

# The Psychological Explanation of Compliance\*

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**Abstract**—Compliance is a type of conforming behavior based on affective needs, which is categorized into explicit compliance and implicit compliance. Explicit compliance refers to conscious compliance that can be divided into aesthetic compliance, moral compliance and sensible compliance according to human's social emotional feature, while implicit compliance refers to unconscious compliance. Compliance formation is the psychological processing of social information, containing two basic modes: down-top and top-down. The interpretation of compliance is of important theoretical and practical significance to correct understanding and promoting coordination and progress between humans.

**Keywords**—compliance; explicit compliance; implicit compliance; psychological processing

## I. INTRODUCTION

My mother told me that when I was young, I grew up in my grandmother's arms listening to the stories she was telling. Later I became an adult and my grandmother grew older. I cannot remember when my grandmother began to repeat those old memories she had experienced, and she always pulled me or other people to listen to her stories, making everyone annoyed. Mom said that my grandmother became old, we should be patient to listen to her, and this is called "filial piety." This is a kind of compliance based on emotion. There are many similar situations in life. People often follow his or her preferences for their children. The newly appointed leaders show their respect to their predecessors and listen to their "instructions" with great patience, and so on. Such is called compliance based on the affective needs of conforming behavior (G.D.Song et al., 2012).

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## II. THE ORIGIN OF COMPLIANCE

The pioneering research on compliance was conducted by social psychologist Freedman's foot-in-the-door effect experiment in 1966 (J.L.Freedman et al., 1966). Experimenters contacted housewives, said they worked for the Community Committee for Traffic Safety, hoping to get supports from housewives to sign a petition which will be sent to California's United States Senators. The petition advocated support for any legislation which would promote safer driving. Almost every subject agreed to sign it. The second contact was made about a few weeks after the initial one. Different experimenters contacted with both previous subjects and new subjects. They were asked to put a large sign concerning "Driving Carefully" in their front yard. It is apparent over 55% of the experimental subjects agreed in the group which signed a petition, whereas fewer than 17% of the experimental subjects in the group who did not sign agreed a petition. The foot-in-the-door effect was confirmed in the subsequent studies: A person is induced to comply with a small request, and then he is more likely to comply with a large request. The behavior that person is unwilling but have to do is defined as compliance by Freedman. Compliance, conformity and obedience are called social influence (J.L.Freedman et al., 1984).

In one demonstration of compliance, it is considered as a kind of response to social influence including instruction, order, law, etiquette, etc. (Charles, 1985; Gralinski & Kopp, 1993; Philip Soper, 2002). Several other researchers believe that compliance is the response to direct request, it is the consensus to others' request (J.L.Freedman et al., 1966; Hogg and Vaughan, 2010). Nail & Others (2000)<sup>1</sup> proposed a new idea, and they regarded compliance as a type of conformity, which examines direct requests from one individual to another of equal or higher social status. It refers to public conformity without private acceptance due to external

<sup>1</sup> Nail & Others (2000) categorized conformity into three types: compliance, obedience and acceptance. Compliance is conforming to others' requests insincerely and externally. Obedience is complying to explicit instruction in order to get reward or avoid punishment. Acceptance means conform sincerely and internally.

pressure. Robert (2004) believed that compliance refers to a particular kind of response—acquiescence—to a particular kind of communication—a request. The request may be explicit, as in the direct solicitation of funds in a door-to-door campaign for charitable donations, or it may be implicit, as in a political advertisement that touts the qualities of a candidate without directly asking for a vote.

Common to above studies is that compliance is a kind of response to external stimulus, which refers to stimulus-response or S-R. Though some scholars suggest that compliance exists internal psychological reaction, the basic model is behavioristic. Modern Psychology believes that social behavior not only depended on objective condition, but also on how we explain it (David Myers, 2014). Social influence is the induction factor of compliance. Motivated selectivity to external induction factor generates inner drive of compliance.

### III. COMPLIANCE IS A KIND OF CONFORMING BEHAVIOR ON THE BASE OF AFFECTIVE NEEDS

Conformity, an exotic vocabulary, is generally explained as ‘accordance’. Adam Smith (1790) used this word to describe the accordance of national laws, governing and virtue in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Following the research of scientific psychology and herding (Le Bon G., 1903; Veblen, T., 1899; Tarde, G. d & Parsons, E. W. C., 1903 ; Allport, F. H., 1924), people started the scientific research on compliance (Sherif, M., 1935; 1937). G. D. Song & Others call this kind of external consistency behavior as conformity and the conformity behavior caused by affective needs as compliance (G. D. Song et al., 2012).

