



Colorado Probation Research in Brief

The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action: The Role of “Placebic” Information in Interpersonal Interaction

Langer, E., Blank, A. et al. (1978). "The Mindlessness of Ostensibly Thoughtful Action: The Role of Placebic Information in Interpersonal Interaction." Journal of Personality and Psychology 36(6): 635-642.

Key Words: Mindlessness, decisions, requests, compliance, experience

Summary/Conclusions

The current study examines how written and verbal communication influence habitual reactions. In three separate field experiments, researchers placed people in situations where they may comply with or deny a request. The three studies provided evidence that when individuals are presented with a familiar request, they are more likely to comply. Even when researchers made requests that were senseless, individuals were more likely to comply as the request was similar to requests they had experienced before.

Limitations of Information

The population of the study may not be representative of individuals supervised in a criminal justice setting. It is unclear how individuals would react with requests from individuals in a position of authority. In the study, researchers used common requests, it is unknown how individuals may respond to uncommon requests. The study was completed in 1978. Societal changes and norms may have changed.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Decisions Made on Autopilot?

Researchers conducted three field experiments to test whether individuals would take action automatically or mindfully when asked to respond to a request. Requests were scripted and labeled as “request”, “placebic information”, or “real information”.

The first field experiment involved a sample of 120 students using a copier in a college library. A researcher would approach the copier when a student would begin to use the copier. The researcher would either simply request to use the copier for five or twenty copies, request to use the copier “because I have to make copies”, or request to use the copier “because I’m in a hurry”. Researchers theorized if people were basing compliance from mindful thought, the compliance of a simple request or a request with irrelevant rationale, “because I have to make copies”, would be different. Two additional scenarios were developed using written requests rather than verbal requests to test the theory.

All three experiments indicated that individuals comply with requests when they are similar to the individuals’ past experience. Additionally, people are more likely to do something when they are given a reason for the request, even when the request is not logical or related to the request. Results also suggest that people frequently respond to requests without really thinking much about the reason, particularly when they have familiarity with the task or behavior.

Practical Applications for Probation Officers:

- √ Understand that an individual may not have a rational reason for why he or she decided to engage in a behavior as environmental cues may have influenced the decision.
- √ Before asking a probationer to do something (e.g. schedule an intake appointment at treatment) ask if they have ever done it before. Adjust your request accordingly to increase the likelihood of completing the task.
- √ Try requesting compliance in a way that is consistent and matches a person’s previous experience.
- √ When probationers do not comply with a previous request, it may be beneficial to provide background rationale of the previous request.
- √ As refraining from requests is a difficult behavior to change, consider directing individuals with anti-social peers to work on refusal and “Stop and Think” technique as part of their skill development.

Practical Applications for Probation Supervisors:

- √ When observing officers, be on the lookout for “autopilot” actions and responses. Encourage officers to tailor interactions with each probationer for maximum benefit.
- √ Create new experiences when introducing new programs or practices. If all changes look familiar, officers may automatically respond with a default mindset.

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