

The Pique Technique: Overcoming Mindlessness or Shifting Heuristics?

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An unusual request can increase compliance in situations in which the typical response to the request is refusal. This procedure, called the pique technique, is said to be effective because the unusual request causes people to give mindful consideration to it. We tested this explanation in 2 studies. Passersby were asked for either a common amount of change or 37 cents. Participants who inquired about the unusual amount were given either a specific or an uninformative reason. The pique technique increased compliance, but only when participants stopped to ask about the request. These participants gave more money, regardless of the reason provided. The findings failed to support the notion that an unusual request leads to a mindful consideration of it.

A direct-mail fundraiser lists several suggested amounts for donations, including one for \$22. A traffic sign directs drivers to slow their vehicles to 19 mph. And a stationery store distributes coupons that give customers 23% off the regular price of any item. Intended or not, each of these real-life examples appears to be taking advantage of a compliance procedure known as the *pique technique* (Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis, 1994). The technique is designed to increase compliance in situations in which people typically pay little attention to the request or routinely reject it. Practitioners of the tactic present individuals with an unexpected request, such as asking for an unusual amount of money. If successful, the procedure leads to higher rates of compliance than a condition in which the request is presented in a predictable and uninteresting manner.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the pique technique, Santos et al. (1994) had undergraduates act as panhandlers on the Santa Cruz, California, wharf. The location was selected because wharf visitors typically ignore the panhandlers who congregate there. The experimenters asked passersby for money, using either a traditional request (“a quarter” or “any change”) or an unusual request (“17 cents” or “37 cents”). A higher percentage of passersby gave money when presented with the unusual request than when hearing the

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traditional request. Santos et al. argued that the pique technique is effective because the unusual request disrupts the “refusal script” on which people typically rely in this situation. That is, most passersby have learned to not invest time and effort considering a panhandler’s request. Rather, they respond to the situation with a cognitively efficient refusal or diversion of attention. This heuristic processing is disrupted when the panhandler presents an unusual request, which is said to “pique” the passerby’s attention.

This description of the procedure is consistent with findings from other recent studies on compliance. That research suggests that people typically rely on cognitive shortcuts, or *heuristics*, when responding to simple requests (Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004; Cialdini, 2001; Cialdini, & Goldstein, 2004). Rather than thoughtfully considering the merits of the request, most people rely on simple rules or scripts to guide their behavior, such as “I say ‘No’ to panhandlers.”

In a classic demonstration of this phenomenon, experimenters asked people who were preparing to use a photocopy machine if they could cut in line and use the machine first (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). When the request was relatively small (5 copies), whether the experimenter gave a good reason (“I’m in a rush”) or an uninformative reason (“I have to make copies”) made no difference. Participants allowed the experimenter to cut in front of them in both of these conditions significantly more often than when no reason was given. Presumably, the complying participants relied on a script that called for them to agree to simple requests whenever a reason is given. Had the participants considered the request in a mindful fashion, they most likely would not have allowed the experimenters to cut in line when presented with a poor reason.

Returning to the pique technique, it seems reasonable that passersby who are confronted with an unusual request are taken out of their refusal script. However, it is not clear that this disruption alone leads to an increased likelihood of agreeing with the request. Santos et al. (1994) suggested that subsequent compliance is the result of “arousing the target’s curiosity and focusing attention onto the ‘strange and unique’ appeal” (p. 763). The new focus of attention is said to lead to a decision that compliance is appropriate. This could be the response of a driver who encounters the 19-mph traffic sign mentioned at the beginning of this article. The driver might ponder the reasons for the sign, decide that experts determined that any speed over 19 mph was unsafe, and slow down. In the panhandling study, participants may have considered the unusual amount and decided that the request was legitimate and, therefore, worthy of their agreement.

Although intuitively appealing, evidence that individuals engage in a mindful consideration of an unusual request is limited. In a follow-up study, Santos et al. (1994) presented participants with written scenarios about being

approached on the wharf with an unusual (17 cents or 37 cents) or common (“any change”) request. After indicating their likely response, participants were asked to list the thoughts that went through their heads when they considered the request. The unusual amount did not generate more thoughts, nor more thoughts that were coded as “mindful” than did the common request. However, participants hearing about an unusual request were more likely to ask why the panhandler needed the money than were participants hearing about the common request.

Although Santos et al.’s (1994) study found partial support for a mindful consideration following an unusual request, the nature of the investigation leaves some questions unanswered. Specifically, because participants knew that they were in a study and were asked to consider their reaction to a hypothetical encounter, it is not clear that unsuspecting individuals presented with unique requests in a real-world setting would generate the same kinds of thoughts. In fact, the wealth of research demonstrating that people typically respond to requests with heuristic processing argues that a thoughtful weighing of the pros and cons, even for an unusual request, may require more cognitive effort than most passersby are willing to invest. We conducted two studies to explore this question.

