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WORKING PAPER

The Effect of Mere Agreement on Compliance[1]

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Abstract

The present paper shows that people's compliance with a request can be substantially increased if the requester first gets them to agree with a series of statements unrelated to the request, but selected to induce agreement. We label this effect the 'mere agreement effect', and present a two-step similarity-based mechanism to explain it. Across six studies, we show that induced mere agreement subtly causes respondents to view the presenter of the statements as similar to themselves, which in turn increases compliance with a request from that same person. We support the similarity explanation by showing that the effect of agreement on compliance is suppressed when agreement is induced to indicate dissimilarity with the interviewer, when the request is made by some other person, and when the artificially high level of agreement is made salient. We also validate the practical relevance of the mere agreement persuasion technique in a field study. We discuss how the mere agreement effect can be broadly used as a tool to increase cooperation and be readily implemented in marketing interactions.

THE EFFECT OF MERE AGREEMENT ON COMPLIANCE

For most of us, few days pass without encountering someone who solicits our cooperation to respond to a questionnaire, to sample a product, to visit a website, or to donate to a humanitarian organization. For decades, researchers in marketing have studied tools that boost compliance rates with these requests (e.g., Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Hornik, Zaig, & Shadmon, 1991; Reingen, 1978). Recent studies have focused on influence processes that are subtle, indirect, or unconscious (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Subtle influence processes possibly play a large role in compliance that is part of non-premeditated decisions (e.g., deciding to donate), often solicited for in time pressured and distracted circumstances (e.g., at the entrance of the supermarket). A growing body of research suggests that people tend to rely on well-learned scripts or heuristics to guide their response in such circumstances (Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado & Anderson, 2004; Cialdini, 2001; Garner, 2005).

The current paper adds to this research by showing that triggering mere agreement on *any* set of statements or questions may be sufficient to increase compliance rates. We first discuss how this mere agreement effect differs from related interpersonal influence strategies and offer a two-step theory for the mere agreement effect. Six studies demonstrate the mere agreement technique and elucidate its underlying mechanism.

1. Mere agreement: a two-stage influence tactic

Several well-documented interpersonal influence strategies use sequential-request scripts (see e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). For example, the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), involves a persuasion technique in which an initial modest request is followed by a subsequent larger request – the target request. Compliance with the initial request increases the chances of compliance with the target request. Although multiple processes may operate in parallel to arrive at a particular foot-in-the-door result (Burger, 1999), usually a self-perception process (cf. Bem, 1972) is involved. In particular, compliance with an initial request may instigate self-perception processes that result in viewing oneself as particularly committed to a certain cause or, more generally as particularly helpful (cf. Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Reingen & Kernan, 1977). In combination with people's tendency to act consistently with their self-image, this altered self-view makes them more likely to comply with the target request (Cialdini, Trost & Newson, 1995).

In sequential-request strategies a target request is preceded by another stage in which an initial request is made. Several results indicate that compliance with a target request may also be enhanced when the target request is preceded by another stage in which *no initial request* is made. For instance, getting people to agree that a certain cause is important in a first stage may increase the probability of donating to that cause (cf. Schlenker, Dlugolecki & Doherty, 1994). Also, having people answering questions about organ donation increases subsequent signing up rates for organ donation (Carducci & Deuser, 1984). Interestingly, a target request may already benefit from a prior stage that is *unrelated* to it. For instance, engaging in a *non-topical* dialogue with a prospective complier before making the target request may increase compliance (Dolinski, Nawrat & Rudak, 2001). In fact, just asking people how they are doing before making a request may be all it takes (Howard, 1990).

This paper introduces a novel influence two-stage process in which both phases are unrelated as the first stage involves neither a request nor any other interaction related to the topic of the target request. We show that merely answering non-topical questions affirmatively or merely agreeing with a set of non-topical statements may be sufficient to increase compliance rates with unrelated requests. We propose that the mere agreement technique can be highly effective because (1) initial agreement and subsequent compliance do not need to be related for the effect to occur, and (2) the initial agreement can be easily induced by statements virtually anyone would agree with.

The documentation of a mere agreement effect extends research on interpersonal persuasion in several ways. First, considering that the items one agrees with may be unrelated to the eventual request, the documented mere agreement effect cannot be attributed to any consistency-based mechanism. In fact, we show that this mere agreement effect is due to an increased feeling of similarity with the requester after initial agreement with him/her. This increased similarity leads to increased compliance with any request. Second, while responding to questionnaire items that are *unrelated* to the target request may seem similar to the conversational engagement studied by Dolinski et al. (2001) and by Howard (1990), it also differs in two key aspects. Unlike in studies on conversational engagement, in most of our studies, there is no face-to-face contact or any other form of interaction between our participants and the interviewer: They never meet the interviewer but rather receive a paper-and-pencil or computerized questionnaire. Also, in the studies on conversational engagement, triggering agreement was not the goal of the interaction. Finally, the focus of our research is also different from that in most other studies on two-stage persuasion techniques. Usually, these studies compare

compliance when it is preceded by another stage to compliance when it is not preceded by another stage. In our studies, however, the request is always preceded by a first stage. We investigate how compliance varies as a function of the *responses* in the first stage.

2. A two-step theory of the mere agreement effect

We propose that people may infer from initial agreement with someone that one is similar to that person (Step 1). In turn, this increased feeling of similarity leads to increased compliance (Step 2). The validity of Step 2 has been documented in a host of studies. For instance, a subtle means by which requesters utilize the similarity principle for maximal influence is to dress in a manner similar to their targets' (Emswiller, Deaux, & Willits, 1971). In related research, perceived similarity between buyers and sellers has proven to result in greater likelihood of purchase (Woodside & Davenport, 1974), or more cooperation in buyer-seller negotiations (Deutsch & Kotik, 1978; Mathews, Wilson, & Monoky, 1972). Even when the apparent similarities are based on superficial matches such as shared names, birthdays, or fingerprint types, they are capable of increasing compliance rates (Burger et al., 2004; Garner, 2005).

Given the ample evidence for Step 2, the most important contribution of the current paper is the demonstration of Step 1: Initial agreement raises perceived similarity. Step 1 is based on the assumption that people readily assume that other people tend to agree with their own statements or tend to answer their own questions affirmatively. As a result, if one agrees to some else's statements/questions, this indicates shared agreement and, hence, some similarity.

