



Forewarned is forearmed: Conserving self-control strength to resist social influence

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 June 2009

Revised 27 February 2010

Available online 1 July 2010

Keywords:

Self-regulation

Self-control

Resource depletion

Social influence

Forewarning of persuasion

Resistance

ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that resisting persuasion involves active self-regulation. Resisting an influence attempt consumes self-regulatory resources, and in a state of self-regulatory resource depletion, people become more susceptible to (unwanted) influence attempts. However, the present studies show that a forewarning of an impending influence attempt prompts depleted individuals to conserve what is left of their regulatory resources and thus promotes self-regulatory efficiency. As a result, when these individuals are subsequently confronted with a persuasive request, they comply less (Experiments 1 and 3), and generate more counterarguments (Experiment 2) than their depleted counterparts who were not forewarned and thus did not conserve their resources, and they are as able as non-depleted participants to resist persuasion.

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How often have you complied with the request of a salesperson or a fundraiser when you had no initial intention to do so? Probably more often than you would like to admit. Resisting an influence attempt can be surprisingly difficult, since we are simply not always aware of the persuasive intent of a request or message, or we otherwise lack the ability or the motivation to resist a persuasive appeal (e.g., Briñol & Petty, 2005). As recent research has shown, resisting persuasion is frequently a costly process that involves active self-regulation. Resisting an influence attempt consumes self-regulatory resources, with the inevitable consequence that when these resources are low, one's attempts at resistance are more likely to fail (Burkley, 2008; Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Janssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Vohs, 2008; Wheeler, Briñol, & Hermann, 2007). Hence, resisting (unwanted) influence is more successful when self-regulatory resources are high, rather than low, but the present research demonstrates that all is not lost for those in a state of self-regulatory resource depletion. Under certain conditions, depleted individuals can successfully conserve what resources they have left to be put into action when encountering an unwanted persuasive attack. In the present research we will argue that forewarning people of an impending influence attempt may serve to promote self-regulatory efficiency and thus prompt depleted individuals to conserve what is left of their regulatory resources. As a result, when these individuals

are subsequently confronted with a request, they will comply less than their depleted counterparts who were not forewarned and did not conserve their resources, and they will be as able as non-depleted participants to resist the influence attempt.

According to the limited-resource model of self-control (Baumeister, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000; for a review, see Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice, 2007), any act of deliberate and regulated response by the self, such as overriding impulses, active choice and controlled (as opposed to automatic) processing, draws on a limited intrapsychic resource. Akin to strength or energy, this resource becomes depleted with use, and is recovered slowly. Many studies have shown that self-control ability suffers after previous exertion of willpower or self-control (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998; Muraven et al., 1998; Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003). In a state of self-regulatory resource depletion, the self resorts to more passive and low-effort courses of action (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998), thereby increasing vulnerability to untoward impulses, habit, and automatic processes (Baumeister, Muraven, & Tice, 2000; Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005).

Recently, research started to test the notion that resisting persuasion is an activity which also draws on limited regulatory resources, and it showed that a state of self-regulatory resource depletion weakens resistance to temptations and (unwanted) influence attempts (Baumeister, 2002; Vohs & Faber, 2007). In a study by Wheeler et al. (2007), participants previously depleted of their self-control resources by an unrelated task showed less resistance to a counterattitudinal persuasive message; they reported more acquiescent attitudes and generated fewer counterarguments than their non-depleted counterparts, especially when message arguments were weak. In line with dual-process frameworks

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(Chaiken & Trope, 1999), depletion of self-control resources appeared to inhibit the generation of counterarguments because it hindered processing of message-relevant information, as evidenced by reduced sensitivity to argument quality. Similar to Wheeler et al. (2007), Burkley (2008) showed that persuasion by a counterattitudinal message increased after an act of self-control, and more resistance toward a persuasive message diminished the amount of self-control resources available to use on a subsequent unrelated self-control task.

Another demonstration of the role of self-regulatory resources in resisting and yielding to social influence was presented by Fennis et al. (2009) and Janssen et al. (2008). They forwarded self-regulatory resource depletion as an important underlying factor mediating the effectiveness of social influence techniques, such as a foot-in-the-door (FITD), door-in-the-face (DITF), or low-ball technique (Burger & Petty, 1981; Cialdini et al., 1975; Freedman & Fraser, 1966). The authors argued that a specific feature of such techniques promotes self-regulatory resource depletion, which paves the way for consumer compliance. More specifically, all these techniques are made up of a sequence of requests, starting with an initial request or series of initial requests (that can either be small, as in the FITD, large, as in the DITF, or particularly attractive, as in the low-ball procedure), and culminating in a target request for which compliance is sought. They showed that actively responding to the initial request of this sequence depleted self-control resources. The resulting state of weak self-control ability increased compliance with a subsequent (charitable) target request, such as freely donating time, effort, or money. Importantly, depleted participants were not susceptible to influence by default, but rather because they relied more on compliance-promoting heuristics that were present in the persuasion context, such as authority, reciprocity, or likeability (cf. Cialdini's principles of influence, 1993).

