

## ***POSITIONING AND THE 'FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR' SOCIAL INFLUENCE TECHNIQUE***

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**ABSTRACT.** In spite of an ever-increasing number of theoretical publications on positioning phenomena, which describe the processes of negotiating the identity in relations between people, their experimental verification is still lacking. The present article attempts to empirically verify similar negotiations as exemplified by the model of social influence based on positioning theory. Thus, the conceptual replication of Doliński's (2005) research was conducted, with several additional experimental conditions. Findings show that a double activation of the same position results in the highest efficiency of the technique when compared to either the activation of two different positions or the control group. The findings are discussed in the context of self-perception theory. The study demonstrates that positioning can be considered an existing phenomenon, and can be employed in order to enrich the classical theoretical explanations of the effectiveness of the 'foot-in-the-door' technique.

**Keywords:** social influence, 'foot-in-the-door', positioning, dialogical self, self-perception theory

The notion of positioning as employed in dialogical theory allows us to describe situations of domination and influence in interpersonal relations. Studies include analyses of personal or social influence in diverse relations, alongside relevant theoretical models (Adams & Harré, 2001; Clegg, 2008; Hevern, 2004; Mita-Lopez, 2006; Ligorio & Pugliese, 2004; Ligorio & Spadaro, 2006; Lucius-Hoene & Depperman, 2000; Wortham & Gadshen, 2006; Yagolkovsky, 2006). Over the past years similar interests have surged in social psychology, which both searches for patterns in exerting interpersonal influence and constructs social influence techniques. Thus, it appears worthwhile to bring the two approaches together: the phenomenon of positioning might constitute a new perspective as to the understanding the efficiency of influence techniques, while the methodology inherent to social psychology may provide tools able to verify some of the theories as regards positioning.

Dialogical theory conceives positioning in the context of a subject position defined as an autonomous nexus of thought and creation of meaning inside a person (Hermans, 1996, 2001). Positioning might occur among people (external) and among

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positions (internal; Hermans, 2002). External positioning describes the mutual proposals by conversation partners to assume particular subject positions (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). Another positioning theory, created by Davies and Harré (1990), defines positioning as a number of personal identity-constructing processes, within a particular discourse, recognisable both for oneself and others. The phenomenon might be understood as a negotiation of rights and obligations given to or denied different participants of a situation (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Thus, to position someone means to establish what they are allowed and not allowed to do, and what they are obliged and not obliged to do (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & Slocum, 2003). The following study embraces positioning in accordance with the dialogical self approach, understood as evoking “I” positions existent in persons in different situations.

Social influence is defined as a change in an individual provoked by an actual or imagined presence of others (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008). From a dialogical perspective, social influence might be understood as the employment of an existing context to successfully position an interaction partner. The effectiveness of positioning depends on the context of a given relation, partially negotiated by interaction partners and reflecting their temporary identities. Social influence occurs when an individual evokes a discourse that attributes them a superior position in the relation and the possibility to trigger desirable changes in the other. From dialogical perspective influence can be considered as offering an interaction partner a subject identity, in which the desired behaviour, fulfilling a request, for instance, would result natural. Exerting influence on an interaction partner means proposing them an “I” position, in which they consider fulfilling the request as natural and view themselves as someone who willingly fulfils such a request. An individual exerting influence might, but need not be, conscious that they are positioning their partner; from their perspective, positioning is not an activity. Contrarily, conscious activities include a number of influence techniques aimed at achieving a particular goal, while positioning remains an undiscovered intermediary instance.

### **Theoretical model**

It is assumed that increasing social influence equates with increasing the strength of positioning. Influence might be exerted by reflexive positioning, a phenomenon, in which an individual concentrates on positioning themselves in a relation (Davies & Harré, 1990). Accordingly, an individual might attempt to assume a position that would allow them to influence their partner, which, ideally, would lead the latter to naturally assume an adequate position – of an influenced person. In such cases, the former’s utterances emphasise proper competence, moral laws or other privileges that sustain their advantage. Also, the person exerting influence might focus principally on their partner and, consequently, offer them the position of the influenced, thus employing interactive

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positioning. In such cases, the former's utterances determine, describe or directly inform their partner what he/she is like.

