

THREE REASONS FOR DOUBTING THE ADEQUACY OF THE RECIPROCAL-CONCESSIONS EXPLANATION OF DOOR-IN-THE-FACE EFFECTS

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This article discusses three broad reasons for concern about the adequacy of the reciprocal-concessions explanation of door-in-the-face (DITF) effects. First, the explanation is not sufficiently well articulated to permit unambiguous identification of disconfirming evidence. Second, even acknowledging the explanation's suppleness, at least three sets of empirical results (concerning concession size effects, concession emphasis effects, and the necessity of concessions) are apparently inconsistent with the explanation. Third, there is no empirical evidence distinctly supportive of the explanation.

The door-in-the-face (DITF) influence technique (Cialdini et al., 1975) involves making two successive requests of a person. The first is a relatively large request that the person declines; the second (target) request is a smaller one. Compared to a target-request-only control condition, the DITF technique has proved dependably capable of yielding enhanced compliance with the target request (for reviews, see Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; Fern, Monroe, & Avila, 1986; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998, in press).

The leading explanation of DITF effects has been the reciprocal-concessions explanation (henceforth, RCE) initially proposed by Cialdini et al. (1975). According to the RCE, the sequence of requests in the DITF technique amounts to the requester's making a concession. The making of a concession is said to activate a general norm of reciprocity which, applied to this circumstance, directs reciprocation of concessions. The general reciprocity rule "says that we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us" (Cialdini, 1993, p. 19); thus in the specific circumstance of negotiations, there is "an obligation to make a concession to someone who has made a concession to us" (p. 35; similarly, see Cialdini, Green, & Rusch, 1992, p. 30). In the case of the DITF technique, reciprocation of the concession takes the form of compliance with the second request.

As Mowen and Cialdini (1980, pp. 253–254) put it, the RCE proposes that the technique's effectiveness "results from the influence of a societal rule for reciprocation of concessions that states, 'You should make concessions to those who make concessions to you.' The requester's movement from the initial, extreme favor to the second, more moderate one is seen by the target person as a concession. To reciprocate this concession, the target must move from his or her initial position of noncompliance with the large request to a position of compliance with the smaller request. By virtue of the requester's illusory retreat, then, normative pressures occur that tend to compel a target person, who has refused to perform an initial favor, to consent to perform a second one."

This article discusses three broad reasons for concern about the adequacy of the RCE: the RCE is not sufficiently well articulated to permit unambiguous identification

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of disconfirming evidence; at least three lines of empirical research yield results apparently inconsistent with the RCE; and there is no empirical evidence distinctly supportive of the RCE.

THE EXPLANATION IS NOT CAREFULLY ARTICULATED

The insufficient articulation of the RCE can be illustrated through consideration of research concerning two potential moderator variables, request prosocialness and concession size.

Request Prosocialness

Several reviews of DITF research have suggested that the prosocialness of the requests moderates DITF effects, such that DITF effects are larger with prosocial requests than with nonprosocial requests (Dillard et al., 1984; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998, in press). This finding has sometimes been taken to pose a puzzle for the RCE, because it is not clear how such an effect can be accommodated or explained by the RCE. Indeed O'Keefe and Hale (1998, p. 24) suggested that "given a general familiarity with the existence of bargaining in commercial enterprises (e.g., labor-management negotiation), the reciprocal-concessions account might expect that nonprosocial requests would more easily be perceived as fitting a bargaining/negotiation frame (compared with prosocial requests), and hence might predict *larger* DITF effects for nonprosocial requests than for prosocial requests."

In their defense of the RCE, Hale and Laliker (this issue) want to claim both that (a) the apparent prosocialness effect does not exist (i.e., there is no influence on DITF effects of the prosocialness of the requests) *and* (b) the RCE can explain the apparent prosocialness effect (because prosocialness and attitude are correlated, and attitude influences concession reciprocation). But this is not a coherent set of beliefs.

