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# A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of the “But You Are Free” Compliance-Gaining Technique

Christopher J. Carpenter

*The “but you are free” (BYAF) compliance-gaining technique operates by telling the target that he or she is free to refuse the request. A meta-analysis of 42 studies of the effectiveness of that technique indicated that it was an effective means of increasing compliance rates in most contexts. It was effective regardless of type of request, but effectiveness diminished when the decision to enact the target behavior was not made immediately, consistent with a self-presentation explanation of the technique’s effectiveness.*

*Keywords: Compliance-Gaining; Meta-Analysis; Reactance Theory; Self-Presentation*

A simple but very effective compliance-gaining technique has been developed in France. The initial demonstration of the “but you are free” (BYAF) technique was by Guéguen and Pascual (2000). One of the experimenters approached individuals walking alone in a shopping mall in France. In the control condition, the experimenter made a simple direct request: “Sorry, Madam/Sir, would you have some coins to take the bus, please?” In the experimental condition, the experimenter added: “But you are free to accept or to refuse.” Those in the experimental condition were substantially more likely to comply with the request. Moreover, those who gave in the experimental condition gave twice as much as those in the control condition. They developed the BYAF technique on the basis of psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966). Purportedly the phrase weakens the target’s perception that her or his freedom to say “no” is being threatened.

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Christopher J. Carpenter is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Western Illinois University. Correspondence to: Christopher J. Carpenter, Western Illinois University, Department of Communication, 1 University Circle, 215 Sallee Hall, Macomb, IL 61455, USA. E-mail: cj-carpenter2@wiu.edu

The BYAF technique has the potential to be a powerful new tool in a variety of compliance-gaining contexts. Unlike the door-in-the-face (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) and other complex techniques, the BYAF technique does not require a series of requests. Instead, one merely adds a single sentence to the original request. Additionally, some research suggests that the BYAF technique can be added to other compliance-gaining techniques to increase their effectiveness further (Dufourcq-Brana, 2007; Guéguen, Meineri, Martin, & Grandjean, 2010). Given the ease with which this technique can be adapted to any context and its potential to strengthen other techniques, it is important to determine the overall effectiveness of the technique and potential moderators. The answer to these questions can help shape best practices for charities seeking to increase the yield of their fundraising efforts. Furthermore, the exploration of moderators may help illuminate the theoretical mechanisms of the technique. First, the technique will be explicated and then the results of a meta-analysis of the BYAF technique's effectiveness will be reported.

### *But You Are Free*

In a series of follow-ups to their original demonstration of the technique, Pascual and Guéguen (2002) determined that the technique was consistently effective in face-to-face contexts, including ones in which the requester did not even offer a reason for the request. Their sixth study showed that the use of the technique was associated with an increase in donation sizes for a prosocial cause when compared to a control message. Specifically, invoking the audience's freedom to donate however much the members wanted was associated with an increase in the average donation size as compared to a direct request control group's average donation size. Additionally, Pascual, Dagot, Vallee, and Guéguen (2009) observed that people were more likely to donate to a tsunami relief fund via the BYAF technique as compared to a direct request. Guéguen and Pascual (2005) also reported that the technique is associated with an increased likelihood that people approached on the street would agree to complete a survey. Finally, Marchand, Halimi-Falkowicz, and Joule (2009) found that nursing home residents were more likely to participate in activities with the other residents when their freedom to refuse was invoked first.

The exact wording of the technique has varied, but it always emphasizes the target's right to say "no." For example, Guéguen et al. (2011) found the phrase "But obviously do not feel obliged" (p. 36) is just as effective as the standard "but you are free." The studies that have varied the phrasing but consistently emphasized the target's freedom have uncovered no substantial differences in the technique's effectiveness across the variations in wording (Guéguen et al., 2011; Pascual, 2002). The factor most consistently emerging has been the importance of verbally recognizing the target's freedom to say "no."