Figure 1. The model of a subject's perception of realising a proper intention.



The model assumes the existence of hidden processes responsible for the negotiation of interaction partners' identities that both activate the identity level and modify the relation between the persons involved. Positioning should increase the effectiveness of influence when it is coherent with the influencing subject's intention, and decrease it in the contrary case.

Figure 2. Theoretical model of the phenomenon of positioning: A subject realises an intention, the position is coherent with the aim.

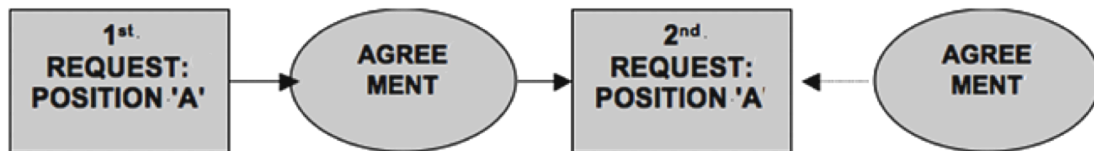
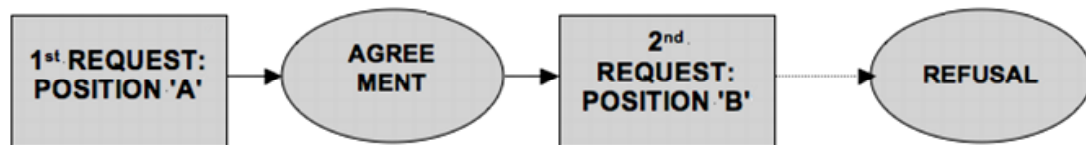


Figure 3. Theoretical model of the phenomenon of positioning: A subject realises an intention, the position is contrary to the aim.



### The "foot-in-the-door" technique

The model has been verified by the conceptual replication of one of the studies on the "foot-in-the-door" influence technique. It is based on two inter-related requests, different in relevance, directed at the same person: the fulfilment of the less relevant request increases the probability of the fulfilment of the other, more relevant one (Doliński, 2005). Research indicates both the high effectiveness of the technique and the scarce theoretical considerations explaining its workings (Burger, 1999; Burger & Caldwell, 2003; Fern, Monroe, & Avilla, 1986). Meta-analyses of studies on the foot-in-the-door technique conducted by Burger (1999) distinguished six psychological

processes responsible for its effectiveness: self-perception, psychological reactance, conformity, consistency, attributions and commitment. The analysis found considerable evidence to support Bem's (1967) self-perception theory as the most relevant explanation of the efficiency of the foot-in-the-door technique. According to the self-perception theory (Bem, 1967) people not only explain their behaviour by their personal traits, but guess both at their personal traits and at other people's personal traits on the basis of their own behaviour and the observation of others' behaviour, respectively (Bem, 1967). If an individual, upon fulfilling a request, does not find an external explanation for their behaviour, they assume it reflects a personal trait, for instance, "of being helpful". When a second, more relevant request occurs within the same context the individual, by now "conscious" of their attitudes and beliefs, will fulfil the second request as well. A similar explanation was proposed by the pioneer investigators of the foot-in-the-door technique, Freedman and Fraser (1966), who did not, nevertheless, relate their explanation to Bem's (1967) theory. On the other hand, Burger (1999) suggests that self-perception is not the unique process responsible for the effectiveness of the technique, but, rather, one of the factors cooperating with other psychological processes mentioned above. The self-perception theory has been chosen for the present study in order to allow for a comparison between a single approach and the idea of positioning.