Consider: One argument advanced by Hale and Laliker is that the apparent prosocialness effect is actually the result of an "attitude" effect, in which one's attitude toward the requesting organization (something influenced by the organization's prosocial orientation) affects one's propensity to reciprocate its concessions. If Hale and Laliker believe that the likelihood of concession reciprocation is influenced by attitude in this way, and believe (as they state) that prosocialness and attitude are commonly confounded in DITF research, then a failure to find a prosocialness effect would be inconsistent with the RCE. But this, in turn, means that when Hale and Laliker raise doubts about the genuineness of the prosocialness effect (as they do in the "Is there a prosocialness effect?" section of their article), they raise doubts about the adequacy of the RCE.

This bizarre state of affairs arises precisely from uncertainty about the RCE's commitments. Does the RCE predict that better-liked requesters will enjoy greater success with the DITF technique than will less-well-liked requesters? If an apparent prosocialness effect appears, is such evidence consistent with the expectations of the RCE, or inconsistent? That Hale and Laliker's defense of the RCE should raise such questions underscores the insufficient articulation of the RCE.

Concession Size

Another illustration of the RCE's lack of specification is connected to a second empirical result that has been taken to cast some doubt on the RCE, namely, the finding that variation in concession size is not associated with corresponding variation in DITF

effects. As the size of the concession (that is, the size of the decrease in request magnitude from the first to the second request) increases, DITF effects do not become larger (Fern et al., 1986; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998, in press). This finding has been offered as evidence disconfirming the RCE, on the basis of a supposition that the RCE predicts that with increasing concession size, the DITF strategy should become more successful. Thus the lack of concession-size effects, being inconsistent with such a prediction, is taken as an indication of defect in the RCE.

However, as Hale and Laliker (this issue) note, the RCE might be adapted to accommodate this finding. The RCE need not be committed to a belief that larger concessions make for greater effects; it need only be committed to the idea that, so long as some threshold of concession is passed, the reciprocal-concession mechanism will be engaged and hence compliance will be enhanced.¹ On its face this would appear to be a perfectly good way of accommodating this otherwise-inconvenient empirical finding (though shortly I will want to raise some doubts about whether this tack can be successful). But even if taken to be a successful accommodation, this development does reveal a weakness in the RCE, namely, that the explanation is actually not very well articulated.

To help bring this out, consider the counterfactual circumstance: imagine that larger concessions *had* turned out to lead to larger DITF effects. Such a result would almost certainly have been counted as evidence supporting the RCE. Presumably, then, the absence of such effects should be *prima facie* evidence disconfirming the RCE. But it is not taken as disconfirming evidence, because the RCE has changed (or been clarified) so as to accommodate the evidence.

Now there's nothing wrong about adapting an explanation to fit emerging evidence; on the contrary, explanations ought to change in just such ways. But this defense of the RCE (against the absence of concession-size effects) shows that the explanation has not been entirely well-formulated, in the sense that it's not plain what predictions might issue from the explanation—and (most crucially) it's not plain what evidence might disconfirm the explanation.

Summary

In short, one reason for doubting the adequacy of the RCE is precisely that it is not (yet) very carefully specified. One cannot be sure what the RCE's commitments are concerning concession size and prosocialness, and so cannot be sure what empirical findings concerning these moderators would count as evidence relevant to the RCE. Indeed, considered more broadly (beyond these two specific moderators), it is not clear what evidence might disconfirm the explanation—which might entitle one to doubt that a genuine explanation is in hand. It may be that from the beginning the RCE has actually been only a vague (though plausible) general notion, not some carefully-articulated account with clear empirical commitments.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ARE INCONSISTENT WITH THE EXPLANATION

A second reason for concern about the adequacy of the RCE derives from three lines of research that have yielded findings apparently inconsistent with the RCE. These concern the effects of varying the size of the concession made, the effects of varying the emphasis given to the making of a concession, and the occurrence of DITF-like effects in the absence of a concession. To be sure, as just discussed, the lack of specification of the RCE undermines any thoroughly confident beliefs about what

predictions a RCE might make, and so mandates some tentativeness about any claim that a given empirical result is inconsistent with the RCE. Even so, these three lines of research have produced findings that seem troublesome for a concession-based explanation of DITF effects.

