

Social Influence

Version 1.1

Topics

1 Introduction	2
2 Social Validation	2
Overview	2
Rationale	3
Application	4
3 Reciprocity	5
Overview	5
Rationale	6
Application	7
4 Consistency	7
Overview	7
Rationale	8
Application	8
5 Authority	9
Overview	9
Rationale	9
Application	9
6 Liking	10
Overview	10
Rationale	10
Application	10
7 Scarcity	11
Overview	11
Rationale	11
Application	11

1 Introduction

The behaviour of an individual is strongly influenced by the behaviour of their peers and their perception of what is expected of them. The perception of what is expected is in turn influenced by both rational motives and seemingly irrational ones. A request with a rational motive could be as simple as “If you do this I will pay you.” There will be no surprise that this request will often result in the desired response. However, in many situations it is the seemingly irrational motives that are most effective in influencing the behaviour of others.

This document describes the role of social influence in gaining compliance with a request. An understanding of social influence can be very useful, as the task of getting others to do what we wish them to do is a very common one.

2 Social Validation

Overview

Social validation describes the tendency of an individual to imitate the behaviour of those around them. This effect is evident in clothing and hairstyles, where what is 'in fashion' trends from one norm to another, with the majority compliantly following the trend.



If everyone else is doing it, it must be a good idea!

Simple experiments can demonstrate the effect of social validation on day to day activities. One such experiment looked at how social validation could be used to influence someone's decision of when to cross at a controlled pedestrian crossing.

Observation showed that most people crossed when it was indicated by the controlled crossing displays. However, if a group of experiment confederates chose to cross at a time when it was safe

(no cars coming) but the controlled crossing display indicated that pedestrians should not cross, then most pedestrians would follow the confederates and cross the intersection. The larger the group of confederates, the more likely that others would follow them.

Other experiments have tested the willingness of individuals to disregard their own observations in order to comply with those of a group. One such experiment involved measuring the length of a piece of string. The experiment involved a piece of string and ruler being passed around a group of twelve or more people with instructions to measure the length of the string. However, all but one member of the group was a confederate and all of the confederates deliberately report an erroneous, consistent, result for the length of the string. For example, if the string was 16cm long, the confederates would all report a length of 15cm. The one person who is not a confederate then has to decide whether to comply with the group's view on the length of the string, or to report their view of the length of the string and consequently be seen as the odd one out. In many cases the person who is not in on the experiment reported an erroneous length that complied with the rest of the group.

Rationale

So what is the motivation to comply with socially validated behaviour? As with most seemingly irrational behaviour there are reasons, though they may not be obvious in the context of the observed behaviour.

Reasons for the social validation effect include:

- **Expediency**
It is quicker to copy the decisions of others than for each option to be thought through. Taking this path would leave more time for considering other decisions for which there are no obvious answers, or that have greater consequences.
- **Survival**
If others have been sticking to the validated behaviour and are still alive, then the behaviour must have some merit. Over time more risky behaviours may have been eliminated, along with their adherents.

- **Social bonding**

One of the measures of group cohesion is the conformity of behaviour within the group. By imitating the behaviour of others, membership of a group is reinforced and the likelihood that the benefits of group membership are received increase.

Application

Where possible do not focus on the unwanted behaviour of the minority. For example, where a small minority of employees are arriving late to work, rather than focus on the few who are late, focus on the majority who are doing the right thing and coming to work on time.

For example, "The majority of employees are making the effort to start work on time. A small minority are letting their co-workers down though. Would this small group please make the effort to get to work on time." This message strongly states that the socially validated behaviour is to turn up to work on time.

It is important to avoid the situation where the literal message is inconsistent with message implied through social validation. An example of an inconsistent message to youth would be: "Far too many youth are committing suicide. It is important that if you are having suicidal thoughts that you seek help".

The intended message is "seek help", however the message implied through social validation is "the choice of your peer group is to commit suicide". Research clearly shows that such messages increase the rate of youth suicide.

3 Reciprocity

Overview

Reciprocity refers to the tendency to respond to a favour or concession, with a favour or concession. That is, when a favour or concession is accepted the giver can be confident that the receiver will feel an obligation to respond appropriately.



I scratched your back. Would you scratch mine?

One simple experiment involved selling raffle tickets to co-workers. It involved seeing how many raffle tickets a person will buy when they were first offered a can of drink, compared to when no gift was first offered. Unsurprisingly, many more tickets were sold when the gift of the drink was offered first.

The effectiveness of reciprocity to influence behaviour is reflected in the pervasiveness of its use in marketing. The variety and creativity of 'free' offers and inducements is a consequence of significant prior success.

Other experiments have involved testing the effect of concessions on influencing behaviour. A classic example would be "Dad, can I have \$50?". If the answer is "No!", then the follow up question "How about \$20 then?" is much more likely to be successful. The reason is that Dad is likely to respond to the concession from \$50 to \$20 with one of his own. Experiments have shown that offering a concession prior to making the intended request can triple the rate of compliance with the intended request.

Rationale

If it were not for the inclination to respond to acts of kindness, receipt of gifts or concessions with equivalent acts, then individuals would be much less likely to volunteer them in the first place. How strong would the motivation to help others be if it could be expected that the help would always be an entirely one way interaction? Knowing that others are likely to respond in kind to our acts of kindness and favours markedly increases our motivation to provide them.

Reciprocity is a key mechanism for tightly bonding group members. Members who do not obey related social rules are typically held in considerable disregard.

The ultimatum game exposes the tendency for individuals to punish those who are not perceived to be obeying the rules of reciprocity. The game involves three players, let's call them Bill, Roger and Brian. Bill sets up the game by putting up say \$100 to be split between Roger and Brian, with the balance of the split being decided by Roger. Brian then reviews the split and decides whether he is happy with it. If Brian is happy, then Bill splits the money and each of Roger and Brian receive their share. If, however, Brian is not happy with the split, then Bill keeps the money and the game finishes.