The idea that people assume that other people would agree with their own statements or would answer their own questions affirmatively is consistent with a number of results from the social cognition literature. First, a host of studies indicate that people's public claims are considered indicative of their true opinions. For instance, when observers hear a target deliver a speech on some topic, they draw correspondent inferences regarding the target's opinion regarding the topic (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). So, when a target argues in favor of abortion, observers infer that the target has a pro-choice attitude. This inference is spontaneously made, even when observers are made clear that the target was assigned a position to defend *at random* (e.g., Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Miller, Ashton, & Mishal, 1990). Observers still draw a correspondent inference because they believe that true beliefs

leak through in public claims, even when these are constrained by the situation (Lord, Scott, Pugh, & Desforges, 1997).

Second, in 'getting-acquainted' situations, people (senders) may ask questions that they would answer affirmatively themselves for several reasons. For instance, people (senders) may believe that other people (receivers) share their opinions, interests and attitudes (false consensus effect; Ross, Greene & House, 1977, see also Marks & Miller, 1987). Also, people (senders) may ask questions they would themselves answer affirmatively for validation purposes: They may be motivated to find out how justified their opinions, attitudes, and interests are (cf. Marks, 1984). As a result, they may want to test whether other people (receivers) share their opinions, attitudes and interests. In sum, in getting-acquainted situations, people (senders) may test the hypothesis that they are similar to their targets (receivers) for a variety of reasons, by asking questions they would answer affirmatively themselves.

In sum, we claim that observers have the lay theory that people tend to ask questions they themselves would affirmatively reply to and tend to make statements they themselves agree with. As a result, if one finds oneself agreeing to a given statement or question, this indicates some similarity between oneself and the other person. This increased feeling of similarity or connection may lead to an increased compliance with any request from the person one seemingly agrees with.

3. Boundary conditions of the mere agreement effect

We study two possible boundary conditions of the mere agreement effect. The first boundary condition is an implication of the proposed two-step theory for the effect. We argued that mere agreement increases perceived similarity, which, in turn, leads to increased compliance. If increased perception of similarity to the requester underlies increased compliance, then increased compliance after mere agreement should only be observed when the requester is the same person as the person one agrees with. Mere agreement should not benefit other requesters with who perceived similarity has not changed.

A second boundary condition results from the fact that compliance with requests often involves a certain extent of mindlessness. That is, compliance is increased when people rely on compliance-promoting cues rather than deliberate on the merits of the request. For instance, people who are temporarily or chronically low in self-control – and thus who are unable or unwilling to deliberate on

the nature of the request – are more likely to comply with charitable requests (Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009). Disrupting the use of script knowledge in interpersonal persuasion settings also increases compliance (Davis & Knowles, 1999; Fennis, Das, & Pruyn, 2004). Finally, compliance is lower in the presence of a cue that triggers deliberation (see e.g., Pollock, Smith, Knowles, & Bruce, 1998). Compliance with a person who is perceived as similar is often attributed to heuristic, mindless processing of compliance requests (cf. Burger et al., 2004). Hence, the mere agreement effect may be eliminated when people do deliberate on the nature of the request.

4. Overview of the studies

We outlined a two-step theory of the mere agreement effect. In Study 1, we demonstrate the validity of Step 1: mere agreement enhances the respondents' perceived similarity with the requester, compared to mere disagreement or responding 'neutrally'. In Study 2, we extend Study 1 and jointly test Step 1 and Step 2. In particular, we show that mere agreement increases perceived similarity (Step 1) which in turn increases compliance with a subsequent request for help (Step 2). Study 3 tests the underlying mechanism more rigorously by manipulating perceived similarity in a mere agreement situation. It shows that compliance is higher when agreement signals similarity than when it signals dissimilarity. Study 4 shows that the mere agreement effect is person specific: Mere agreement increases helpfulness toward the interviewer but not toward any other person. This differentiates the mere agreement tactic from consistency based tactics like foot-in-the-door. Study 5 shows that deliberation may eliminate the effect of mere agreement on compliance. Deliberation is shown to result in a breakdown of Step 2 (from perceived similarity to compliance), but not of Step 1 (from agreement to perceived similarity). Finally, Study 6 shows the validity of the mere agreement effect in a field study.

4.1. Study 1: Mere agreement increases perceived similarity

Study 1 tests the assumption that agreeing with someone's statements leads to subsequent

increased similarity with that person. In particular, participants were asked to agree or disagree with eight statements. The statements were manipulated to trigger agreement on all eight (agreeing condition), trigger disagreement on all eight (disagreeing condition) or trigger agreement on four and disagreement on the remaining four (control condition). We expected increased perceived similarity with the source of the statements in the agreeing condition compared to the two other conditions.

4.1.1. Method.

In the agreeing condition, participants received eight statements with respect to ecological behavior to which presumably they would all agree (e.g., 'I sometimes shut down electronic devices to save energy' and 'I sort my garbage in different bags'). In the disagreeing condition, participants received eight statements with respect to ecological behavior to which presumably they would all disagree (e.g., 'I always use energy saving lamps' and 'I always use public transportation'). In the control condition, participants received four agreeing and four disagreeing statements.

Forty-seven students participated in exchange for course credit. They came to the laboratory in groups of maximum eight people and were tested in individual cubicles. In the first computerized questionnaire, participants had to indicate for each of the eight statements whether or not they agreed on a seven-point scale (ranging from 'I definitely do not agree' to 'I definitely agree'). Next, we looked at the extent to which participants perceived themselves to be similar or dissimilar to the person who made up the statements. Participants were instructed to imagine the person who had made up the statements – the interviewer – while answering the following three items on a seven-point scale: (1) 'To what extent do you think this person is like you', (2) 'To what extent do you think this person and yourself share the same interests', (3) Overall, how much do you identify with this person'. As an additional indicator of perceived similarity we also included a pictorial measure of interpersonal closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This measure of closeness uses seven pictures of two circles, one representing the self and the other representing the interviewer. The seven pictures differ with respect to the overlap between the two circles, ranging from no overlap to full overlap. We used the average of the three similarity items and the interpersonal closeness measure as a proxy for the perceived similarity between the participants and their requester ($\alpha = .88$).