Research by Doliński (2005) demonstrates the self-perception mechanism functions with greater efficiency when the first request is uncommon (as opposed to a common request). Having fulfilled an uncommon request an individual justifies their behaviour on the basis of their personal traits more strongly, while in the case of a typical request such justification is not necessary.

The effectiveness of uncommon requests has been demonstrated by Doliński (2005, p. 76) in a study involving mall clients who were first asked to fulfill a small and either common or uncommon request (answering two questions about the mall and tying a person's shoelaces due to "terrible back pains", respectively), and were later asked to watch over a damaged shopping cart. The difficulty of both versions of the first request was similar (completing it required from 8 to 14 seconds). According to the results, in the control group (only the second request) 42% agreed to watch over the cart, in the first common request group the percentage rose to 45, while in the uncommon request group it amounted to 61%. Thus, the results demonstrate that it is not the difficulty of the first request, but its degree of commonness that conditions the effectiveness of the "foot-in-the-door" technique.

### **Method**

However, there remains a possibility that it is not the degree of commonness, but the content of requests that triggers the particular effect. It appears that when asked to answer questions about the mall, the participants were positioned as individuals either in possession of knowledge about the mall or at least of their expectations towards it –

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namely as Experts. Conversely, the request to tie shoelaces might correspond to the position of a person who aids others in distress – a Samaritan. As regards content, the request to watch over a shopping cart remains closer to the position of a person helping others, rather than that of a mall client. More persons fulfilled the requests after having been twice positioned as Samaritans than in the case of two distinct positions. The similarity of positioning might thus be the factor responsible for the result of the study. That may be verified by another study employing two common requests forwarded to a person positioned twice in the same way (coherent positioning) or two uncommon requests triggering two different positions (incoherent positioning). An increased effectiveness of the technique in the case of a common request/coherent positioning will establish positioning as an active factor. If effectiveness does not increase, then, following Doliński (2005), it needs to be assumed that common requests do not increase the effectiveness of the technique. A cross study will indicate which of the two theories better explains the increase in the effectiveness of the technique.

### **Pilot study**

During the pilot study, three requests have been established (first common and uncommon requests, and the second request) for each of the two positioning types. The requests employed in Doliński's study (2005, p. 76) were also included – their degree of commonness served as a reference in the selection of the other requests. The selection included requests fulfilled by 70-90% of participants; their completion required a similar 8 to 14 seconds. Farther, the second stage of Doliński's (2005, p. 76) pilot study, which estimated the probability of forwarding requests, was replicated with the addition of request evaluation as regards their relevance and positioning direction. It was assumed that the Expert position would be triggered by references to participants' knowledge, while the Samaritan position would be invoked by the need to help. The study employed requests (a) having the highest scores on the "willingness to help" or "knowledge" scales (where '1' corresponded to the lowest level of a feature and '7' corresponded to its highest level), (b) having the highest differential mean value between the scales and (c) characterised by completion probabilities closest to the levels established in the original study by Doliński. A total of 49 requests were revised in a sequence of pilot studies, each being evaluated by 16 participants. Requests selected for positioning are presented in Table 1.

### **Participants**

A total of 180 subjects participated, 90 women and 90 men, randomly selected from among mall-goers; 30 subjects (15 women and 15 men), who fulfilled first and second request, participated in each study variant.

Table 1 *Requests selected for positioning in the first study*

Request content	Request type	Position	K	W	K – W difference	P
Changing money that could be used to unlock a shopping cart	first, common	S	2.01	6.25	4.25	76.6%
Asking for information about the possible place to change money in order to unlock a shopping cart	first, common	E	6.19	3.5	2.69	66.1%
Completing a brief questionnaire about one of the products sold in the mall	first, common	C	4.06	5.38	1.31	71.9%
Holding a bulky child’s toy for a moment while the other person moves their cart	first, uncommon	S	2.13	6.63	4.5	18.2%
Asking whether a particular company is Polish or foreign	first, uncommon	E	6.11	2.89	3.22	10.8%
Asking to zip up an open hood as the other person cannot do it alone due to back pains	first, uncommon	C	1.56	5.38	3.81	18.3%
Aiding to take a light but bulky package off a shopping cart	second	S	1.69	6.88	5.19	40.7%
Asking for the location of the first-aid point in the mall	second	E	3.95	6.09	2.14	39.6%
Watching over a shopping cart full of products while the other person looks for another person picking them up in their car	second	C	1.63	6.75	5.13	24.1%