### *Meta-Analyzing the BYAF Technique*

A meta-analysis of the existing BYAF literature serves several purposes. First, it can establish the strength of the technique across a variety of contexts and correct for

sampling error. This analysis will enable professionals concerned with compliance gaining to gauge the strength of the technique by comparing the average effect size to other compliance-gaining techniques subjected to meta-analysis (e.g., Andrews, Carpenter, Shaw, & Boster, 2008; Carpenter & Boster, 2009; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998).

In addition, the possibility that the technique is less successful when the decision to comply does not occur face-to-face was a focus of interest. Andrews et al. (2009) raised the possibility that some compliance-gaining techniques rely on the target's desire to engage in positive self-presentation before the requester. It is therefore important to determine whether or not the BYAF technique is similarly limited in its effectiveness to situations in which the decision to comply is made with the requester present. Furthermore, if the BYAF technique reduces reactance, as the originators claimed, the technique may not be effective in situations in which the decision to comply is not made in front of the requester. For example, if the requester emails the target (e.g., Guéguen, Pascual, Jacob, & Morineau, 2002), then the target can choose to comply or not without the requester being present or possibly even knowing if the target complied. In such cases, reactance may not be evoked because the threat to the target's freedom is less acute when the person imposing on the target is not present when the target either performs the behavior or not. The self-presentation hypothesis therefore predicts that, when meta-analyzed, studies of requests in which the decision to comply was not made with the requester present will form a homogeneous set with a substantially lower average effect size than the body of studies in which the decision to comply is made face-to-face.

Another possible moderator is implicit in Carpenter and Boster's (2009) finding that compliance-gaining techniques may be less effective in a sales context. These researchers suggest that the loss of effectiveness occurs because people are more suspicious of self-interested requests and cognitively process such requests more thoughtfully. The targets of compliance-gaining requests may see them as prosocial, self-interested, or an offer. Prosocial requests are ones for which compliance benefits some worthy cause and not the requester (e.g., requests soliciting money for charities; Pascual & Guéguen, 2002, Study 5), self-interested requests clearly only benefit the requester (e.g., give the requester money; Pascual & Guéguen, 2002, Study 1), and offers are for the benefit of the target only (e.g., to participate in activities in a nursing home; Marchand et al., 2009). The self-interested requests may reduce the effectiveness of the technique by causing targets to process the request more carefully than when it is prosocial or an offer. The following meta-analysis will report the overall effectiveness of the technique and tests of these moderators.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

To locate as many studies examining this technique as possible, the full text of the articles in *PsycINFO* and *Communication and Mass Media Complete* were both

searched using the term “but you are free.” Studies citing the seminal Guéguen and Pascual (2000) article were searched for using the Web of Science as well as Google Scholar. Examination of the references section of all the obtained studies as well as those of relevant review articles (e.g., Joule, Girandola, & Bernard, 2007) aided in the identification of pertinent articles. The primary authors on all of the obtained studies were emailed and asked for unpublished studies. The search resulted in the location of 13 articles for which it was possible to estimate 51 effect sizes. The sample size was 23,790. The studies took place primarily in France. Two were conducted in Romania, two in Russia, and one in the Ivory Coast.

Unfortunately, some of the effect sizes were not independent, as they were derived from studies focusing on moderators of the technique and shared common control groups. When studies were interdependent, the effect size comparison that most resembled the most common method of implementing the technique was the one maintained for the analysis. The phrase “but you are free” was used rather than such variations as “you are not obliged” or “you may do as you wish.” Also, in some studies the phrase appeared before the target request was described and in some it came after. There were 26 cases in which the request appeared before, 24 where it appeared after, and two where it was placed before and after the target request. As the before placement was the most common, it was used for the effect size estimate in studies that examined both order variations against a shared control group.<sup>1</sup> When only independent effect sizes were included, there were 42 effect size estimates from independent studies of the technique’s effectiveness for a combined sample of 22,333. This sample was used to produce the overall estimate and the additional dependent effect sizes were added to any subgroup in which there was not already a sample employing the same control group.

