

## SOME EFFECTS OF GUILT ON COMPLIANCE: A FIELD REPLICATION

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A conceptual replication of the Carlsmith and Gross study of the effects of guilt on compliance was carried out in field conditions. It was found that both sympathy and guilt lead to an increased level of helping behavior, with sympathy being the more effective of the two. While earlier findings with respect to the guilt-compliance relationship were thus replicated, the results concerning sympathy are different from those obtained by Carlsmith and Gross. Possible reasons for this difference are discussed.

It has been relatively well established experimentally that one of the most efficient ways of obtaining compliance is by inducing a feeling of guilt in the person whose compliance is desired (e.g., Carlsmith & Gross, 1969; Freedman, Wallington, & Bless, 1967). In these studies it was also found that the guilty individual is more likely to comply to a request made by someone other than the victim whom he harmed: there seems to be a feeling of discomfort on the part of the guilty individual in continuing to associate with the victim. One of the most intriguing findings of the Carlsmith and Gross (1969) study was that a very low level of compliance was obtained as a result of a feeling of sympathy toward someone who had been hurt. Subjects who watched a person receive painful electric shocks complied to a subsequent request by the victim even less than did control subjects. It should be emphasized, though, that in that experiment, the subject's compliance would not relieve the damage that had already been done. Opportunity was not provided for the feeling of sympathy to be demonstrated in a relevant manner. Thus, there was little reason for the subject to be emotionally involved and truly sympathetic with the requesting individual. The person making the request received shocks as part of the

experiment for which he was paid, and the experimenter was in control anyway, so why feel sorry? Moreover, the subject may have wondered why the requesting "subject" did not ask this favor of the person who had given him the shocks.

Since this is an interesting and provocative set of findings, and in view of the problems with the sympathy manipulation, it appeared useful to carry out a field replication of the second experiment reported in the Carlsmith and Gross (1969) paper. The variables defining the Carlsmith and Gross conditions were conceptually translated to a new set of variables applicable in a field setting. However, helping behavior rather than compliance was used as the dependent variable. Another important difference was that the subject's act of helping in the present study relieved the damage that had been done and was not irrelevant to it as in the Carlsmith and Gross experiment.

### METHOD

#### *Overview*

The study was conducted on 5 consecutive wet days (3 weekdays and a weekend), during daylight hours, on the streets traversing approximately 50 blocks in a part of Toronto that can be roughly described as ranging from middle-lower to lower-middle-class area. The density of pedestrians was rather low. The dependent measure was the subject stopping and collecting some computer-punched cards, dropped by the experimenter under different circumstances, depending on experimental condition. There were four conditions: control, restitution, sympathy, and generalized guilt. These conditions were conceptually comparable to those in the Carlsmith and Gross study.

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### Subjects

The first passerby that came along was treated as a subject, with the following restrictions: (a) All subjects were male (experimenters were also all male), for it was felt that the interaction between the sexes might produce additional complexities (the subjects and the experimenters in the Carlsmith & Gross, 1969, experiments were also male). (b) Only adults (roughly 18 years and over) were treated as subjects, for it had been found in the pilot study that younger males almost invariably helped collect cards. (c) Only people who had at least one arm free were treated as subjects, for obvious reasons. (d) Very old people were not counted as subjects. Except for people falling into the categories described above, every first passerby was treated as a subject. There was a total of 123 subjects, randomly assigned to the four conditions. The number of subjects per condition ranged from 28 to 33.

### Procedure

The study was carried out by four males (ages 21–25). (The person dropping the cards was the “experimenter”; the person playing some other role was the “confederate.”) These four people all acted different roles depending on the condition, and all participated in all conditions, but they were not aware of the number of conditions or of the purpose of the experiment as a whole. Professionally, they had nothing to do with psychology. In the *control* condition, the experimenter walked toward the subject, and at a distance of about 4 yards from him, let the cards slip out of the folder that he was carrying to the wet sidewalk. He stopped, looked at them for a moment, and while bending down, said to the subject: “Please don’t step on them.” Forty punched cards were always dropped out of a folder; if the subject stopped to help, the experimenter started collecting the cards at a steady, slow speed, since the subjects did not always stay until all the cards had been collected. Since this was noted in the pilot study, the number of cards collected by a subject was also treated as a dependent measure. In the *restitution* condition, the experimenter walked behind the subject, and at the moment that he was abreast with him, brushed the arm in which he was carrying the folder against the subject’s free arm, so that the cards fell on the sidewalk in front of both the subject and the experimenter. He looked at them for a brief moment (the subjects invariably stopped) and, while bending down, uttered the same sentence. In the *sympathy* condition, the confederate was hidden in a doorway, or standing in a shop entrance, while the experimenter stood in the middle of the sidewalk waiting for the subject. As a subject was approaching, the experimenter started to walk toward him, and at the moment that he reached a predetermined point, about 4 yards away from the subject, the confederate walked out of the doorway very fast and bumped into the experimenter, at which time he let the cards slip out of the folder. The confederate simply walked away in the direction