*Note:* The selection includes both request and proposed position types, and the results on “knowledge” scale (K), “willingness to help” scale (W), differential mean between two scales (K - W difference) and the probability of being asked such a request (P). Control groups include requests employed originally by Doliński (2005, p. 76). S = Samaritan; E = Expert; C = Control Group

## Procedure

In order to verify the hypothesis a 2 x 2 study was designed – a request (common vs. uncommon) x positioning (coherent vs. incoherent). The study singles out two factors responsible for the effectiveness of the technique, not considered separately in Doliński’s (2005, p. 76) study: positioning coherence and request commonness. According to the hypothesis, coherent positioning will increase the effectiveness of the technique if compared to either incoherent positioning or the control group.

The study conditions selected include contradictory factors, which allows for the establishment of the factor responsible for the results. The findings have been balanced

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Table 2 *Study conditions; the arrows indicate an expected increase (↑) or decrease (↓) in technique effectiveness; the notion “classical hypothesis” refers to technique effectiveness as considered by Doliński (2005, p. 76)*

Positioning in requests		Position coherence	First request commonness	Classical hypothesis	Dialogical hypothesis
First	Second				
Expert	Expert	Yes	Yes	↓	↑
Samaritan	Expert	No	No	↑	↓
Expert	Samaritan	No	No	↑	↓
Samaritan	Samaritan	Yes	Yes	↓	↑
Expert	Samaritan	No	Yes	↓	↓
Samaritan	Samaritan	Yes	No	↑	↑

by the employment of each type of request once with each positioning type. Study conditions are presented in Table 2.

The study was conducted at the parking lot adjacent to a mall. Approximately half-way towards the mall, participants were approached by a young man who forwarded the first request. About one minute later, by the mall door, a young woman forwarded the second request. The study concluded in the moment of accepting or rejecting the fulfillment of the second request.

### Results

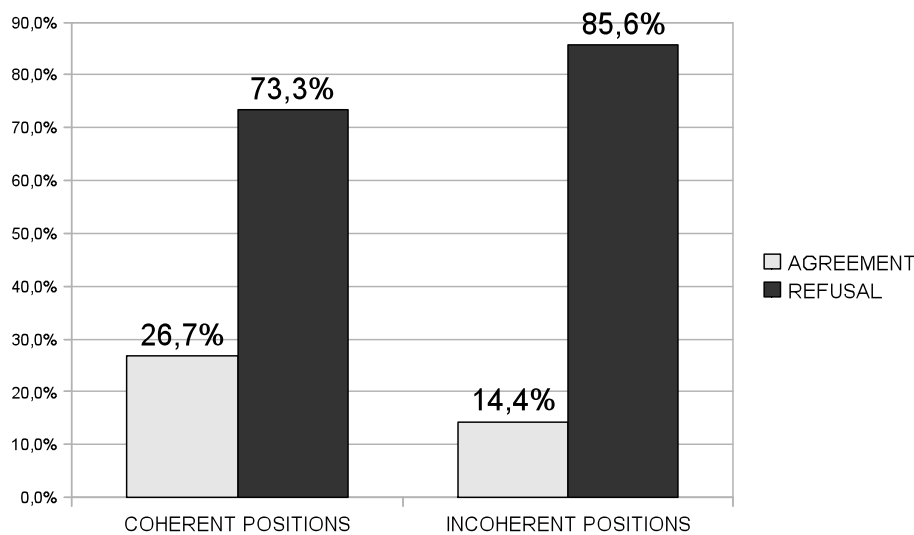
Doliński (2005) established the effect of commonness of the first request. Participants fulfilled the second request more often if the first request was uncommon (61%), rather than common (45%). The effect occurred again in replication in the case of 63.3% of common requests and 76,7% of uncommon requests; nonetheless, the level of statistical significance ( $p > 0.5$ ) has not been reached. Results for all study conditions are presented in Table 3.