### *Coding*

There were two effect sizes coded for each study. First, the  $\chi^2$  for the increase in compliance associated with using the BYAF technique compared to the direct-request message was converted to a correlation coefficient in line with the formulas Cooper (1998) provided. The odds ratio (OR) for each study was also calculated, except for Study 6 in the Pascual and Guéguen (2002) article because the dependent variable was the amount of money the participants offered for a charity rather than their decision to donate.

Two aspects of each study were coded as potential moderators: whether the target made their choice with the requester present or not and if the request was prosocial (e.g., donate to a charity; Pascual & Guéguen, 2002, Study 5), self-interested (e.g., give the requester money; Pascual & Guéguen, 2002, Study 1), or an offer for the benefit of the target (e.g., to participate in activities in a nursing home; Marchand et al., 2009). For a full listing of all of the coding for each study, effect sizes, and sample sizes, see Table 1.

**Table 1** The Moderator Coding, Effect Sizes, and Sample Sizes of the Studies in the Meta-Analysis

Author	Year	Type of request	Immediate or delayed	<i>N</i>	OR	<i>r</i>
Dufourcq-Brana 2007 Study 1	2007	prosocial	Delayed	400	0.704	-.05
Dufourcq-Brana 2007 Study 2	2007	prosocial	Immediate	100	2.93	.26
Dufourcq-Brana 2007 Study 3	2007	prosocial	Immediate	60	6.571	.436
Guéguen & Pascual	2000	Selfish	Immediate	80	8.143	.414
Guéguen & Pascual	2005	Prosocial	Immediate	159	2.85	.187
Guéguen et al.	2002	prosocial	Delayed	600	2.417	.189
Guéguen et al.	2010	prosocial	Immediate	100	1.909	.16
Guéguen et al. Study 1	review	Selfish	Immediate	2160	3.481	.268
Guéguen et al. Study 10	review	selfish	Immediate	200	1.81	.14
Guéguen et al. Study 11	review	Selfish	Immediate	172	4.51	.354
Guéguen et al. Study 12	review	Selfish	Immediate	200	1.962	.16
Guéguen et al. Study 13	review	Selfish	Immediate	200	3.523	.302
Guéguen et al. Study 2	review	Selfish	Immediate	160	2.287	.166
Guéguen et al. Study 3	review	Selfish	Immediate	4421	1.689	.109
Guéguen et al. Study 4	review	Prosocial	Immediate	60	6.57	.436
Guéguen et al. Study 5	review	Prosocial	Immediate	400	2.429	.214
Guéguen et al. Study 6	review	prosocial	Delayed	100	6.714	.312
Guéguen et al. Study 7	review	prosocial	Immediate	2289	2.228	.197
Guéguen et al. Study 8	review	offer	Delayed	4515	1.913	.04
Guéguen et al. Study 9	review	selfish	Delayed	2230	1.791	.11
Marchand et al.	2009	offer	Delayed	37	2.694	.243
Pascual Study 5	2002	selfish	Immediate	94	1.151	.03
Pascual Study 6	2002	Selfish	Immediate	320	2.103	.169
Pascual Study 7	2002	Selfish	Immediate	84	2.75	.229
Pascual Study 10	2002	prosocial	Delayed	171	2.47	.22
Pascual study 11	2002	prosocial	Delayed	220	2.54	.13
Pascual et al.	2009	prosocial	Immediate	120	2.51	.21
Pascual et al.	2002	prosocial	Delayed	400	0.669	-.059
Pascual & Guéguen Study 1	2002	Selfish	Immediate	80	6	.346
Pascual & Guéguen Study 2	2002	Selfish	Immediate	80	2.45	.21
Pascual & Guéguen Study 3	2002	Selfish	Immediate	200	2.59	.221
Pascual & Guéguen Study 4	2002	Selfish	Immediate	306	1.705	.125
Pascual & Guéguen Study 5	2002	prosocial	Delayed	126	0.86	-.04
Pascual & Guéguen Study 6	2002	prosocial	Immediate	60		.359
Pascual et al.	2005	prosocial	Immediate	387	1.448	.087
Pascual et al.	2005	prosocial	Immediate	222	1.73	.13