opposite that from which the subject was coming, without apologizing or attempting to help, as if nothing had happened. The experimenter looked after the confederate for a brief moment and uttered the same sentence to the subject while bending down to collect the cards. In the *generalized guilt* condition, the confederate walked fast toward the subject, carrying three expensive-looking hard-cover books under his arm. He ran into the subject in an absent-minded fashion, dropping the books to the sidewalk. The subject invariably halted, but before he had time to do or say something, the confederate bent down and collected the books quickly, muttering “They are not mine, and you have to do this,” after which he walked away. As the subject continued on his way, after about 50–70 yards along the same block, at a sign from a coordinator standing on the opposite side of the street, the experimenter walked out of the doorway in the direction from which the subject was coming. At a distance of about 4 yards from the subject, the experimenter let the cards drop, looked at them for a moment, and bent down to collect them, saying “Please don’t step on them” to the approaching subject. The experimenter’s behavior in this situation was identical to that in the control condition, which made it possible for him to be blind to condition. The coordinator was able to see both the experimenter standing in the doorway and the confederate standing some distance down the street. Whenever a potential subject approached the doorway in which the experimenter was standing, the sign was given to him to come out and act. If the subject had been previously treated by the “books–confederate,” which the coordinator noted down, he was counted as a generalized guilt subject. If he had not been treated by the confederate, he was counted as a control subject.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before discussing the results, it seems appropriate to mention a number of points that seem relevant. The sentence “Please don’t step on them” does not contain an explicit request, and it is thus not compliance that is measured, but rather helping behavior. It would be difficult to show that compliance and helping, respectively, are influenced by different and unrelated sets of variables in the present experimental procedure; the situation contained a salient, though implicit, request.

The results of the experiment are shown in Table 1. Both the proportion of subjects who helped and the average number of cards picked up showed significant differences across experimental conditions ( $\chi^2 = 15.01$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $F = 5.57$ ,  $df = 3/119$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Two-tailed  $t$  tests on the number of cards picked up show that each experi-

TABLE 1  
 PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS HELPING, AND MEAN  
 AMOUNT OF HELP PER SUBJECT, BY  
 EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION

Condition	% of subjects who collected cards	Mean number of cards collected per subject
Control	16	1.29
Sympathy	64	8.61
Restitution	39	4.64
Generalized guilt	42	4.77

mental condition differed from the control at the .05 level ( $t_s$  of 2.24–4.18).

The fact that subjects in both the generalized guilt and restitution groups help more than the control subjects is consistent with the Carlsmith and Gross findings. Nevertheless, it does seem true, as Carlsmith and Gross pointed out, that restitution is not a necessary component of the guilt-compliance relationship. In the restitution condition, the subjects often stood still for a moment, looking quite embarrassed, and sometimes made profuse apologies. However, apologies were often followed by rather quick departures, and not accompanied by the subject's actually helping the experimenter collect the cards. The fact that the subjects tended to apologize served as an informal "check on the manipulation."

It should be noted that the generalized guilt conditions in the two experiments can be seen as conceptually equivalent if one disregards the fact that in the Carlsmith and Gross experiment the person who made the request had witnessed prior to that the subject giving shocks to someone, while in the present study the subject's "transgression" had no witnesses. However, the Freedman et al. (1967) findings showed that subjects comply as a result of guilt even when there were no witnesses to their harming someone. It is apparently not the self-image repair process that is at work.

The major difference between the results of the present experiment and that by Carlsmith and Gross is in the sympathy condition. The present results are exactly opposite to those of Carlsmith and Gross. There seem to be two main reasons for this difference. In the present experiment, helping "undoes" the

harm that has been done, whereas this was not the case in the Carlsmith and Gross experiment. It is possible that sympathy leads to an increased level of helping only when the act of helping relieves some of the damage that was done. In addition, it was evident that subjects in the sympathy condition of the present experiment were emotionally involved and that a more authentic feeling of sympathy was aroused in them. The subject's behavior and remarks were quite revealing in this respect. While the control subjects tended to make a fairly large and unnecessary semi-circle around the pile of cards, and hardly ever commented on what had happened, the behavior of the subjects in the sympathy condition was strikingly different. Even the subjects who did not actually stop to help often made remarks about the inconsiderate confederate's behavior of the "How very rude" and "What a bastard" kind. Furthermore, in the present experiment, the subjects saw that the experimenter could get no help from the person who had caused the harm: this was not clear in the Carlsmith and Gross study.

It may be concluded that this replication has succeeded in confirming the guilt-compliance relationship established in the Freedman et al. (1967) and the Carlsmith and Gross (1969) studies. However, contrary to the Carlsmith and Gross findings, although personal involvement facilitates compliance to be obtained, it does not necessarily have to be personal involvement via a feeling of guilt. The results of the present study indicate that sympathy can also lead to an increased level of helping (or compliance), provided that the act of helping neutralizes some of the detrimental consequences.

#### REFERENCES

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