A relevant effect for the coherent positioning factor at  $p < 0,05$  has been observed. Participants positioned coherently fulfilled the second request more often (85,6%) than participants positioned incoherently (73.3%);  $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 4,116, p < .05$  (one-tailed). The results are illustrated in Figure 4. An effect of request commonness has been calculated: positioning coherence increases the effectiveness of the technique with common requests (90% of second requests fulfilled with coherent positioning vs. 63.3% in the case of incoherent positioning);  $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 9.283, p < .005$  (one-tailed). The effect has not been observed in the case of uncommon requests,  $p > 0.5$ . The results are illustrated in Figure 4.

Table 3 Results for all study conditions, indicated as both per cent rates and total number of subjects who agreed/refused to fulfil a given request;  $\chi^2(8, N = 180) = 36.253$ ,  $p < .001$  (one-tailed)

Positioning in requests		Position coherence	First request commonness	Agreed to fulfil the request	Refused to fulfil the request
First	Second				
Expert	Expert	Yes	Yes	86.7% 26 subjects	13.3% 4 subjects
Samaritan	Expert	No	No	90.0% 27 subjects	10.0% 3 subjects
Expert	Samaritan	No	No	66.7% 20 subjects	33.3% 10 subjects
Samaritan	Samaritan	Yes	Yes	93.3% 28 subjects	6.7% 2 subjects
Expert	Samaritan	No	Yes	63.3% 19 subjects	36.7% 11 subjects
Samaritan	Samaritan	Yes	No	76.7% 23 subjects	23.2% 7 subjects

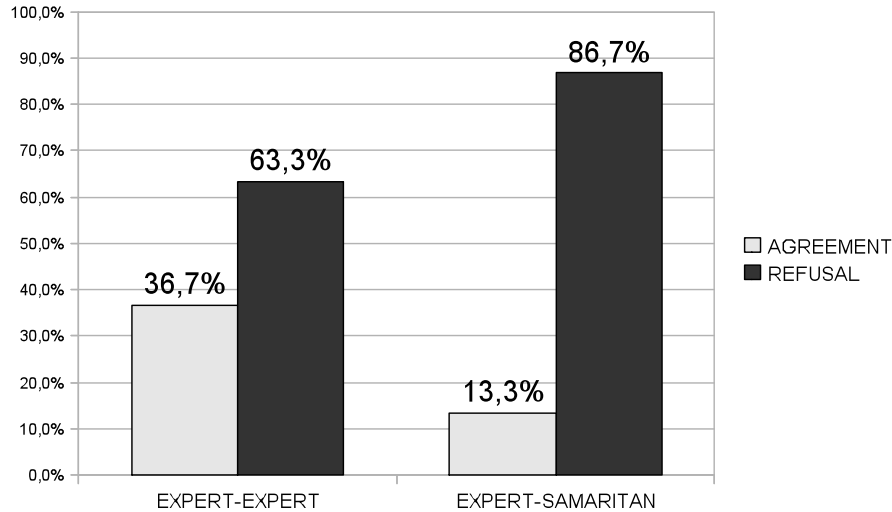
Figure 4. The percentage of fulfilled second requests under the conditions of both coherent and incoherent positions;  $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 4.116$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed).





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Figure 5. The percentage of fulfilled second requests with the first common request under the conditions of position coherence (Expert – Expert) and incoherence (Expert – Samaritan);  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4,356, p < .05$  (one-tailed).