Concession Size Variation

As noted above, variation in concession size is not associated with corresponding variation in DITF effects, which has been taken to suggest some defect in the RCE. Hale and Laliker's (this issue) defense of the RCE against this criticism invokes a threshold model of reciprocal concessions: the suggestion is that the reciprocal-concessions mechanism will be engaged so long as some threshold of concession is reached (that is, so long as the concession is large enough), but any larger concession (larger than the minimum needed to pass the threshold) will be otiose. The upshot is that the RCE is not committed to a belief that larger concessions make for greater effects, and hence the failure to find any dependable relationship between concession size and DITF effects is not to be counted a weakness of the RCE. As noted above, this initially seems a plausible way of handling the lack of concession-size effects.

But upon closer consideration, a threshold model does not appear capable of accommodating the lack of concession-size effects. Such a model would surely want to acknowledge that the location of the concession threshold can (and probably will) vary from person to person; to induce Alice's compliance may take a larger concession than is needed to extract compliance from Bob, who in turn requires a larger concession than does Chris. This means that in a sample of people, some range of concession thresholds will be represented; some persons will have relatively low thresholds, others higher ones. But this in turn implies that increasing the size of the concession will enhance compliance in the sample (will increase the proportion of persons complying), because it increases the number of persons whose concession thresholds have been satisfied. That is, even a threshold-model version of the RCE would appear to predict that larger concessions would produce larger DITF effects—a prediction not confirmed by the empirical evidence to date.²

Concession Emphasis Variation

It would appear to be relevant to the RCE to consider the effects (on DITF effects) of variations in the emphasis given to the concession made by the second request. Although one cannot be entirely confident about the RCE's predictions, it seems plausible to suppose that if the making of the concession is in fact crucial to DITF effects, then variation in the emphasis given to the concessionary aspects of the second request might have corresponding effects on DITF success. Specifically, if the concessionary aspects of the second request are minimized or de-emphasized, presumably DITF effects will be diminished; but if the concessionary aspects of the second request are emphasized, presumably DITF effects will be enhanced.

There are a number of studies that offer some evidence on this question. The evidence is usefully divided by distinguishing (a) studies examining the influence on DITF effects of emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request and (b) studies examining the influence on DITF effects of de-emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request.

Emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request. A simple way of emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request is to indicate that second-request

compliance would be less valuable to the requester (compared to first-request compliance). For example, in Shanab and O'Neill's (1979) "yielding-only" condition, the second request (involving volunteering for another study) was introduced by the requester's mentioning that "the first experiment is more important to me personally" (p. 239). By suggesting that second-request compliance would be less valuable to the requester, the requester emphasizes that the requester is in fact making a concession. Similarly, in one of Goldman, McVeigh, and Richterkessing's (1984, Experiment 1) DITF conditions, the requester prefaced the target request by saying "Well, I really wanted people to help with the Big Brother program but things don't always work out the way you want and sometimes you have to compromise. Let me make a concession" (p. 247). If DITF effects are driven by concession-based processes, then presumably emphasizing the concession in such ways should enhance the effectiveness of the DITF technique.

But there is little reason to suppose that DITF effects are generally enhanced as a result of emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request. In five studies to date comparing a standard DITF version against a concession-emphasized version, the two versions have never differed significantly in effectiveness. In two studies, the direction of effect favored the standard DITF implementation (i.e., emphasizing the concession produced nonsignificantly smaller compliance than did the standard DITF version; Miller, Seligman, Clark, & Bush, 1976, yielding-only condition, and Shanab & O'Neill, 1979, yielding-only condition); in one study, the direction of effect favored the concession-emphasized DITF implementation (i.e., emphasizing the concession produced nonsignificantly greater compliance than did the standard DITF version; Shanab & Isonio, 1980, yielding-only condition); in the remaining two studies, either the two versions produced identical compliance rates (Goldman, McVeigh, & Richterkessing, 1984, Experiment 2) or the direction of effect could not be determined (Goldman, McVeigh, & Richterkessing, 1984, Experiment 1).