*(Continued)*

**Table 1** Continued

Author	Year	Type of request	Immediate or delayed	N	OR	<i>r</i>
Samson Study 1	2009	Selfish	Immediate	120	2.41	.2
Samson Study 2	2009	prosocial	Immediate	120	2.486	.202
Samson Study 3	2009	Selfish	Immediate	120	2.769	.222
Samson Study 4	2009	prosocial	Immediate	120	2.625	.226
Samson Study 5	2009	Selfish	Immediate	120	1.667	.103
Samson Study 6	2009	prosocial	Immediate	120	1.485	.081

### *Method of Analysis*

From recent work concerning the validity and ubiquity of the various methods of meta-analysis, the Hunter and Schmidt (2004) method appears to be the most valid and the most common meta-analytic technique in communication research (Anker, Reinhart, & Feeley, 2010). The Hunter and Schmidt approach was used in this meta-analysis.

The analysis included the determination of the sample-size weighted correlation for the increase in compliance associated with the requester using the BYAF technique versus the direct-request technique and the odds ratio for that difference in compliance. In order to calculate the weighted mean of the odds ratio for the increase in the likelihood of the target complying when the BYAF technique was used as opposed to a direct request, the natural log of the odds ratio was calculated for each effect, following the recommendations of Haddock, Rindskopf, and Shadish (1998). They argue that using the natural log of the odds ratio for the meta-analytic average increases the accuracy of the calculation. The natural log of the odds ratio was converted back to an odds ratio for interpretation after averaging.

The amount of variance that was predicted due to sampling error was next estimated in order to determine how much of the variation in effect sizes would be attributable to sampling error as opposed to moderators of the technique's effect. Then, the sample-size weighted amount of variance obtained from the corpus of studies was calculated. The homogeneity test proposed by Hunter and Schmidt (2004) is the 75% rule. If 75% or more of the obtained variance in the corpus of studies can be attributed to sampling error rather than variations caused by moderators, the effect size can be considered to be a fixed-effects estimate of a single population effect size (also known as a homogeneous effect). In such a case, the corpus of studies presumably is capturing a single population effect size. If less than 75% of the variance is explained by sampling error (and other study artifacts), the effect is called a heterogeneous effect and Hunter and Schmidt recommend the construction of 80% credibility intervals to demonstrate how widely the effect sizes vary on the basis of moderators of the effect size. Hunter and Schmidt recommend against constructing confidence intervals or conducting statistical significance tests of the effect size because of the substantial amount of error in such estimates.

## Results

### *Main Findings*

The sample-size weighted correlation between the presence or absence of the BYAF technique and the proportion of those who complied with the request was  $r = .13$ , with 22% of the variation in effect sizes explained by sampling error (80% credibility interval:  $.03 < \rho < .24$ ). This finding is consistent with a moderate-sized increase in effectiveness associated with using the BYAF technique instead of a direct request. The sample-size weighted odds ratio was 2.03, which suggests that participants in these studies were more than twice as likely to say “yes” when the request included the BYAF than when it did not. The finding that only 22% of the variance could be accounted for by sampling error suggests that this effect is moderated by other variables.