4.1.2. Results and Discussion.

A manipulation check confirmed that the overall agreement between the agreeing, control, and disagreeing condition, differed significantly in the predicted direction ($M_{\text{agreeing}} = 5.7 > M_{control} = 4.2$; $t(29) = 4.6$; $p < .0001$ and $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 5.7 > M_{\text{disagreeing}} = 3.3$; $t(30) = 6.91$; $p < .001$ and $M_{control} = 4.2 > M_{\text{disagreeing}} = 3.3$; $t(29) = 1.92$; $p < .1$). A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of the experimental condition (agreeing vs. control vs. disagreeing) on perceived similarity: Participants in the agreeing condition perceived the interviewer as more similar than participants in the control condition ($M_{\text{agreeing}} = 4.3$ versus $M_{control} = 3.4$; $t(29)= 2.6$; $p < .02$) or the disagreeing condition($M_{\text{agreeing}} = 4.3$ versus $M_{\text{disagreeing}} = 3.0$; $t(30) = 3.4$; $p < .003$) The disagreeing and the control condition did not significantly differ ($t < 1$; *ns*). The results suggest that participants in the agreeing condition perceive the person presenting the statements as more similar to them than participants in the disagreeing or control condition.

4.2. Study 2: Mere agreement increases compliance through increased perceived similarity

Study 1 found an effect of agreement on perceived similarity. Study 2 tests two hypotheses: 1) mere agreement increases subsequent compliance and 2) this mere agreement effect is mediated by increased feeling of similarity. We continued with only two conditions, the agreeing and the control, for two reasons. First, the disagreeing and the control condition did not significantly differ in Study 1. Second, even if the non-significant difference between the disagreeing and the control condition is due to relatively low power in Study 1, it makes more sense from a practical point of view to investigate how one can increase compliance rather than decrease it. Finally, in Study 1, all statements were ecologically related. Agreement or disagreement with such statements may have altered self-perceptions regarding environmental consciousness (Cornelissen, Pandelaere, Warlop, & Dewitte, 2008). Compliance may have resulted because environmentally concerned people might see themselves as generally more cooperative, and not because of perceived similarity to the requester. . To eliminate this problem, each statement now referred to a different, unrelated topic. In addition, we also controlled for self-perceptions of helpfulness.

4.2.1. Method.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: the agreeing

condition or the control condition. In the agreeing condition, participants received eight pretested statements with a high probability of agreement (e.g., 'I can really look forward to having a nice meal' and 'I think women should receive equal pay to men'). In the control condition, participants also received eight pretested items. Four items were the same as in the agreeing condition (e.g., 'I can really look forward to having a nice meal'); the four remaining items were reframed to elicit disagreement (e.g., 'I think it is allowed to pay women less than men'). This procedure ensured that the topics of the statements were identical in both conditions.

Participants were invited to the lab in groups of maximum eight people to take part in a series of unrelated computerized experiments. Sixty-four undergraduates participated in return for a fee. Upon entering the lab, participants first received the eight statements for which they had to indicate on a seven-point scale (ranging from 'I definitely do not agree' to 'I definitely agree') whether or not they agreed. After a filler task, they saw a scenario featuring the person who had constructed the eight statements they had just received. This person was said to be a student who needed some help for his master's thesis. In the scenario, this student had to conduct about 100 telephone surveys calls (15-item questionnaire), as a part of his planned research project. He was looking for volunteers to make some of the phone calls. Participants could indicate whether they intended to conduct more (1) or fewer (0) phone calls than the average participant (for a similar procedure see Nelson & Norton, 2004).

After the cooperation measure, we administered the same perceived similarity scales as in Study 1. They allowed us to construct a proxy for the perceived similarity with the requester ($\alpha = .79$). Next, because the mere agreement manipulation might affect mood and because mood can have an effect on cooperative behavior, we administered a standard scale which assesses positive and negative mood (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Finally, participants had to rate themselves on a visual analogue scale (80 points) with endpoints 'cooperative' and 'uncooperative', to be able to control for their specific disposition to cooperate.

4.2.2. Results and Discussion.

We conducted a logistic regression with the binary cooperation variable as the dependent variable, and experimental condition (agreeing vs. control) as the categorical predictor. We also controlled for

negative mood, positive mood, and one's disposition to cooperate[6].

A manipulation check confirmed that the participants in the agreeing condition agreed to more statements than those in the controlcondition, $M_{agreeing} = 5.9 > M_{control} = 4.4$; $t(62) = 12.26$, $p < .001$. In line with our hypothesis, the probability of cooperation was higher in the agreeing condition than in the control condition, $M_{agreeing} = 0.45$, $M_{control} = 0.22$; LR $\chi^2(1) = 4.27$, $p < .04$. To provide evidence that the cooperation effect was mediated at least in part by the perceived similarity with the interviewer, we conducted a mediation analysis using the technique recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, in addition to the significant effect of the experimental condition on the willingness to cooperate in the telephone scenario, there was a significant effect of experimental condition on perceived similarity with the interviewer, $M_{agreeing} = 4.1$, $M_{control} = 3.6$; $F(1, 59) = 4.92$, $p < .04$. Second, perceived similarity and willingness to cooperate were positively related, LR $\chi^2(1) = 9.42$, $p < .004$. Finally, when both experimental condition and perceived similarity were entered as predictors in the equation, perceived similarity still predicted cooperation significantly, LR $\chi^2(1) = 6.92$, $p < .009$, whereas the effect of experimental condition on cooperation was attenuated, LR $\chi^2(1) < 2$, $p > .18$. Further, using a version of the Sobel test recommended by Baron and Kenny, the reduction in the direct effect of the experimental condition on cooperation, was significantly different from zero, 95% CI [$-.2121 < Z < -.0041$], providing support for mediation of the effect of agreeing on compliance by perceived similarity.

Overall, Study 2 shows that mere agreement increases the participants' likelihood to comply with a subsequent request for help, as well as perceived similarity with the requester. Moreover, perceived similarity between participants and requester mediated the effect of mere agreement on compliance.

4.3. Study 3: Conversational expectations moderate the effect of mere agreement on perceived similarity

Studies 1 and 2 showed that merely agreeing with someone else raises perceived similarity. In the introduction, we argued that this is due to a general expectation that people tend to agree with their own statements and answer their own questions affirmatively. The current study tests this explanation for the mere agreement effect on perceived similarity. All participants received 'agreeing' questions.