#### A. Affective Motivation is the Basis of Complying Behavior

Conformity is defined by human’s consistency of response to external behaviors. This way of defining is a class conception. However, compliance, as a subordinate conception, cannot take stimulus situation as a definition standard as that consciousness is the motivated selectivity during process of environmental stimulus (Bernard Weiner, 1999). When accepting other people’s requests, people may take many factors into consideration, such as legitimacy, menace, reward and ethical desirability, etc. The internal psychic reaction feature also applies to situation in which people in face of other social impacts. However, human’s motivation can be categorized definitely. G. D. Song & Others<sup>2</sup> studied the university teachers’ scientific research conformity and university students’ examination discipline conformity. They find in empirical research that there are four types of conformity motivation: cognitive motivation, emotional motivation, utilitarian motivation and unconscious motivation. Also, G. D. Song thinks they represent four types

of conformity behavior: abidance, compliance, obedience and herd behavior (G. D. Song et al., 2012). Among these four types, compliance is a kind of external consistency behavior based on affective needs according to social cognition.

#### B. Explicit Compliance and Implicit Compliance

Human’s motivation can be divided into explicit motivation and implicit motivation in "Fig. 1".

TABLE I. AESTHETIC COMPLIANCE, MORAL COMPLIANCE AND SENSIBLE COMPLIANCE

Category	Content	Example
Aesthetic Compliance	on base of aesthetic motivation(aesthetic experiences of human and things)	indulgent parents spree children's improper behaviors
Moral Compliance	on base of moral motivation(emotion experiences of judgment on people's thought and behavior whether accord with moral standards)	children are patient with nagging parents
Sensible Compliance	on base of sensible motivation(emotion experiences in the process of recognizing objective realities)	complying behavior of leaders facing with vexatious subordinates

<sup>2</sup> According to research on university teachers’ scientific research conformity in Shenyang, China carried out by G. D. Song and S. H. Wang and investigation on Northeastern University students’ examination discipline conformity carried out by G. D. Song and S. M. Wang, human conformity motivation can be divided into explicit one and implicit one. Explicit (conscious) motivation can be divided into three types: cognitive motivation, emotional motivation and utilitarian motivation. Implicit motivation refers to unconscious motivation.

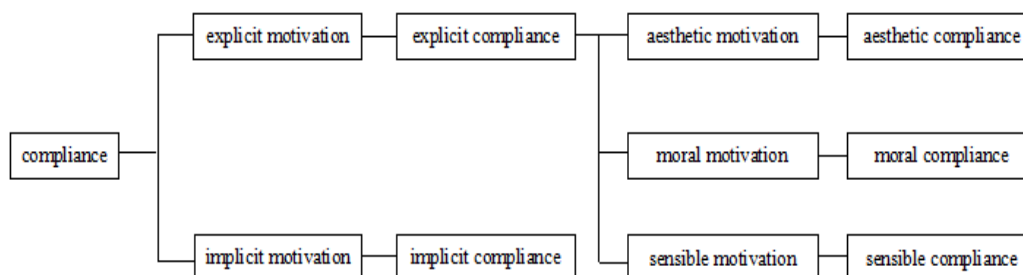


Fig. 1. Classification chart of compliance.

Explicit motivation means that the motivation is added with conscious cognitive processing during its forming process. For instance, you may not pay any attention to a child playing in the street. However, when you were told that your friend is the child's parent, I believe most people may praise the child with words like lovely or cute. This kind of praise is conscious motivation which we call it explicit motivation. Supposing that you two become close to each other and one day the child gets sick and needs your help, I guess you may help him/her without any hesitation. This kind of behavior has a unconscious motivation which we call it implicit motivation.

Distinction of explicit and implicit motivation brings forth explicit and implicit compliance. Explicit compliance refers to conscious compliance. It can be divided into three categories: aesthetic compliance, moral compliance and sensible compliance according to human's social emotional feature (G.D. Song, 2007) in "Table I".

Implicit compliance refers to unconscious compliance, which is not purposeless. It's just a potential one (G.D. Song, 2002). For instance, comparing a man's respect and subsequent respect for Mrs. Wang when he knows she is his leader's wife, the cognitive processing is different. The latter one is a behavior with implicit compliance, while the purpose is specific.

#### IV. FORMATION PROCESS OF COMPLIANCE

Compliant motivation is generated from relationship with people and external environment. Human motivation can merely be realized without contact with environment and others (Abraham Maslow, 2013). In safer driving test carried out by Freedman with his partners (1966), a housewife did not agree to set up a board previously, but

after she accepted the request of signing the petition, she may change her cognition; even her attitude towards herself and the event can be changed. When the second request was made, the moral compliance may come out because the housewife is responsible for the behavior of signing the petition (J.L. Freedman et al., 1984). No one wants himself/herself to be contradictory (David Myers, 2014). The behavior of choosing moral motivation is realized by her cognition of the environment. As A.Korman (1974) said: Human are rational. One's behavior cannot be driven by external factors before his/her agreement, because human can make choice to realize his/her wonderful purpose (Bernard Weiner, 1999).