De-emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request. A simple way of de-emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request is to underscore how important or valuable second-request compliance would be to the requester. For example, in Shanab and O'Neill's (1979) "gaining-only" condition, the second request was prefaced by the requester's saying "I am also recruiting volunteers for another study which is of equal importance to me" (p. 239). By indicating how valuable second-request compliance would be, the requester minimizes any concessionary aspects of the second request. If DITF effects are driven by concession-based processes, then presumably such minimization should diminish the effectiveness of the DITF technique.

But the empirical evidence does not support a claim that DITF effects are generally reduced as a result of de-emphasizing the concessionary aspects of the second request. In five studies to date comparing a standard DITF version against a concession-minimized version, the two versions have never dependably differed in effectiveness. Two studies have found that de-emphasizing the concession nonsignificantly reduces DITF effects (Mowen & Cialdini, 1980, Study 1, large first request; Shanab & O'Neill, 1979, gaining-only condition); one study has found that it has no effect (Shanab & Isonio, 1980, gaining-only condition); and two studies have found that it nonsignificantly enhances DITF effects (Miller et al., 1976, gaining-only condition; Mowen & Cialdini, 1980, Study 1, very-large first request).

Summary. In short, variation in the emphasis given to the concessionary aspects of the second request does not produce corresponding variation in DITF effects: minimizing the concessionary aspects of the second request does not reduce DITF effects, and emphasizing those concessionary aspects does not enhance DITF effects. If the effects had turned out differently—if varying the emphasis on the concessionary facets of the second request had turned out to correspondingly influence DITF effects—that surely would have been counted as an indication that concession-based processes underlie DITF effects. Hence the absence of such effects should be seen as an indication of weakness in a concession-based account of DITF effects.

DITF-Like Effects Without Concession

There is a third area of research that has yielded results troublesome for the RCE—especially troublesome because the RCE is unlikely to be sufficiently flexible so as to accommodate this empirical evidence. Surely one can say with confidence that the RCE is at least committed to believing that the making of a concession is crucial to DITF success. After all, if there is no concession, the reciprocal-concessions norm (the putative mechanism underlying DITF effects) cannot be invoked. Hence, if the RCE is sound, the appearance of DITF effects requires a concession. And, of course, the standard DITF implementation plainly involves the making of a concession: there is initially a relatively large request made, and subsequently a smaller one. (In fact, it would seem that making a concession necessarily involves making two requests with the second smaller than the first. Without such a sequence of requests, by definition there could be no “concession.”) But a number of studies suggest that DITF-like effects—that is, enhanced compliance—can be obtained in situations that are similar to DITF circumstances but do not involve the making of a concession. Specifically, three different kinds of studies point to this conclusion.

Request refusal and subsequent behavioral opportunity. The first sort of study is one in which, like standard DITF implementations, there is initially a refusal of a large request. But then, instead of presenting participants with an explicit request, participants are presented with what might be called a behavioral opportunity to help. For example, in their experimental condition Foehl and Goldman (1983, Experiment 1) initially asked persons to agree to donate blood once every month for the next four years (a request all refused). Subsequently, the requester, seemingly by accident, dropped a number of pamphlets; the outcome of interest was whether the participant helped pick up the pamphlets. In this sort of study, participants have an opportunity to engage in helping behavior, but there is no smaller second request—there is no second request at all—and hence there is no concession. Yet several studies have found that, compared to a no-request-refusal control condition, refusing the initial request does lead to enhanced compliance (enhanced helping; see Foehl & Goldman, 1983, Experiment 1 and Experiment 2; Grace, Bell, & Sugar, 1988).³ These effects cannot be explained as a matter of reciprocal concessions, because no concession was made.

Transgression and subsequent request. The second sort of study is one commonly labelled “transgression-compliance” research. In these studies, experimental-condition participants commit some transgression, typically involving infliction of harm on another person (e.g., participants are led to think they have broken someone’s camera, or are led to tell a lie). Subsequently, a helping request is made. In these studies, notice, there is no initial large request to be refused—and hence there is no concession. And yet, compared to a no-transgression control condition, transgression-condition participants

commonly display significantly greater compliance with the request (e.g., Carlsmith & Gross, 1969; Freedman, Wallington, & Bless, 1967; for a review of this research, see O'Keefe, 2000). These effects cannot be explained as a matter of reciprocal concessions, because no concession was made.