Potential moderators were examined next. The first potential moderator was whether the participants responded to the experimenter’s request with the experimenter present or without the experimenter present. In 32 independent studies ( $N = 13,434$ ), the decision to comply occurred immediately upon request by the experimenter. For this set, the sample-size weighted average effect size was  $r = .18$ ,  $OR = 2.20$  with 40% of the variance attributed to sampling error (80% credibility interval:  $.10 < \rho < .25$ ). For the remaining 10 studies ( $N = 8,799$ ), the participants did not respond to the request with the experimenter present, as was the case when they initially received the request via email (e.g., Guéguen et al., 2002) or were asked to return a survey at a later time (e.g., Pascual & Guéguen, 2002, Study 5). The sample-size weighted average effect size for this group was  $r = .07$ ,  $OR = 1.77$  with 24% of the explained variance attributed to sampling error (80% credibility interval:  $-0.01 < \rho < .15$ ). Although neither effect size is an estimate for a homogeneous set, the minimal overlap in credibility intervals suggests that they may be estimates of different population effect sizes. More simply put, when the decision to comply did not occur with the requester present, the effectiveness of the BYAF technique was substantially less pronounced.

Next was an examination of the three types of the request: prosocial requests (e.g., helping landmine victims, as in Guéguen et al., 2002 or responding to surveys as in Guéguen & Pascual, 2005), self-interested requests (e.g., asking for money for the bus, as in Guéguen & Pascual, 2000), and offers to benefit the respondent (e.g., participating in group activities in one’s nursing home, as in Marchand et al., 2009). Unfortunately only two studies included offers, which were insufficient to yield a meaningful estimate of the effect. There were 21 studies ( $N = 6,334$ ) for which the request was prosocial and 19 ( $N = 11,347$ ) for which it was self-interested. The meta-analyses indicated that both types of requests were equally likely to benefit from the BYAF technique: prosocial,  $r = .16$ ,  $OR = 1.93$ , 30% variance explained, 80% credibility interval:  $0.05 < \rho < .27$ ; self-interested:  $r = .16$ ,  $OR = 2.13$ , 28% of variance explained, 80% credibility interval:  $0.08 < \rho < .24$ . The data were not consistent with the type of request moderating the effectiveness of the technique.

### *Publication Bias*

According to Levine, Asada, and Carpenter (2009), there are many instances in communication research such that studies are not published because they failed to detect statistically significant effects. If studies go unpublished, they are generally not included in meta-analyses; hence, those meta-analyses excluding them give potentially biased estimates of the population effect size. They proposed that if the sample size and the effect sizes in the corpus of studies under examination are strongly negatively correlated, there may be many studies that went unpublished that are missing from the corpus. Although this meta-analysis included several unpublished articles, there may be others. In the BYAF set of studies, the sample sizes and the effect sizes were correlated at  $r = -.30$ . This finding indicates the possibility of publication bias.

In order to construct an estimate of the effect size, if the missing studies were present, a trim-and-fill analysis was conducted (Duval & Tweedie, 2000). The trim-and-fill algorithm has been used in previous meta-analyses of compliance-gaining techniques (Carpenter & Boster, 2009). This algorithm examines the degree to which a set of studies contains more studies that are larger than the average effect than studies that are smaller. Such an imbalance would indicate that the studies with smaller effect sizes that would be expected to exist due to sampling error have been suppressed. The trim-and-fill algorithm then estimates what the average effect size would be if those phantom studies had been included in the meta-analysis. The trim-and-fill algorithm estimated that if the studies missing due to publication bias were included in this meta-analysis, the estimate of the correlation effect size would be reduced by .04. Although this reduction is small, the average effect size is already modest and the potential presence of unpublished null findings may reduce it further.

### **Discussion**

The meta-analysis of the research involving the BYAF technique yielded several important findings. First, the effect size ( $r = .13$ ) is consistent with the effectiveness of other techniques detected in the compliance-gaining literature. Andrews et al. (2008) discovered that the legitimization of paltry favors produced a weighted mean effect size of  $r = .18$ , Carpenter and Boster (2009) reported that the disrupt-then-reframe technique had a weighted mean effect size of  $r = .28$ , Dillard et al. (1984) determined that the foot-in-the-door technique had a weighted mean effect size of  $r = .11$ , and O'Keefe and Hale's (1998) research indicated that the door-in-the-face had a weighted mean effect size of  $r = .10$ . The BYAF technique falls comfortably within this range. It has merit for consideration by charities and other compliance-gaining professionals in efforts to increase compliance with requests for donations.