[6]Our manipulation did not affect mood or the participants' disposition to cooperate, nor did mood or one's disposition to cooperate affect our dependent measure, so these variables are not discussed further.

However, as in the previous studies, some received no further information about 'the interviewer' (control condition). Others were told that the interviewer tended to agree (interviewer-agrees condition) or to disagree (interviewer-disagrees condition) to the questions he or she had selected for the interview. If people generally assume that interviewers select questions that they themselves would answer affirmatively, perceived similarity should be similar in the interviewer-agrees and the control conditions, and both conditions should lead to higher perceived similarity than the interviewer-disagrees condition. We expected the same pattern for the measure of helpfulness.

The current experiment uses a dictator game as a measure of helpfulness. In a dictator game, one party – the dictator – can unilaterally decide on how to divide a given amount of money between him/herself and someone else. More favorable splits for the receiving party are generally interpreted as signs of helpfulness or altruism (cf. Ruffle, 1998). In our study the receiving party for the dictator game was the interviewer from the first part of the study. We expected more favorable splits for the interviewer in the interviewer-agrees condition and the control condition compared to an interviewer-disagrees condition.

If people generally assume that interviewers select questions that they themselves would answer affirmatively, perceived similarity should be similar in the interviewer-agrees and the control conditions, and both conditions should lead to higher perceived similarity than the interviewer-disagrees condition. We expected the same pattern for the measure of cooperation.

Finally, we also tested an alternative mechanism for the results of the previous studies. In interviews, eliciting affirmative answers renders an interview more fluent than eliciting negative answers (cf. Dardenne & Leyens, 1995). Also, the existence of an acquiescence bias suggests that it is easier for people to agree with questions/statements than to disagree (Knowles & Condon, 1999). Ease of processing has been shown to be a powerful determinant for many of judgments (cf. Schwarz, 2004; Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). Possibly, agreeing virtually all the time may be easier (i.e. entail more fluent processing) than disagreeing half of the time. Fluent responding may in turn create a favorable impression of the interviewer, including a heightened sense of similarity, which may lead to increased compliance. To test this alternative explanation, we assessed ease of responding in the current experiment.

4.3.1 Method.

One hundred and twenty-four participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in a 3 Interviewer response (interviewer-agrees versus interviewer-disagrees versus control) between-subjects design. All participants were informed that they would have to answer eight questions that a previous participant had selected in order to get to know them better. Participants assigned to the control condition received no further information about the previous participant. Participants in the interviewer-agrees condition were informed that the previous participant had been asked to select questions which s/he would answer affirmatively. Participants in the interviewer-disagrees condition were informed that the previous participant had been asked to select questions which s/he would answer negatively. In reality, all participants received the same questions. These questions were pretested in a similar population to make sure that each would elicit agreement from about 80% of the participants. This ensured that our participants would mostly agree to the questions – necessary to set up a mere agreement situation – but that it still would be plausible that the previous participant had answered negatively to any given question.

After responding to the eight selected items, participants had to decide unilaterally how to divide € 10 between themselves and the previous participant. There was a 10% chance that the split would be effectuated. Afterwards, participants had to indicate their similarity to the previous participant (ranging from 0 = not similar at all to 5 = very similar) and to indicate how easily they found answering the selected questions (ranging from 0 = very difficult to 5 = very easy). Finally, participants had to select 8 questions themselves that they would ask to get to know the next participant. They received a list of 20 questions, which did not contain the 8 questions that were posed to them. After selecting their 8 questions, they were asked to answer to each of the 20 questions they had selected from. This enabled us to investigate whether participants in the various conditions tended to select questions to which they themselves would respond affirmatively.

4.3.2 Results.

As intended, *agreement* did not significantly differ across the three Interviewer response condition, $F(1,121) = 1.75$, $p = .18$, and was uniformly high[7] ($M_{\text{interviewer-agrees}} = 7.07$, $M_{\text{control}} = 7.00$, $M_{\text{interviewer-}}$

[7] The agreement appears to slightly differ across the three conditions. To make sure that this did not affect our results, we reran all analyses, now controlling for agreement. These analyses yielded the

$_{disagrees}$ = 6.71, on a theoretical scale of 0 to 8). *Perceived similarity* with the interviewer happened to be identical in the interviewer-agrees and the control condition (M = 2.85). Perceived similarity in these two conditions was substantially higher than in the interviewer-disagrees condition (M = 1.10), $t(121)$ = 8.26, $p < .001$. Similarly, while virtually the same *amount* was *donated* in the interviewer-agrees (M = 3.63) and the control condition (M = 3.68), $F(1,121) = 0.02$, $p = .92$, both amounts were significantly higher than the amount donated in the interviewer-disagrees condition (M = 2.69), both ts > 2.01, both ps < .05.

We tested whether perceived similarity mediates the effect of Interviewer response conditions on amount donated. As our independent variable is categorical with more than two levels, however, it is not possible to obtain a direct statistical test for mediation. Hence, we used the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure only. We found that (1) Interviewer response affected amount donated (cf. supra), (2) Interviewer response affected perceived similarity (cf. supra), (3) that perceived similarity and amount donated were positively correlated, $r = .25$, $p < .01$. Finally, in a general linear model predicting amount donated using both Interviewer response and perceived similarity, Interviewer response was no longer significant , $F(2,120) = 0.17$, $p = .84$, while perceived similarity was, $F(1,120) = 3.56$, $p = .03$ (one-tailed).

An alternative account states that the observed differences in compliance is due to differences in processing fluency (i.e. ease of responding to the questions). Two results are inconsistent with this account. First, the ease of answering the questions did not significantly vary across the three conditions, $F(2,121) = 0.24$, $p = .79$. Second, ease of answering was not correlated to amount donated, $r = -.04$, $p = .65$.

Finally, for participants in the control condition[8], we investigated whether they tended to select questions for the next participant that they would answer affirmatively. This would further substantiate the idea that people in general tend to ask questions they themselves would answer affirmatively. Each participant had selected 8 questions and responded afterwards to all of the 20 questions they could

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same results as the reported analyses. The slight agreement differences did not explain the observed findings.