Transgression and subsequent behavioral opportunity. The third sort of study is also commonly labelled transgression-compliance research, but in these studies the transgression is followed not by an explicit request but by a behavioral opportunity to help (akin to the DITF-like studies discussed above). For example, in Kidd and Berkowitz's (1976, Experiment 1) study, following the transgression, participants encountered someone who had just spilled a stack of papers. In studies like these, no explicit requests are ever made—and hence there is no concession. And yet, again, compared to a no-transgression control condition, transgression-condition participants commonly display significantly greater compliance (e.g., Kidd & Berkowitz, 1976, Experiment 1; Konecni, 1972; Regan, Williams, & Sparling, 1972; for a review, see O'Keefe, 2000). These effects cannot be explained as a matter of reciprocal concessions, because no concession was made.

Summary. These studies indicate that enhanced compliance is possible when there is an initial request refusal but no explicit second request, when there is no initial request refusal but there is an explicit second request, and when there is neither an initial request refusal nor an explicit second request. That is to say, enhanced compliance is found even when there is no concession whatever (since a concession requires a pair of requests). Obviously, reciprocal-concessions processes cannot explain the enhanced compliance found in these circumstances.

Now of course it still might be true that reciprocal-concessions processes underlie the enhanced compliance found specifically in DITF circumstances. But one who believes that reciprocal concessions explains DITF effects is also committed to believing that something *different* explains the enhanced compliance found in these other circumstances. After all, in these other circumstances there is no concession, and hence no reciprocal-concessions norm will be invoked. And thus we should have doubts about a concession-based account of DITF effects precisely because it commits us to positing different explanations for these other enhanced-compliance effects. A more parsimonious explanation would seek to identify some mechanism common to all these cases.⁴

THE EXPLANATION HAS NO SUPPORTIVE EVIDENCE

A third reason for concern about the adequacy of the RCE is that there is no empirical evidence distinctly supportive of the RCE. As an initial observation here, it might be noticed that Hale and Laliker's (this issue) discussion is thoroughly defensive. It tries to defuse various objections, but points to no specific supporting evidence.⁵ Instead, the article attempts to show that this or that apparently-troubling empirical result could be accommodated by the RCE. But where is the evidence *for* the RCE?

One possible source of distinctive supportive evidence for the RCE would be evidence of uniquely-explainable effects of moderating factors, that is, moderator-variable effects that could be explained only by reciprocal-concession processes. It is not clear that any such effects have yet been reported. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine what such effects might be like. As Abrahams and Bell (1994) have pointed out, DITF moderator-variable effects are usually consistent with more than one explana-

tion. Thus although in principle it might be possible to obtain evidence of this sort, practically speaking the RCE is unlikely to find such supportive evidence.

A second possible sort of distinctive evidence supporting the RCE would be direct assessment of the relevant intervening state(s). Of course, obtaining such evidence will require a specification of just what mediating states are deemed crucial by the RCE, and it is not plain that such specification is yet in hand. At least some readings of the RCE would have it suggest that the sequence of requests makes the situation appear to be one involving bargaining or negotiation, and hence to be a circumstance in which reciprocation of concessions is normative. Approached in this way, perception-of-the-situation would appear to be a relevant mediating state, with the RCE expectation being that DITF situations will be perceived as negotiations. Unhappily for the RCE, Tusing and Dillard (in press) have reported that DITF situations are commonly perceived as more similar to helping situations than to bargaining situations. An RCE defender might suggest that this research misidentifies the crucial mediating state—but without some alternative specification of the relevant state(s), the RCE will continue to lack distinctively supportive evidence.