Study 1

We conducted a modified version of the panhandler study in which we varied the response requesters gave to participants who asked about the unusual request. Sometimes participants were given a reasonable answer, but other times they were given an uninformative answer similar to that used by Langer et al. (1978) in the photocopy machine study. If participants who ask about the unusual amount consider the request in a mindful fashion, we would expect an increase in compliance only when a reasonable answer is provided.

Method

Participants

The participants were 321 adults (140 women, 181 men). Each participant was walking alone in one of five outdoor shopping areas in the San Francisco Bay Area and appeared to be over 18 years of age. Participants were not aware that they were involved in a study.

Procedure

One of four trained experimenters randomly approached the participant with a request. For safety reasons, experimenters worked in pairs, but the second experimenter remained at a distance far enough away to suggest that he or she was not acquainted with the requester. All experimenters were 21-year-old undergraduates who wore “normal school clothes” like the experimenters in Santos et al.’s (1994) investigation. All data were collected during daylight hours.

Through a prearranged order, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control condition, the experimenter approached the participant and said, “Excuse me, can you spare any change?” In the pique condition, the experimenter asked, “Excuse me, can you spare 37 cents?” If a participant in the pique condition asked what the money was for (29.9% of participants asked),² he or she was given one of two responses, depending on a prearranged random order. Those in the specific-reason condition replied, “Because I need to buy a stamp.” Participants in the vague-reason condition replied, “Because I need to buy some things.” No one in the control condition asked why the requester wanted money.

Experimenters kept at least a 3-ft. (1 m) distance between themselves and the participant at all times, except when reaching forward to receive money. They made no other verbal or nonverbal effort to secure the request. The only other words spoken by the experimenters were “Thank you” if the participant gave some money.³ Experimenters were careful not to block the participant’s path. Indeed, the typical participant did not break stride when walking by the experimenter, and many did not make eye contact.

Results and Discussion

We calculated the average amount of money given in each condition. We first compared the amount of money given in the three pique conditions combined with the amount given in the control condition. Participants in the pique conditions gave more money ($M = \$0.18$) than did those in the control

²In Santos et al.’s (1994) study, 11% of the participants in the pique condition asked about the request. This is notably lower than in either of our studies. An obvious reason for this difference is that we conducted our research in relatively upscale shopping areas, whereas Santos et al. asked for money on the Santa Cruz, California, wharf.

³All money collected was donated to a local homeless shelter. Experimenters also abided by all local laws concerning panhandling in each municipality in which the studies were conducted.

Table 1

Money Given and Compliance Percentage: Study 1

Condition	Amount given (<i>M</i>)	Compliance (%)	<i>N</i>
Control	\$0.07	18.8	117
Pique/no question	\$0.10	25.9	143
Pique/specific reason	\$0.38	87.1	31
Pique/vague reason	\$0.37	70.0	30

condition ($M = \$0.07$), $F(1, 319) = 18.51, p = .001, d = .48$. We also compared the percentage of participants who gave any amount of money. Significantly more people gave money in the pique conditions (41.7%) than in the control condition (18.8%), $\chi^2(1, N = 321) = 16.48, p = .001, \phi = .23$. Thus, based on either the amount given or the percentage of people who complied, we replicated the pique technique effect demonstrated in Santos et al.'s (1994) investigation.

Next, we compared the amount of money donated across the four conditions: control condition, pique/no question condition, pique/specific reason condition, and pique/vague reason condition. A one-way ANOVA reveals a significant effect, $F(3, 317) = 34.63, p = .001$. As shown in Table 1, subsequent cell comparisons indicate that participants gave significantly more money in both the pique/specific reason condition and the pique/vague reason condition than they did in either the control condition or the pique/no question condition (all $ps < .001$; Tukey's honestly significant difference [HSD] test). Moreover, there was no significant difference between the pique/specific reason condition and the pique/vague reason condition ($p = .98$) or between the control condition and the pique/no question condition ($p = .64$).

An examination of the percentage of participants who gave any amount of money also found an overall effect across the four conditions, $\chi^2(4, N = 313) = 67.41, p = .001$. As shown in Table 1, the pattern of results is similar to that found for the total amount given. Participants in the pique/specific reason condition gave money significantly more often than did control condition participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 148) = 48.57, p = .001, \phi = .57$. Pique/vague reason participants also complied more often than did participants in the control condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 27.82, p = .001, \phi = .43$. However, the compliance rate in the pique/no question condition did not differ significantly from the control condition compliance rate,

$\chi^2(1, N = 260) = 1.45, p = .23$. Pique/specific reason participants complied with the request more often than did participants in the pique/no question condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = 38.48, p = .001, \phi = .47$; and pique/vague reason participants also complied at a higher rate than did pique/no question participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 173) = 19.73, p = .001, \phi = .34$. The rate of compliance in the pique/specific reason and the pique/vague reason conditions did not differ significantly, $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 1.74, p = .19$. Finally, no effects for the gender of the participant or the gender of the requester were found in any of the analyses.