[8] We restricted analysis to the control condition because the selection process in the other conditions may have been contaminated by the fact that participants thought that the previous participants had been asked to select questions to which s/he would answer affirmatively (interviewer-agrees condition) or negatively (interviewer-disagrees condition). Post-hoc analysis showed this was the case. The bias towards affirmative questions was significant in the interviewer-agrees condition, but not in the interviewer-disagrees condition. Testifying to the dominance of an affirmative selection strategy, there nevertheless remained a slight bias in the latter condition.

choose from. We calculated per participant the proportion of affirmative responses to their own selected questions and the proportion of affirmative responses to the questions they did not select. If there were no bias to selecting questions one answers affirmatively, these two proportions should be equal. Consistent with our speculation, however, the proportion of affirmative responses to the questions they selected ($M = .71$) significantly exceeded the proportion of affirmative responses to the questions they did not select ($M = .42$), $t(41) = 7.54$, $p < .001$.

4.3.3 Discussion.

Study 3 demonstrates that people spontaneously use expectations about an interviewer's own responses to his/her questions in order to infer their similarity with an interviewer. Our participants inferred an identical degree of similarity with an interviewer when they had no information about the interviewer's own responses than when they were told that the interviewer had answered all selected questions affirmatively. A markedly lower degree of similarity was inferred when the interviewer presumably had answered all questions negatively.

As before, these differences in perceived similarity translated to differences in helpfulness. Participants donated more money in the interviewer-agrees and control conditions compared to the interviewer-disagrees condition. Moreover, they donated about the same amount of money in the interviewer-agrees and the control condition. This further supports the hypothesis that mere agreement alters perceived similarity which in turn affects compliance rates. An alternative account which attributes differences in compliance to differences in processing fluency is not supported by the present data.

One final piece of data also supports the idea that people may hold the belief that interviewers tend to select questions they would answer affirmatively. In the control condition, when the participants were asked to select their own questions for the next participant, they demonstrated a bias towards selecting questions they would answer affirmatively over questions they would answer negatively. People's preference for 'affirmative' questions may not only be very pervasive but also result in the belief that people in general ask affirmative questions.

4.4. Study 4: The mere agreement effect is interviewer-specific

The previous studies showed that merely agreeing with statements raises a target's perception of similarity with an interviewer. This increased feeling of similarity then translates into increased compliance with the interviewer. Study 4 tests an implication of the proposed two-step theory, namely that mere agreement should only increase helpfulness toward the interviewer and not toward other persons. A demonstration that mere agreement should affect compliance only for requests from the person with whom one has agreed and not for requests from any other person would not only support the proposed mechanism but would also rule out an alternative mood explanation. In Study 2, we had already tested a mood explanation by measuring positive and negative mood. Apparently, agreeing with statements did not alter mood. However, it remains possible that induced mood differences had dissipated by the time we had measured mood. Still, if merely agreeing would alter mood as a result of which people would become more compliant with request, we should observe increased helpfulness toward any person.

As in Study 3, participants engaged in a dictator game: They had to split 10 Euro between themselves and the interviewer. We expected more favorable splits for the other party in the agreement condition compared to a control condition. In addition, this beneficial effect of mere agreeing should be observed only when the other party is the source of the statements with which one has agreed.

4.4.1 Method.

Seventy-six participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 'degree of agreement' (agreeing versus control) by 2 'target condition' (interviewer versus other person) between-subjects design. All participants were informed that they would have to indicate their level of agreement with ten personality statements that a previous participant had selected in order to get to know them better. Participants in the agreeing condition received ten statements with which most students agree. Participants in the control condition received five statements with which most students agree and five with which most students disagree. After responding to the ten statements, participants were asked to engage in a dictator game in which they had to decide unilaterally how to divide € 10 between themselves and another party. This other party was either the interviewer (interviewer condition) or another participant (other person condition). To make the decision consequential, they were informed that there was a 10% chance that the split would be effectuated.

4.4.2 Results and discussion.

We predicted that the money that the participants decided to give away would be higher in the agreeing/interviewer condition than in all other conditions. A focused contrast (cf. Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1989) indicates that this is indeed the case, $F(1,72) = 6.97$, $p = .01$ (see Figure 1 for the means). The cell means in the three remaining conditions did not significantly differ from one another, $F(2,72) = 0.19$, $p = .83$. Pairwise comparisons showed that participants gave more money away in the agreeing/interviewer condition than in any of the remaining conditions, all ts > 2.00, all ps < .05. None of the pairwise comparisons between the three remaining conditions was significant, all ts < 0.56, all ps > .57.

Insert figure 1 about here

Study 4 shows that merely agreeing increases helpfulness but only toward the person with whom one agrees. This not only further supports the proposed two-step theory but also eliminates a mood explanation for the mere agreement effect. If merely agreeing would alter mood as a result of which people would become more compliant with request, we should have observed increased helpfulness toward any person.

4.5. Study 5: Deliberation eliminates the mere agreement effect on compliance

Compliance with requests is often due to mindless processing during which people tend to follow a set of heuristics to decide whether or not to comply (cf. Burger et al., 2004; Cialdini, 2001; Garner, 2005). Compliance drops when people deliberate about the request (Dolinski, Ciszek, Godlewski, & Zawadzki, 2002; Pollock et al., 1998). The current study tests whether a cue that makes participants deliberate may undermine the mere agreement effect. In addition, we investigate whether this breakdown of the mere agreement effect occurs in Step 1 (perceived similarity is not increased) or in Step 2 (similarity is not used as a factor in deciding on compliance); see Figure 2. To trigger deliberation, we reminded half of the participants of their level of agreement with the statements before they had to indicate compliance and perceived similarity with the requester. This reminder consisted of an overview of their responses without the corresponding statements. We expected that this

deliberation cue would eliminate the mere agreement effect on compliance because similarity is no longer used as a cue (breakdown in Step 2).

Insert figure 2 about here

4.5.1 Method.

One hundred and forty-four participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 'degree of agreement' (agreeing versus control) by 2 'reminder condition' (reminder versus no reminder) between-subjects design. Apart from the reminder manipulation, the procedure of Study 5 was identical to the one we used in Study 2. In the reminder condition, prior to the telephone scenario, we told participants that before answering some questions about the person who constructed the statements they had read, they would first be provided with an overview of their agreement with the eight statements (the same as in Study 2). Next, the computer program automatically generated a table indicating each participant's level of agreement with each of the eight statements (i.e. the participants' response to each of the eight statements). In the no reminder condition, the telephone scenario immediately followed the eight statements like in Study 2.