CONCLUSION

For a very long time, a reciprocal-concessions account has been taken to be the presumptively correct explanation of DITF effects. But there is ample reason to think that any such presumption is now (and perhaps always has been) misplaced. Consider the empirical findings in hand: DITF effects are not influenced by the size of the concession; DITF effects are not influenced by emphasizing the concession made; DITF effects are not influenced by de-emphasizing the concession made; and, indeed, DITF-like effects can still be obtained even in the absence of any concession. Taken together, such empirical considerations cast substantial doubt on any belief that the mechanism underlying DITF effects is concession-based. Moreover, there is no distinctive evidence supporting a concession-based account—no uniquely-explainable moderator-variable effects, no confirming evidence reporting direct assessment of mediating states. And the reciprocal-concessions account appears so insufficiently articulated that one might wonder whether it qualifies as an explanation at all. All told, then, there is very good reason to doubt that the reciprocal-concessions explanation provides a satisfactory account of DITF effects.

NOTES

¹Hale and Laliker (this issue) offer another possible explanation for the lack of concession-size effects, namely, an "incredulity effect" in which an excessively large initial request makes the DITF technique backfire. But the relevant empirical evidence suggests that this account is inadequate. One source of information about concession-size effects comes from studies in which, in different DITF conditions, the initial request is the same but the second (target) request varies in size (thus yielding a variation in concession size). In such a design, when the smaller concession is associated with larger DITF effects (as in, e.g., Goldman, 1986), the explanation cannot possibly be that the initial request was so large as to produce an incredulity effect in one condition but not the other—because the initial request was the same in the two conditions.

²Suppose a threshold model were to adopt the alternative (and surely implausible) assumption that compliance thresholds do not vary from person to person. Even this would not suffice to explain the results in hand. Imagine two DITF conditions varying in concession size, with (per this alternative assumption) identical concession thresholds for all the individuals in the two conditions. A comparison of the compliance rates in these two conditions will vary depending on the location of the two concessions relative to that (uniform) threshold. It might be that the compliance rates will be identical in the two conditions (if both concessions fall below the threshold, or if both concessions fall above the threshold), or it might be that there will be greater compliance in the larger-concession condition than in the smaller-concession condition (if the larger concession falls above the threshold and the smaller concession falls below it). But if this version of a threshold-model RCE is correct, in no

case could the smaller-concession condition exhibit greater compliance than the larger-concession condition. Thus this version of the threshold model predicts that, across studies, one should find some general (if weak) indication that larger concessions produce larger DITF effects. But, again, this is not what the empirical evidence in hand indicates. Considering just the direction of effect in studies to date, smaller concessions produce greater compliance than do larger concessions in eight cases, and larger concessions produce greater compliance than do smaller ones in seven cases (O'Keefe & Hale, 1998, pp. 17-18).

³Interestingly enough, Foehl and Goldman's (1983) Experiment 2 indicated that such enhanced helping obtains when a prosocial request is declined but not when a nonprosocial request is declined—paralleling the influence of prosocialness variations on DITF effects (Dillard et al., 1984; O'Keefe and Hale, 1998, in press). This parallelism is consistent with the supposition that there is some common underlying mechanism in the DITF circumstance and the request-refusal-followed-by-helping-opportunity circumstance.

⁴I have one in mind (O'Keefe & Figge, 1997, 1999).

⁵One of the objections that Hale and Laliker discuss is chimerical, namely, the suggestion that the RCE cannot accommodate the observed requester-variation moderator effect (in which smaller DITF effects occur if different persons make the two requests). Though they discuss this "objection," Hale and Laliker do not provide any quotations from critics who actually advance this argument, nor any specific citations (giving page numbers) to indicate where such a criticism was advanced. Their text says (in two places) that O'Keefe and Figge (1997) offered such an objection, but this is utterly false; O'Keefe and Figge said no such thing. And O'Keefe and Hale (1998, p. 24) explicitly recognized that "the reciprocal-concessions account can easily explain why variations in the identity of the requester will influence DITF effects (because with different requesters, the pressure to reciprocate a concession vanishes)." In short, Hale and Laliker are here defending the RCE against a wholly fantasized criticism. Perhaps refuting imaginary objections is a sign of just how beleaguered these RCE defenders are.

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