study 4

Study 4 was designed to allow a mediation analysis of our interpretation for the unique opportunity effect found in each of the first three studies. That is, we are arguing that the reason individuals comply at higher rates in our unique opportunity conditions is that they perceive the request as an opportunity available to few other people. If this perception is the reason for their increased likelihood of agreeing with the request, then we would expect two outcomes (Baron & Kenny, 1986). First, participants in a unique opportunity condition will recognize that they are being presented with an offer not available to others. Second, the unique opportunity effect (higher compliance in the unique opportunity condition than in the other conditions) will not be found when the effect of this perception is removed.

Conducting an analysis for this mediation requires that we measure participants' perceptions concerning the uniqueness of their opportunity. However, measuring these perceptions is difficult or impossible when using the type of procedures we employed in the first three studies. We therefore asked participants in Study 4 to imagine themselves in one of three scenarios. One scenario provided participants with a unique opportunity, one described a more common opportunity, and one referred to a widely available opportunity. Participants indicated the extent to which they would likely take advantage of the opportunity and the extent to which they perceived the situation as a unique opportunity not available to others.

### Method

**Participants** One hundred and ten MBA students (72 men, 38 women) participated in the study as part of an in-class exercise.

Procedure Questionnaires containing one of the three scenarios were randomly distributed among participants during class time. We wanted the scenarios to focus exclusively on the uniqueness of the opportunity, and so we removed the requester from the hypothetical situations. Each of the scenarios asked participants to imagine that they were interested in buying an expensive snowboarding package (about \$1200) that, as far as anybody knows, never goes on sale. Briefly, participants in the unique condition read that a friend's uncle runs a ski resort and, although she can't do this for everyone or too often, the friend says she can get the snowboarding equipment for the participant at 40 percent off retail. Participants in the common condition read about finding a co-op limited to certain people, such as union members, teachers, veterans, and credit union members. The list of eligible members also included college students. Even factoring in the \$50 membership fee and the shipping fees, the snowboarding package could be purchased at 40 percent off the retail price. Control group participants read about the equipment going on sale at a large sporting goods store for 40 percent off.

All participants were told to imagine that they had saved up just enough money to buy the equipment at the discounted price and make a couple of trips to use the equipment. Thus, if they bought the equipment, they could not buy other things they might want. Participants then indicated the likelihood that they would purchase the snowboard package (1 = Very Unlikely, 11 = Very Likely) and the extent that they believed the offer to buy the snowboard at a discount seemed to be a unique opportunity for them that few other people had (1 = Very Little, 11 = A Great Deal).

## Results and discussion

A significant effect was found across conditions for the likelihood that participants would purchase the equipment, F(2,107) = 3.77, p = .03,partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Participants in the unique opportunity condition (M = 6.97, SD = 2.80) were more likely to take advantage of the opportunity than participants in the common opportunity (M = 5.86, SD = 3.47) or control condition (M =5.00, SD = 2.88). A post hoc multiple comparisons test revealed a significant difference between the unique opportunity and common opportunity conditions (p = .01). The extent to which participants believed they received a unique opportunity that few others have followed a similar pattern, F(2,107) = 2.67, p = .07. Participants in the unique condition (M = 8.17, SD = 2.19) were more likely to see the situation as a unique opportunity than were participants in the common condition (M = 7.03, SD = 3.29) or the control condition (M = 6.74, SD = 2.74).

We combined the common and control participants into one condition for the mediation analysis. In this way, we could compare those who showed the increased compliance effect against those who did not. As shown in Figure 1, the significant relation between condition and likelihood of purchase drops to non-significance when the perception of uniqueness is included in the equation. The magnitude of the difference in the two coefficients (.230 vs. .146) indicates a significant mediation due to the extent to which participants saw the situation as an opportunity few others had (Sobel  $\chi = 2.02$ , p = .04). The magnitude of the coefficients indicates that approximately 36% of



Figure 1. Opportunity to purchase and likelihood of purchase mediated by belief that offer is unique. \*p < .05 \*\*\*P < .001

the effect of condition on the decision to purchase is indirect and is mediated through the belief about the uniqueness of the offer.

### General discussion

Across four studies using a variety of procedures and requests, we found that individuals are more likely to comply with a request when they believe the request represents a unique opportunity not available to most people. The effect appears to operate independently of a limited supply effect and is not the result of a perceived need to help the requester. Moreover, the effect is found even when the opportunity is determined purely by chance, suggesting that individuals are not responding to a sense that they have somehow earned the opportunity. Rather, the unique opportunity effect appears to be the result of heuristic processing, i.e., people relying on a rule of thumb that says they should grab an opportunity available to few others. The research thus expands our understanding of how the scarcity principle comes into play in compliance situations by demonstrating that a targeted opportunity, even if it is not limited in time or availability, may increase compliance. Finally, we produced the unique opportunity effect when examining different kinds of compliance behaviors. The effect appears when asking individuals to volunteer their time as well as when asking them to purchase a product.

One question not addressed in this research is why people in our culture often rely on the unique opportunity heuristic. That is, why have we come to believe that an opportunity that few others have is more valuable than an opportunity available to most people? One possibility is that the heuristic is related to a sense of distinctiveness. In individualistic cultures like the United States where the research was conducted, self-esteem is often tied to personal achievements that distinguish the individual from the crowd (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tafarodi, Marshall, & Katsura, 2004). One way to reach this goal of distinctiveness is to take advantage of opportunities not available to others and thereby attain something above and beyond what most people have. If that is the case, then we can speculate that the unique opportunity effect demonstrated in the studies reported here might not be found in cultures that place less of an emphasis on individuality and personal achievement.

Although we found consistent evidence for reliance on a unique opportunity heuristic across four studies, it is reasonable to speculate about some limitations of the effect. For example, people may not rely on heuristics when the cost of agreeing with a request is large or when encouraged to spend a moment to consider the request before responding. It is also not clear how unique the opportunity has to be before the heuristic is activated. We found no increase in compliance when participants were led to believe their "selection" put them in a category with approximately 50% (Studies 1 and 3) or 75% (Study 2) of the population. Most likely, the degree of uniqueness required to produce the effect will vary with the type of request and the cost of the compliance.

Finally, like other rules of thumb people use when faced with requests, the unique opportunity heuristic unfortunately can also leave individuals vulnerable to those who know how to exploit it. Everyday examples abound. We see offers for veterans only, members only, seniors only, etc. Unsolicited mail tells us we are selected, qualified, preapproved, and so on. We hear that a bargain is not available to the public, to those outside the company, in stores, etc. As with other techniques, the best defense may be awareness of how and why these tactics work.

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### Note

1. We found a similar pattern when examining the percentage of participants in each condition who verbally agreed to the request and the percentage of participants who showed up at the experimental session. For the verbal measure, we found a significant effect across the three conditions,  $\chi^2$  (2, N = 153) = 8.08, p = .03,  $\phi = .23$ . The unique condition was significantly higher than the control condition,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 102) = 6.84, p = .01,  $\phi = .26$ , but the difference between the unique condition and the common condition fell short of statistical significance,  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 102) = 2.71, p = .10. For the behavior measure, the effect across the three conditions also fell short of statistical significance,  $\chi^2$  (2, N = 153) = 3.40, p = .18.

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### **Biographical notes**

JERRY M. BURGER is a Professor of Psychology at Santa Clara University.

DAVID F. CALDWELL is the Stephen and Patricia Schott Professor of Management in the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University.