The findings thus replicate the pique technique effect. The increase in compliance relative to the control condition indicates that the unusual request disrupted some participants' refusal scripts. However, the results failed to support the notion that the procedure also led these individuals to consider the request mindfully. Pique condition participants who asked about the request showed an increase in compliance relative to the control condition, regardless of the reason given. If participants had given serious thought to the requester's reason for needing money, we would have expected more compliance when a good reason was provided than when an uninformative reason was given.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings from Study 1 and to rule out three potential concerns about our initial study. First, it is possible that participants gave more money in the pique conditions than in the control condition because they considered the amount requested in the pique conditions (i.e., 37 cents) higher than the amount requested in the control condition ("any change"). If this is the case, then it is possible that participants gave more money in the pique conditions simply because they were asked for more money. Arguing against this possibility, we can point to Santos et al.'s (1994) study in which higher compliance was found in the pique conditions than in the "any change" condition, regardless of whether requesters asked for 17 cents or 37 cents. Nonetheless, we sought to rule out this concern in Study 2 by changing the amount requested in the control condition.

Second, Study 1 experimenters responded to questions about the request by saying either "I need to buy something" or "I need to buy a stamp." It is possible that this wording led participants to assume that the request was urgent or at least important. That is, perhaps participants processed the request in a mindful fashion, and their careful consideration of the wording led them to conclude that the requester was in need. To rule out this possibility, we modified the wording of the requests in Study 2.

Third, the experimenters in Study 1 were not completely blind to the hypotheses. Thus, it is possible that they inadvertently asked the request slightly differently in the pique conditions than in the control conditions and thereby affected the rate of agreement with the request. To argue against this possibility, we sought to replicate the effect in Study 2 using experimenters who were unaware of the hypotheses.

Method

Participants

Participants were 313 passersby (162 women, 151 men) in a busy shopping area in Palo Alto, California. All of the participants were walking alone and appeared to be over 18 years of age. None of the participants were aware that they were involved in a study.

Procedure

The procedures were identical to those used in Study 1, with three exceptions. First, two control conditions were created. Instead of being asked for “any change,” participants were asked either “Excuse me, can you spare 25 cents?” or “Excuse me, can you spare 50 cents?” As in Study 1, no participant in either of these control conditions asked why the requester wanted the money. Second, if participants in the pique condition asked why the requester wanted the money (37.5 % of the participants asked), they were told either “Because I want to buy a stamp” or “Because I want to buy some things,” according to a prearranged random pattern. Third, we had four undergraduate women, ages 19 through 21 years, who served as experimenters. All of the experimenters were blind to the hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

As in Study 1, we first checked to see if we produced the basic pique technique effect. We compared compliance in the three pique conditions combined with each of the two control conditions. Participants gave significantly more money to the requester in the pique conditions ($M = \$0.20$) than in either the control/25 cents condition ($M = \$0.04$), $F(1, 231) = 25.31$, $p = .001$, $d = .66$; or the control/50 cents condition ($M = \$0.07$), $F(1, 232) = 13.50$, $p = .001$, $d = .49$. In addition, a greater percentage of pique condition participants (41.5%) gave at least some money to the requester

Table 2

Money Given and Compliance Percentage: Study 2

Condition	Amount given (<i>M</i>)	Compliance (%)	<i>N</i>
Control/25 cents	\$0.040	15.0	80
Control/50 cents	\$0.070	19.7	81
Pique/no question	\$0.110	23.2	95
Pique/specific reason	\$0.371	75.9	29
Pique/vague reason	\$0.332	71.4	28

than did participants in the control/25 cents condition (15.2%), $\chi^2(1, N = 233) = 15.34, p = .001, \phi = .26$; or participants in the control/50 cents condition (20.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 234) = 9.94, p = .002, \phi = .21$. Thus, once again we replicated the pique technique effect.

However, as shown in Table 2, the procedure again appears to have been effective only when individuals paused to ask about the unusual request. A one-way ANOVA examining all five conditions indicates a significant effect for condition on the amount of money given, $F(4, 308) = 24.47, p = .001$. Post hoc comparisons reveal that people gave more money in both the pique/specific reason condition and the pique/vague reason condition than in the pique/no question condition or in either of the two control conditions (all $ps < .001$; Tukey's HSD test). No difference was found between the pique/specific reason condition and the pique/vague reason condition ($p = .95$), and no difference was found between any of the other three conditions (all $ps > .12$).