The BYAF technique also has the virtue of being adaptable to potentially any context. That the effect size was consistent for both prosocial and self-interested requests in a variety of contexts (nursing homes, street requests, and survey requests) is reflective of a technique that has widespread value. Additionally, it does not require determining a context-appropriate means of disruption as the disrupt-then-reframe

requires or creating additional requests as the foot-in-the-door and the door-in-the-face require. Finally, it can be used in contexts in which the legitimization of paltry favors cannot be used because there are some contexts in which a paltry favor does not seem helpful (e.g., only donating a few minutes of time to a charity would not be a worthwhile contribution; Dibble et al., 2011). All that is required for the BYAF technique is that the key phrase is added to the request.

On the other hand, the moderator analysis revealed that the technique may not work well when the decision to comply does not occur in the presence of the requester. It remains unclear if the technique's effectiveness is reduced because reactance is not as strongly aroused without the presence of the person threatening the target's freedom or if because the technique causes the target to attempt to engage in a more positive self-presentation by complying with the more polite BYAF technique than the direct request as is the case with other techniques (e.g., the legitimization of paltry favors; Andrews et al., 2008).

### *Limitations*

The primary limitation of this meta-analysis is the relatively small number of researchers who have investigated the technique. Many of the studies were conducted by either Guéguen or Pascual. The small number of researchers researching this topic raises the specter of a variation on the Ohio State Effect found by Johnson and Eagly (1989) such that the researchers who are the most invested in the success of the technique may be more likely to find that the technique is effective than less invested researchers. Consistent with this possibility, the trim-and-fill analysis suggested that there may be missing studies that could reduce the estimate of the effect size. On the other hand, several of the smallest effect sizes for the technique listed in Table 1 were found by either Guéguen or Pascual. The researchers have tested the BYAF technique in a wide variety of contexts, so the range of tests is not restricted by researchers repeating the same experiments using the same materials. Clearly, more research by a variety of researchers is needed to provide strong evidence of the technique's effectiveness.

### *Future Research*

Additional work is needed on the theoretical explanations of the BYAF technique. Despite dozens of studies having been conducted on the BYAF technique, none have provided any evidence that the reactance explanation can or cannot explain the technique's effectiveness. Samson (2009) found that requesters who used the BYAF technique were liked better than those who used a direct request. Perhaps the BYAF technique merely sounds more polite and increases compliance by increasing liking. Critical tests of these explanations are required to advance the research on this technique. A study that varied whether or not the target is personally known to the requester might help determine if the technique is based on self-presentation as

people would care more about the impression they make on people with whom they anticipate future interactions. A lab study could show participants a video of the requester either using the technique or a direct request. Aroused reactance of the participants could be measured and the hypothesized reduction caused by the BYAF technique could be tested.

Additionally, the cause of the moderator uncovered here requires additional investigation. The BYAF technique was substantially less effective in situations in which the decision to comply was not made with the requester present. There are situations that, even if the decision were not made with the requester present, the requester would find out if the target had complied, for example, if the target were emailed a survey that the target knew would not be anonymous. Alternatively, the target could be emailed a request to participate in a lab study with the requester. Such experiments could help determine if it is the temporal gap between the request and the decision that reduces the technique's effectiveness or if it is the lack of self-presentation concerns of the target.

### Conclusion

In general, it appears that this relatively new compliance-gaining technique has promise as a strategy for increasing the likelihood that individuals will say "yes" to a request. On the other hand, it remains to be seen how effective it is when email is the method of delivery and other contexts in which the decision is not made with the requester present. Future work would profit from determining why the technique works in order to improve its effectiveness and expand reactance theory.

### Note

- [1] These variations were tested as potential moderators but none had any substantial effect on the estimated effect size or substantially reduced the unexplained variance.

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