In sum, and in line with dual-process models of persuasion (e.g., Petty & Wegener, 1999), a state of self-regulatory resource depletion reduces systematic or central-route processing, and enhances the weight on heuristic processing in consumer judgment and decision making. This renders it more difficult to resist (unwanted) influence attempts, an activity which evidently requires systematic processing to engage in issue-relevant thinking and to argue against the persuasive communication. A key means to encourage more systematic processing and thereby increase the odds of resistance to persuasion could be to increase people's awareness of an upcoming influence attempt in advance. Multiple studies have suggested that forewarning people of an upcoming persuasive communication motivates them to counterargue the message in order to reassert their attitudinal freedom, and thereby increase resistance to persuasion (e.g., Allyn & Festinger, 1961; Brock, 1967; Chen, Reardon, Rea, & Moore, 1992; Freedman & Sears, 1965; Hass & Grady, 1975; Kiesler & Kiesler, 1964; Petty & Cacioppo, 1977; see Wood & Quinn, 2003 for a review). For instance, in an experiment by Petty and Cacioppo (1977), forewarning undergraduate students of the content of an upcoming discrepant communication (a tape recording by their faculty committee, recommending that university seniors be required to pass a comprehensive exam in their major prior to graduation) stimulated anticipatory counterargumentation, and resulted in less persuasion.

We may assume that a forewarning of an influence attempt can be an effective means to increase resistance, because it encourages biased, systematic scrutiny of the persuasive message as evidenced by increased counterargumentation. But what if the motivation to counterargue is present, but the *ability* to engage in counterargumentation is lacking because of previous depletion of regulatory resources? We argue that in these conditions, forewarning motivates people to conserve their remaining resources, and mobilize them in the service of this counterargumentation. This presupposes that a depleted state does not reflect a complete exhaustion of resources but merely a temporary or relative deficit, a notion that was recently

supported by Muraven, Shmueli, and Burkley (2006). They suggested that individuals are motivated (at either a conscious or an unconscious level) and able to conserve their regulatory energy when the benefits of using the resource in the future apparently outweigh the benefits of using it right now. Their studies showed that expecting to exert self-control in the future motivated participants who exerted self-control in the past (and were thus depleted of their regulatory resources) to conserve their remaining self-control strength for this future task. These participants performed worse on an intervening measure of self-control than participants who were either not depleted, or not expecting future self-control. Moreover, when performance on this future task was actually measured, participants who were initially depleted but conserved resources performed as well as non-depleted participants. In contrast, initially depleted participants not expecting to exert self-control in the future performed worse than participants in the other conditions.

The present research

In sum, previous research has shown that a state of self-regulatory resource depletion weakens resistance to (unwanted) influence attempts, and studies have shown that individuals low in self-control strength are able to conserve what is left of their resources for future use. Extending these two lines of research, the present research argues that forewarning people of persuasion may foster self-regulatory efficiency by motivating them to conserve self-control strength to resist the upcoming influence attempt. We expect that a forewarning of an influence attempt prompts individuals to conserve what is left of their resources, but mainly when there is a clear rationale for doing so, i.e., when they previously suffered a loss of self-control resources. Since self-regulatory resource depletion has been found to have an acquiescing effect on compliance with a request (Fennis et al., 2009; Janssen et al., 2008), a motivation to conserve resources would be especially beneficial to those low in self-control strength. As compared with others who are less depleted, they should try to avoid expending more strength so that they can build up their resistance. By contrast, we do not expect forewarning to promote self-regulatory efficiency when people's resources have not previously been depleted by an act of self-control; since one would have enough resources left for resisting a future influence attempt, there should be no direct need for conservation. As a result of this (seemingly unconscious) process of conserving strength, we expect depleted participants who were forewarned of an influence attempt to comply less with a subsequent persuasive request than their depleted counterparts who were not forewarned and thus did not conserve their resources. Moreover, we expect them to be as able as non-depleted participants to resist the influence attempt.

As such, the present research contributes to the literature in four key ways. First, it shows that self-regulatory efficiency may play an important role in resisting social influence. Second, it provides insight into the self-regulatory dynamics underlying "classic" effects of forewarning on persuasion. Third, by linking up self-control resources with dual process models of persuasion, the present research underscores the self-regulatory mechanisms driving systematic or central information processing in response to persuasion attempts. Fourth, it extends previous work on resistance and persuasion by showing that the effects of forewarning of persuasive intent are not only a function of the recipients' motivation, but also of their *ability* to withstand an unwanted upcoming influence attempt.

We conducted three experiments to test our hypotheses. In a first study we tested the effect of depletion and forewarning of an influence attempt on compliance with a persuasive request. We expected that a forewarning would decrease the amount of compliance with the request, but mainly among previously depleted individuals. In a second and third study we aimed to demonstrate that the process underlying this effect is one of conservation of remaining

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