A similar pattern emerges when examining the percentage of participants who gave any amount of money. As shown in Table 2, there was a significant difference in compliance rate across the five conditions, $\chi^2(4, N = 313) = 67.41, p = .001$. Specific cell comparisons indicate that participants in the pique/specific reason condition gave money more often than did participants in either the control/25 cents condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 33.95, p = .001, \phi = .56$; the control/50 cents condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 27.30, p = .001, \phi = .50$; or the pique/no question condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 24.70, p = .001, \phi = .45$. Similarly, participants in the pique/vague reason condition complied more often than did participants in either the control/25 cents condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 29.03, p = .001, \phi = .52$; the control/50 cents condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 22.84, p = .001, \phi = .46$; or the pique/no question condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 20.31, p = .001, \phi = .41$. However, participants in the pique/no question condition did not give money more often than did

participants in either the control/25 cents condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 175) = 1.36$, $p = .24$; or the control/50 cents condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 0.13$, $p = .72$. Finally, the percentage of compliance in the pique/specific reason and pique/vague reason conditions was not significantly different, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 0.01$, $p = .94$.

In short, Study 2's findings replicate those in Study 1 and thereby argue against some of the concerns about the initial investigation. Specifically, the pique technique was effective whether the requester asked for more money (50 cents) or less money (25 cents) in the control condition than in the pique conditions (37 cents). The amount requested in the pique conditions appears to have increased compliance because it was unusual, not because it was higher or lower than the common request. In addition, we found an increase in compliance in both the pique/specific reason condition and pique/vague reason condition despite using the word "want" instead of "need." Thus, telling participants that the money was "needed" does not appear to account for the pattern of results in Study 1. Finally, because all requesters in Study 2 were blind to the hypotheses, experimenter expectancy does not appear to be responsible for the results in either study.

General Discussion

Passersby in both investigations were more likely to comply with a request for money when presented with an unusual amount than when presented with a common request, thus replicating the basic pique technique effect. However, increased compliance was found only among participants who stopped to ask about the unusual request. More important, participants who asked about the request exhibited the same increase in compliance relative to control condition participants whether they were given a reasonable answer or an uninformative answer. Our findings thus support the notion that an unusual request can lead to a greater likelihood of agreement, but we found no evidence that this increased compliance reflects a mindful consideration of the request.

If an unusual amount does not lead to a thoughtful analysis of the request, how can we account for the increased compliance in our studies with the pique technique procedure? We can suggest two possibilities. First, rather than considering the request in a mindful fashion, individuals who are presented with an unusual request may respond by simply moving from one heuristic to another. Specifically, in the panhandler situation, passersby may come to rely on what Dolinski, Nawrat, and Rudak (2001) identified as an *acquaintance script*. That is, if someone we know asks to borrow a quarter or for help carrying packages, most people fall back on an "I help people I know" heuristic and respond with knee-jerk agreement. However, Dolinski

et al. argued that this acquaintance script also can be triggered by a stranger who simply acts like an acquaintance. In support of this analysis, Dolinski et al. found increases in compliance when experimenters engaged participants in a short dialogue prior to a request. Although these conversations often consisted of no more than a dozen words, they apparently were sufficient to trigger the acquaintance script and to lead participants to respond to the requester as if dealing with someone they knew. Other investigations using different procedures also have found an increase in compliance following a short conversation (Aune & Basil, 1994; Burger, Soroka, Gonzago, Murphy, & Somervell, 2001; Howard, 1990).

Returning to our studies, some participants who received the unusual request asked about the reason for the request. Based on earlier investigations, it is reasonable to suggest that this brief verbal exchange triggered an acquaintance script, which caused participants to respond to the situation as if dealing with an acquaintance. Because we readily grant small favors to people we know, triggering this acquaintance script may have increased the likelihood that our participants would agree with the request. Consistent with this analysis, we found an increase in compliance only among pique technique participants who stopped to ask about the request.

Second, it is possible that participants who asked about the unusual amount had already decided to give money before hearing the experimenter's reason for the request. Another way to say this is that the kind of person who responds to an unusual request may simply be the kind of person who also asks about the request. If this is the case, then a mindful consideration of the request again is not necessary to increase compliance. However, the question remains as to why disrupting a refusal script with an unusual request leads some people to comply, but not others.

In summary, it appears that people who are presented with an unusual request may be more miserly about expending cognitive effort than was originally thought. This observation is consistent with research on a number of other compliance procedures finding that people rarely engage in a thoughtful weighing of arguments when they are presented with a simple request. Thus, in this regard, the pique technique is not unique.

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