As in Study 2, we used a dichotomous cooperation measure: Participants could indicate whether they were willing to conduct more (1) or less (0) phone calls than the average participant. Afterwards, similarity was measured as in Study 2.

4.5.2 Results.

A manipulation check again showed a significant difference between the agreeing and the control condition in the predicted direction, $M_{\text{agreeing}} = 6.0 > M_{\text{control}} = 4.3$; $t(142) = 21.3$, $p < .001$. We conducted a logistic regression with degree of agreement (agreeing versus control) and reminder condition (reminder versus no reminder) as the categorical predictors, and the binary cooperation variable as the criterion. We also controlled for negative mood, positive mood, and one's disposition to cooperate[9].

[9]There was no effect of our manipulation on negative mood, positive mood, or one's disposition to cooperate. Negative mood (factor score) had a significant negative effect on the willingness to conduct phone calls, LR $\chi^2(1) = 7.6$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.58$, and we found a positive correlation between one's disposition to cooperate and the compliance measure, LR $\chi^2(1) = 8.82$, $p < .005$, $\beta = .064$. Since we found no evidence for mediation or interaction effects, these variables are not discussed further.

The analysis revealed a significant interaction between degree of agreement and reminder condition, LR $\chi^2(1) = 3.84$, $p = .05$ (Figure 2). Without reminder, participants in the agreeing condition were more likely to cooperate than participants in the control condition, $M_{agreeing} = 0.42$, $M_{control} = 0.22$; LR $\chi^2(1) = 4.17$, $p < .05$, replicating Study 2. In the reminder condition, however, the effect of agreeing on compliance disappeared, $M_{agreeing} = 0.29$, $M_{control} = 0.33$; LR $\chi^2(1) < 1$, *ns*.

Insert figure 3 about here

In addition, when we included the interaction between perceived similarity ($\alpha = .81$) and reminder condition in the equation, we found a significant interaction between reminder and the mediator, LR $\chi^2(1) = 3.9$, $p < .05$. Together with the fact that the interaction between degree of agreement and reminder condition on perceived similarity was not significant ($F < 1$, *ns*), these results suggest that the reminder procedure is eliminating the effect of mere agreement on compliance after an increase in perceived similarity rather than before, and thus hints at moderated mediation (reminder × perceived similarity) on compliance. Following Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007; Model 3 p.209), we performed a moderated mediation with an estimation of the mediating role of perceived similarity at the two levels of the reminder manipulation: In the reminder condition, perceived similarity was not related to compliance, $Z = .21$, $p > .8$; However, for participants who were not reminded of their degree of agreement (like in Study 2), perceived similarity was mediating the effect of mere agreement on subsequent compliance, $Z = 2.07$, $p < .04$.

In sum, these results provide evidence that rendering people more mindful did not attenuate the effect of agreement on perceived similarity, but it did prevent that agreement and enhanced feeling of similarity would produce an increase in compliance rates (Path 2 in Figure 2).

4.5.3. Discussion.

Study 5 illustrates that the effect of mere agreement on compliance may be eliminated when people are rendered mindful. However, the breakdown of the mere agreement effect only occurs in the second stage. Reminding participants about the extent to which they previously agreed with an unknown other, apparently makes them aware of the superfluous nature of 'feeling similar' and prompts them to correct for its effect. In the reminder condition, mere agreement still enhanced

perceived similarity with the requester; however, the increased perceived similarity with the requester was no longer sufficient to make respondents more compliant. Furthermore, among the participants who were not reminded of their degree of agreement, we replicated the findings of Study 2: perceived similarity between participant and requester mediated the effect of mere agreement on the willingness to help the requester afterwards.

4.6. Study 6: Validation in the field

Although our studies testify to the robustness of the mere agreement effect, it remains nevertheless desirable to show that the mere agreement technique also works outside the lab. To validate the mere agreement effect in a real life setting, we tested it in a telephone survey. Particularly, we examined whether the degree of agreement with statements would influence respondents' willingness to subscribe for participation in future surveys. For the data collection, we collaborated with a market research company. The compliance and the setting was real life, but we manipulated the degree of agreement by varying the set of statements, just like we did in the lab studies.

4.6.1. Method.

Ninety-two respondents (part of a compiled telephone sample) were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: the agreeing condition or the control condition. Keeping actual opinion constant, 'agreeing condition' participants were induced to agree more often than the control participants. In both conditions participants received eight statements to which they could (dis)agree on a three-point scale (agree = 1, neutral = 2, disagree = 3). The agreeing condition consisted of eight items with a high probability of agreement ($M_{\text{agreeing}} = 1.11$). To keep the wording of the statements almost identical in both conditions, four out of eight presumably agreeing statements were reframed to construct four 'disagreeing items' for the control condition (see appendix). Hence, the control condition consisted of four presumably agreeing and four presumably disagreeing items ($M_{\text{control}} = 1.98$).

In a brief introduction, the market research company was described to participants and the purpose of the survey was explained by two interviewers: supposedly the market research company needed people's opinion on various topics in order to adjust their upcoming services. After participants gave their permission to respond to the questionnaire, they (1) had to indicate whether or not they agreed to the eight statements on a three-point scale, (2) were asked to give their name and address if they were

willing to participate in comparable surveys in the future (i.e. compliance measure), and (3) were asked for some demographics.

4.6.2. Results and Discussion.

A manipulation check confirmed the significant difference between the degree of agreement in the agreeing and the control condition, $M_{agreeing} = 1.11 < M_{control} = 1.98$, $t(90) = 27{,}45$; $p < .001$. A logistic regression with the binary cooperation variable as the criterion, and experimental condition (agreeing vs. control), and interviewer as the categorical predictors, revealed a positive main effect of the experimental condition on the participants' willingness to cooperate in future surveys $M_{agreeing} = 47$ %, $M_{control} = 29$ %, $\beta = 0.854$, LR $\chi^2(1) = 2.66$, $p = .05$ (one-sided). We also found a main effect of interviewer, LR $\chi^2(1) = 9.51$, $p < .005$, but there was no significant interaction between experimental condition and interviewer, LR $\chi^2(1) < 1$, *ns*. Also, respondents' gender did not exert any main or interaction effect and was therefore ignored in the analysis.