The effect was especially visible in the case of coherent Expert positioning with the first common request: participants twice positioned as Experts fulfilled the request more often (86,7% of acceptance) than participants positioned first as Experts and then as Samaritans (63,3%);  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4,356, p < .05$  (one-tailed). The effect was irrelevant in the case of uncommon requests. Study conditions did not allow for the employment of a similar analysis for groups positioned as Samaritans due to the lack of comparative groups. The results are illustrated in Figure 5.

No effect of gender has been observed ( $p > 0,05$ ), either when splitting groups according to positioning coherence or considering request types.

### Discussion

The study revealed expected phenomena: Coherently positioned participants fulfilled the second request more often than incoherently positioned participants. The effect of gender types has not been observed. The findings cohere with the assumptions of the model and indicate that it is not the commonness, but positioning coherence that influences the effectiveness of the technique. The greatest effectiveness was observed in the case of combining common requests and coherent positions (90%), while the poorest effectiveness involved incoherent positions (63.3%). If both Doliński's (2005, p. 76) and positioning theories were true, it might be proposed that the two effects occurring simultaneously mutually cancel themselves. However, the aim of the study was to decide which of the factors selected influences stronger the effectiveness of the technique, and the findings point towards the positioning theory, rather than the effect of commonness.

An uncommon request does not alter the effectiveness of the technique neither in the case of coherent or incoherent positions. Farther, the findings indicate a true existence of the positioning phenomenon.

The results yielded by the study are partially beneficial as regards the self-perception theory: activating the same position twice increases the possibilities to fulfil the second request. Conversely, activating two different positions blocks the effect. A new subject position might be considered as another person with no reason to activate self-perception as, in a way, it was “another” who fulfilled the first request. Possibly, self-perception is limited to one subject position. dialogical self theory appears to better explain the effectiveness of the technique discussed, in comparison to other approaches. Contrarily to Bem’s (1967) theory, it advocates an explanation that naturally combines with a more complete personality theory.

Uncommon requests supposedly increase the effectiveness of the technique; nonetheless, after the introduction of the positioning factor the effect disappears. Similarly, greater effectiveness should occur in the case of coherent positioning and uncommon requests, as the position should activate self-perception and fulfil the second request. However, the effect does not occur. Following dialogical theory, it could be assumed that common requests are adequately rooted in situation contexts and activate commonly-employed positions, better accessible and more easily activated. Contrarily, uncommon requests are directed at positions not easily accessible in a given context. Such an understanding would explain the effectiveness of positioning with common requests, whereas it would still not sufficiently clarify the lack of effect with uncommon requests.

Another explanation refers to the possibly insufficient uncommonness of requests so as to activate the effect: they are more common (18,2% and 10,8% of probability, respectively) than the original uncommon request from Doliński’s (2005, p. 77) study (6.9%). Nevertheless, they are comparably less common than true common requests (58.4% less common in the case of Samaritan requests and 55.3% less common in the case of Expert requests). Farther replication of the original study with more precisely selected uncommon requests appears necessary.

The findings of the study result interesting and it appears worthwhile to continue research of the relevant phenomena, possibly with numerous additional study factors, in order to verify whether the effect observed is not an artifact. Above all, the relevance of the requests employed should be considered – some of the second requests might engage participants less if compared with first requests and, as Kulbat (2002) observes, this difference is crucial for the effectiveness of the technique. The second Expert request remains doubtful (indicating an inexistent first-aid point). A similar request (indicating a street inexistent in a given town) was successfully employed by Doliński (2005) in his study as a first request, rather than the second. Possibly, the insufficient difference in

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relevance between the first and second requests is the variable that modifies study results. In the pilot study to the present study the relevance of second requests was not tested, following Doliński's (2005, p. 76) pilot study procedure; however, it now appears vital that this parameter be known.

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