If Roger suggests an equal split of the money offered by Bill, then in most cases Brian will agree. However, if the suggested split markedly favours Roger, say 70% to Roger, then the likelihood of Brian accepting the deal diminishes. Why would this be? Would Brian not be better off no matter how small the amount offered? The selfish response of Brian would be to accept any amount, no matter how small, as this would be better than nothing. When Brian does not accept a small amount he is no longer being selfish, he is acting in the interest of the group. Brian's actions could be paraphrased as "I am prepared to miss out in order to teach you a lesson. You need to play by the rules of reciprocity. That way this group will be stronger and increase the chances of survival of all of us".

Application

Employees expect their employing organisation to behave according to rules of reciprocity. That is, if the employee makes an extra effort they will expect the organisation to reciprocate in some manner. This could be either in recognition or reward. If the organisation is not seen to behave according to the rules of reciprocity, then it, just like another group member will be held in disregard.

4 Consistency

Overview

Consistency refers to the motivation for a person to keep their behaviours consistent with public statements and their perception of who they are. For example, if someone makes a public statement committing to undertake a particular action then they are more likely to perform that action.



I wish I never said on Facebook that I would do the mid winter swim...

Small public statements can be leveraged into stronger commitments over time. An enlightening example of the influence possible through the skilled use of the consistency effect was provided by the Chinese during the Korean war in the 1950s. The Chinese communists had a starkly different approach to handling POWs than the North Koreans. Whilst the North Koreans ran harsh, even brutal camps the Chinese operated their camps under what they called the “lenient policy”. One consequence of the policy was that POWs were much more likely to turn each other in and collaborate with the Chinese. A further consequence was that POWs returning from these camps were markedly more aligned with the communist perspective than those returning from the camps run by the North Koreans.

The Chinese strategy was to start with seemingly inconsequential concessions and then to build on them. For example the POWs would be given statements to repeat such as “The United States is not perfect”. It would be hard to disagree with this statement, no matter how ardent a supporter of the US position the POW may have been. If a POW chose to disagree with this statement then they could find themselves attempting to defend some awkward propositions. Once a POW agreed to a statement then it would be presented to them in writing with a request to sign it. This signed statement would then be publicly displayed so that other POWs would see it. The POW now found themselves in a position of having made a public statement that they would feel obliged to be consistent with. This POW would then be asked to make further statements and to write answers to questions that step by step led closer to the Chinese perspective.

Another technique used was to hold essay writing competitions. The topics of the essays were invariably about the role and complicity of China and the United States in the war. The Chinese would select as winners of the competitions the ones that met their purpose, that is were just one small step along the path to agreeing with the Chinese perspective. They would not choose the indulgent essays that wholeheartedly agreed with the Chinese perspective, as they knew that these would be seen to be servile and insincere. Often there would be prizes for the winning essay. However, the prize would be modest, it would never be enough for the author to let themselves off the hook and say “I just did it for the prize”.

Rationale

It would be very hard to manage a hunter gatherer group if its members did not do what they said they would do. In order to plan and coordinate the actions of a group it is necessary that the members are reliable and do what they say they will do.

Application

In the workplace setting the consistency effect can be employed by getting people to make public statements committing to actions. For example when a task is allocated at a meeting ask the person who is agreeing to complete the task “Are you confident that you will complete that task on time? If you cannot, will you please contact me with plenty of warning?”. If both of these questions are answered with “yes” in public then it is much more likely that the task will be completed.

5 Authority

Overview

Authority is a commonly encountered effect. We encounter authority in everyday interactions with local councils, police and in the workplace.



Yes officer, this is indeed a 50kph zone.

Rationale

The use of authority is fundamental to the running of a group. It is inevitable that there will be multiple views on some choices the group has to make and it likely that consensus will often be difficult to reach. The use of authority allows for fast decision making and tighter group cohesion.

Application

Authority should be used sparingly. The overuse of authority can diminish the commitment of team members to the group, particularly when it is used in situations where other options are available.

Group members are much more likely to accept a decision based on authority if they feel that they have been listened to and their views considered.

6 Liking

Overview

A person is more likely to comply with a request from someone they like. However, liking is less influential than the other effects discussed so far. A variation of the experiment discussed in the reciprocity section that involved selling raffle tickets to a co-worker was used to compare the relative effectiveness of reciprocity versus liking. It was found that people bought more tickets from someone they felt they owed a favour, but did not like, than from someone they liked, but did not feel they owed a favour.



Of course you can borrow my tool box. What are friends for?

Rationale

People are more likely to feel committed to a group in which they feel there is mutual liking. Group members are less likely to get into conflict with those they like.

Application

Whilst liking is not the recommended effect to utilise to gain compliance with requests in the workplace, it is an important attribute of a relationship. If a group member consistently operates in an unpleasant manner it is likely that their ability to gain compliance with requests will diminish over time.

7 Scarcity

Overview

People tend to value scarce resources more highly than those that are perceived to be more available. This effect is particularly evident amongst collectors who prize scarcity above all else. For example nothing will drive up the value of a stamp more than scarcity.



Yum, the last of the species. It tastes great!

Rationale

Hunter gatherers who consumed the scarce resources in a new location first would ensure that they obtained the most resources for the group. It makes sense to focus attention on first obtaining resources that are not always available.

Application

If a task is uncommon, highlighting its scarcity may make the task seem more appealing.

Prepared by Tima Consulting Limited
PO Box 548 Nelson, New Zealand, 7040
www.tima.co.nz