Study 6 demonstrates that the mere agreement effect can also be observed outside the lab. In fact, the observed mere agreement effect was rather high: willingness to cooperate in future surveys increased from 29% to 47%, an increase of 18%! One could argue that the indication that one is willing to cooperate in future surveys may be rather inconsequential: At the time of the future survey, people may simply not act consistent with their prior intention. Still, indicating that one is willing to cooperate in future surveys does imply that one is rather likely to receive further telephone calls. In addition, committing to a course of action does increase the probability of engaging in that course of action (Spangenberg, Greenwald & Sprott, 2008).

5. General Discussion

Consistent findings across six studies demonstrated the applicability of mere agreement as a subtle compliance increasing tool. Study 1 illustrated that agreeing respondents perceive the person presenting the statements as more similar to them than disagreeing or neutral respondents. In Study 2, the more participants agreed with a set of statements, the more they were willing to help the requester afterwards. This effect was mediated by the perceived similarity between participants and requester. Study 3 showed that mere agreement leads to increased perceived similarity because people think that

other people tend to agree with their own statements or answer their own questions affirmatively. When participants were given opposite expectations – the interviewer selected questions to which he answered negatively – mere agreement led to a lower perceived similarity and to less helpfulness than when participants were not given explicit expectations. After establishing the causal role of similarity, we identified two boundary conditions. Consistent with a similarity account for the mere agreement effect on compliance, Study 4 showed that mere agreement increases helpfulness toward the interviewer only. Study 5 showed that deliberation eliminates the mere agreement effect on compliance. However, mere agreement continued to lead to increased perceived similarity. Finally, Study 6 demonstrates the validity of the mere agreement technique in a field study.

We addressed two alternative explanations for the mere agreement effect on compliance. First, we tested a mood-based explanation by measuring mood (Study 2 and Study 5). In neither study did mere agreement alter mood. Also, Study 3 demonstrated that only the interviewer benefits from a mere agreement treatment but not some other person does. In contrast, a mood account would predict that mere agreement would benefit any person raising a request. Second, we tested a fluency-based account that attributes increased compliance to a more fluent processing in the mere agreement condition than in the control or disagreement condition. In Study 4, differences in interviewer expectations did lead to differences in compliance although they did not lead to differences in fluency of responding to the selected questions. Moreover, ease of responding was not correlated with amount donated to the interviewer in a dictator game. Although our results point toward a similarity-based mechanism, several alternatives remain possible. For instance, mere agreement may lead to increased feelings of connectedness with the interviewer or with increased empathy, which, in turn may lead to increased compliance. Still, empathy and connectedness may be strongly related to perceived similarity. It remains to be seen whether future research is able to disentangle a similarity-based account from these conceptually much related accounts.

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to show that ‘agreeing with someone’ eventuates in more compliance with a subsequent participation request. Since a rather basal similarity-based mechanism appears to drive the effect, we assume it to be a rather robust strategy. In fact, six consistent studies were able to show this robustness: Different sets of agreeing statements worked equally well in a computerized questionnaire among students, as in a real life telephone survey with respondents of all ages and social classes.

Our research introduces mere agreement as a tool to increase cooperation and that can readily be implemented in marketing interactions and negotiations. Especially in dyadic retail conversations triggering mere agreement can be easier put into practice compared to other conceptually related superficial similarities between a sales agent and his customer. For example, behavioral mimicry (i.e., mimicking leg and arm movements of consumers; see e.g., Tanner et al., 2008) and other incidental similarities such as pretending to have the same name or birthday as the consumer (e.g., Garner, 2005), are probably more difficult to apply and more easily run the risk of raising suspicion from the prospective customers. In sum, we consider 'mere agreement with statements' a novel tool that *subtly* increases compliance rates. The results of our studies have clear implications for (social) marketers: For a sales agent increased compliance may lead to more people buying his product, in a telephone survey higher cooperation rates can lead to a larger number of panel members and thus a more representative sample, and in a charity context extra compliance may result in higher donation amounts.

The proposed mere agreement technique is a two-stage social influence technique. In a first stage, agreement on *any* topic is elicited. In a second stage, a request is made. Eliciting agreement in the first stage increases compliance with the request in the second stage. The mere agreement technique cannot be reduced to any other known two-stage social influence technique. It differs from the well-known foot-in-the-door technique in several respects. First, foot-in-the-door involves two requests whereas the mere agreement technique involves only one request. Second, in foot-in-the-door situations, compliance may be enhanced if the requester in the second stage is different from the requester in the first stage (cf. Burger, 1999). In contrast, the mere agreement effect is eliminated when the second stage agent (the requester) is different from the first stage agent (the interviewer). Finally, while foot-in-the-door involves exploiting consistency, mere agreement involves exploiting perceived similarity. This latter aspect also implies that the mere agreement technique is different from any other interpersonal persuasion technique involving consistency (e.g. the low-ball technique).

The mere agreement technique also differs from other techniques that involve engaging in a verbal exchange during the first stage. For instance, getting people to say they are doing fine in the first stage increases compliance for charitable causes in a second stage (Howard, 1990). However, this increased compliance is attributed to guilt or fear of social rejection rather than to similarity with the requester: After saying one is doing fine, one would appear very stingy not to contribute to a charitable cause.

Engaging in a dialogue before making a request also enhances compliance rates (Dolinski et al., 2001). Like the mere agreement effect, the effect of dialogue involvement is attributed to enhanced perceived similarity. However, our results show that not every 'dialogue' may be equally potent to elicit compliance with a subsequent request – triggering agreement may beget more compliance than other verbal exchanges. Also, in studies on dialogue engagement, the verbal interactions were face-to-face and very natural. This contrasts with the type of verbal interactions that were studied in the current paper: These may hardly be classified as dialogues. In fact, the interaction in our studies boiled down to indicating agreement or disagreement with a limited number of items, which is different from the type of verbal exchanges in a proper dialogue. In addition, in all the studies, participants just answered questions or indicated agreement with statements without ever meeting the interviewer. This renders the mere agreement tool very useful for social influence in mediated interactions (e.g. via telephone, chat rooms, etc.)

An avenue for future research concerns the scope of the mere agreement effect. First, it is possible that the more respondents 'learn' about the person presenting the statements, for instance through visual appearance in a face-to-face context, the less likely it is that mere agreement will enhance their willingness to help this person afterwards. Respondents' perceived similarity with the requester might then be based upon the actual perception they have with respect to this person's personality and looks, rather than upon the extent of prior agreement. Nevertheless, for e-marketing, online surveys, telemarketing, telephone surveys, and direct mailing, our studies already indicate that mere agreement can represent an important compliance increasing tool.