#### A. Psychological Processing of Human Social Cognition

According to emotional theory, many important emotions stem from our interpretation and inference. However, some simple emotional reactions happen instantly, not only beyond consciousness, but also before the cognitive processing. These viewpoints have practical significance. To a certain extent, emotion is rooted in thought, we can expect to change our emotions by changing thoughts (David Myers, 2006). The interpretation and inference make up psychological processing of human social cognition. According to cognitive psychology research, the driving force towards external information processing is affected by sensory information and priori knowledge. It occurs down-top processing when feeling expression bases upon information from sensory input. While, it may occur top-down processing when feeling expression is affected by individual priori knowledge, motivation, expectation and other senior activities in "Fig. 2" (Richard J.Gerrig & Philip G.Zimbardo, 2003).

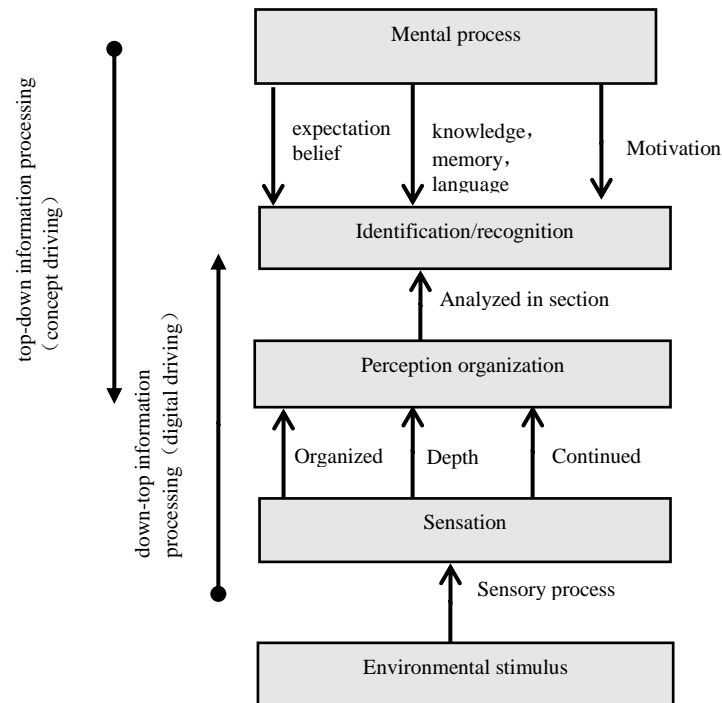


Fig. 2. Psychological processing of human cognition.

Both the down-top and top-down information processing are basic social cognitive processing.

#### B. Psychological Processing of Social Cognition in Compliance Formation

Generally speaking, human's first mental processing of explicit compliance is mainly down-top information processing (inductive inference). For instance, a man makes compliance when joining a new social group. After fitting in the group, the group with its members has been

conceptualized. The top-down information processing (deductive inference) can help realizing compliance. Both explicit and implicit compliance contain two kinds of information processing. In implicit compliance, the down-top information processing is a natural orienting reflex (unconditioned reflex) caused by simple stimulus. While top-down information processing is signal reflex (classical conditioned reflex) caused by previous experiences. See figure 3 below for mental processing of social cognition in compliance formation.

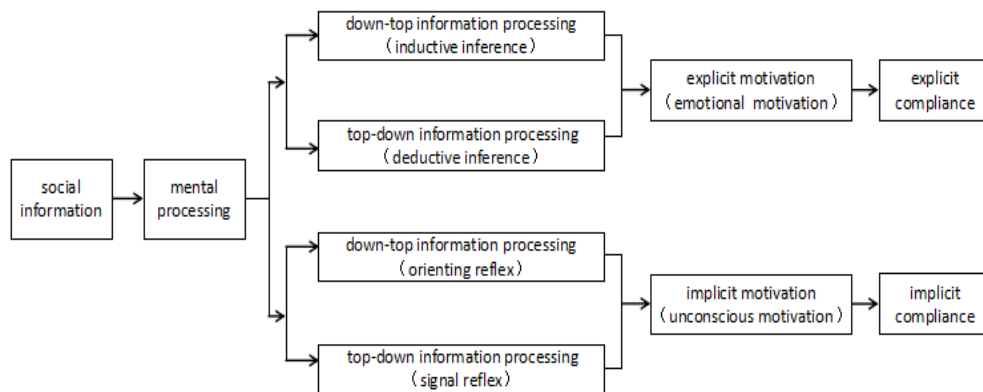


Fig. 3. Psychological processing of social cognition in compliance formation.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Humanistic psychology believed that consciousness, especially self-examination, is the nature of human's existence, and conditioned reflex is human's second nature. Internal mental phenomena and processing is more important than the external ones (Abraham Maslow, 2013). Dialectical

materialism illuminates the theory of internal and external relations. External cause is condition of change, while, internal cause is the basis of change. External cause acts upon internal cause. According to cognitive dissonance theory, we can prove behavior rationality to reduce cognitive dissonance through internal mental activity when external stimulus cannot prove behavior rationality (David Myers,

2014). Therefore, it is a scientific way to define compliance according to human emotional motivation and to explain compliance formation according to human information processing. And explanation of compliance nature is of important theoretical and practical significance towards not only the correct understanding and handling of people's relationship in social life, but also promotion of coordination, development and progress between humans.

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