Second, the mere agreement effect on compliance is eliminated when people are cued to engage in mindful responding to the request. Future studies may investigate various cues that may eliminate the mere agreement effect on compliance. For instance, when confronted with a high number of agreeing statements (e.g., 15), or with a very friendly or pushy requester to begin with, respondents may become suspicious about the degree of agreement with a total stranger. As a result, the influence of mere agreement on compliance may be attenuated.

Our research suggests that the effect of mere agreement on compliance can be attenuated by raising awareness of prior agreement. However, this reminder procedure did not attenuate the effect of such agreement on perceived similarity. Future research may look into the potential role of this evoked perceived similarity in 'delayed' compliance requests. Just like people over time proved to dissociate

the source credibility from the content of a persuasive message (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004), people may dissociate the feeling of similarity from its origin (the prior agreement). Under this assumption, perceived similarity may have a 'sleeper-effect' on delayed compliance requests, even if the agreement with a total stranger was too salient or obvious in a first stage.

Future research is needed to speak to any possible moderators of the mere agreement effect on compliance, but for now, triggering agreement an *any* topic seems a novel and promising tool for gaining compliance in marketing interactions.

Appendix. Example of agreeing and disagreeing statements used in Study 1b

A) Agreeing Condition

1 I think women should receive equal pay to men

2 I sort my garbage

3 I get happy when the weather is nice

4 I think doping in sports should be forbidden

5 I think people generally pay too much attention to beauty

6 Tom Boonen is a bicycle racer with charisma

7 I think life has become more expensive with the introduction of the Euro

8 I can really look forward to having a nice meal

B) Control Condition (italicized items are reframed compared to the items in the agreeing condition to yield 'disagreeing' items)

1 *I think women may be paid less than men*

2 I sort my garbage

3 I get happy when the weather is nice

4 *I think doping in sports should be allowed*

5 I think people generally pay too much attention to beauty

6 *Tom Boonen is a bicycle racer without charisma*

7 *I think life has become less expensive with the introduction of the Euro*

8 I can really look forward to having a nice meal

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Figure 1

Money given away (in Euro) to the other party in the dictator game as a function of agreement condition (agreeing versus control) and other party (interviewer versus any other person) (Study 4)

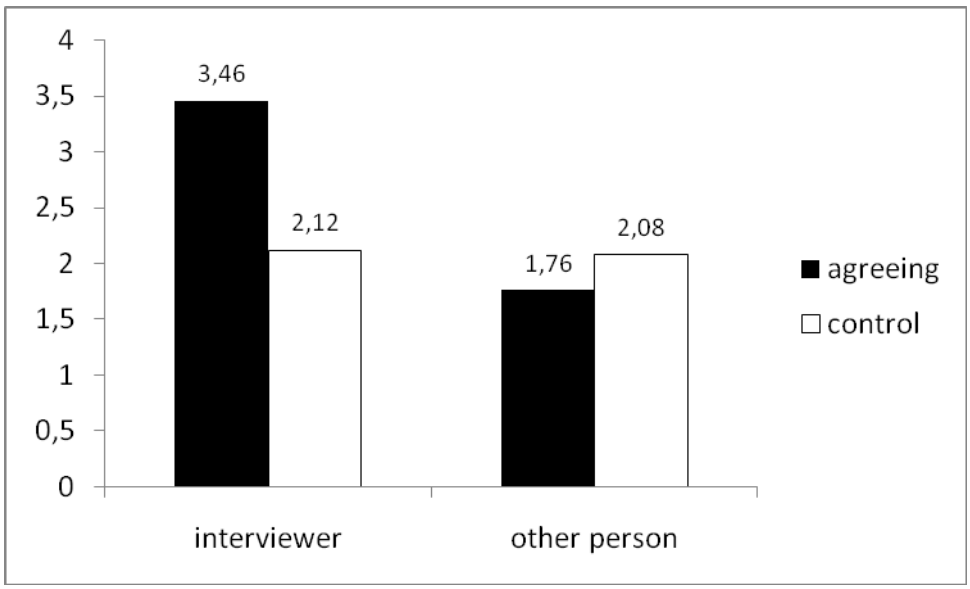

Figure 2

The two possible ways in which deliberation may eliminate the effect of mere agreement on compliance (Study 5)

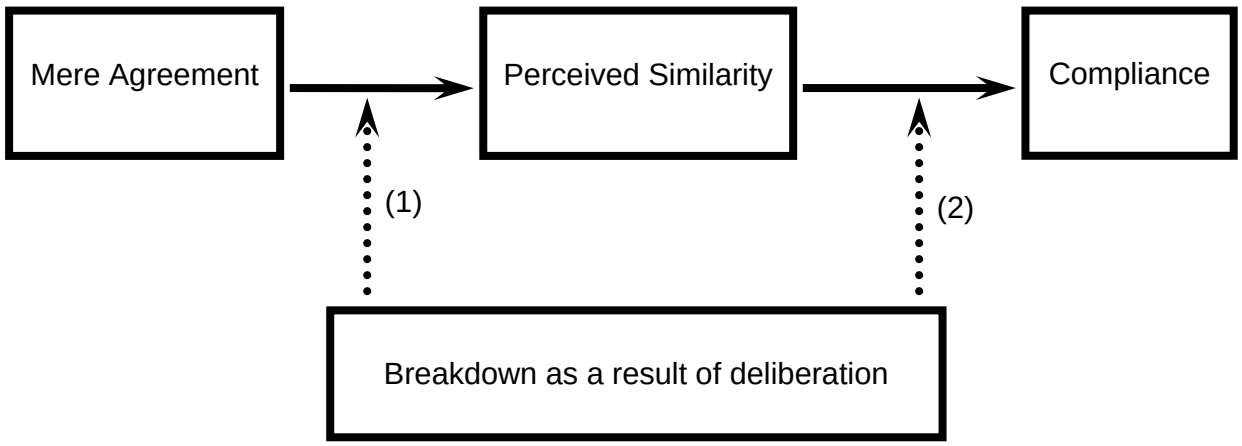

Figure 3

Means for the probability to make phone calls in the agreeing and the control condition for reminder and no reminder (Study 5)