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In search of a "sweet spot:" Can understanding how language influences intimidation maximize the quality of valued compliance?

Intimidation is often defined, received, and perceived pejoratively. The current study sets out to find a "sweet spot" in situations where intimidation cannot be avoided and compliance is the goal, where one can maximize compliance but keep fear as low as possible. This experimental study predicted that by lessening mean-spirited speech, a moderate amount of intimidation, as opposed to greater or lesser degrees of it, would produce more compliance with a request, positive interpersonal attributions, and communicative accommodations. The results supported the idea of such a "sweet spot" and implications for authority figures are considered and discussed.

Key words: intimidation, communication accommodation, attributions, compliance

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Amid the unprecedented events of 2020, monumental issues and movements in the U.S. have brought to the forefront discussions about the uses of intimidation. After a group of heavily-armed protesters gathered at the Michigan state capitol building, newspapers around the world called it a show of "intimidation" (e.g., Jonsson & Robertson, 2020). Commentators across the political spectrum, such as right-wing pundit Sean Hannity and then-Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, condemned the protesters' efforts to "intimidate" lawmakers (MSNBC. com, 2020; Zoellner, 2020). More recently, in Washington D.C., amidst protests surrounding the death of George Floyd, National Guard helicopters were used as a "persistent presence" to disrupt the protests (Gibbons-Neff & Schmitt, 2020). The low flying helicopters spawned debate about the intimidating role the military may have on protesters. Retired Army Lt. General Russel Honoré explained the use of the helicopter as a "weapon of intimidation" (CNN.com, 2020). In advance of the 2022 midterm elections, several jurisdictions passed laws making it illegal to intimidate election officials (Vigdor & Hurdle, 2022). Intimidation is inevitable for authority figures because of their stature and power resources, but what strategies can be used to dull the negative effects of perceived intimidation?

Although it arises in many aspects of social life, like policing, politics, and the media, intimidation is not clearly defined in the scholarly literature and is regularly designated as a negative construct that is best avoided. We disagree with this characterization. As Conway and Schaller (2005) state, commands from authority figures can be either hard, like blunt implements that demand compliance, or softer, gentler, approaches that encourage compliance through more subtle means. The same is true for intimidation. Hence, our study attempted to elucidate a definition of intimidation from a pilot study described below. It defined intimidation as a feeling of fear or pressure caused by a perceived threat or a lack of power that is developed from discomfort with initial inferiority or otherness.

The current study seeks to both introduce this concrete definition of intimidation as well as understand the ways to dull its negative effects for the situations where intimidation cannot largely be avoided. Nonverbal behaviors may appear intimidating to varying degrees (e.g., a head tilting upward or downward is perceived as more intimidating), but the behaviors do not address relationships that have an element of intimidation, such as those with authority figures, and the role intimidation plays within those relationships. Intimidation often assists in defining other constructs like power and dominance, but it is seldom studied in its own right (e.g., Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000; Burgoon et al., 1998). While the effects of intimidation have been documented in animals (Preisser et al., 2005), there is much to learn about the complexities of intimidation in human interactions and its role in the field of communication.

Implicit understandings of the construct theoretically suggest that an individual who engages in intimidation may be able to at least generate some positive benefits through compliance by using behaviors (e.g., use of language) that may lessen the inherent fear in the intimidated. If fear can be considerably

lessened, the construct of intimidation does, in fact, have a valuable social function. Conway and Schaller (2005) argue that authority can have a backfiring effect, so using softer approaches may be more effective. This is because pressure causes reactance that is contrary to persuasion goals (Conway et al., 2021). Similar constructs, such as anger, have shown that people tend to support those who express anger when discussing a specific topic (Tiedens, 2001) which suggests that negative constructs can still be perceived favorably under the right circumstances. Some positions of authority are intimidating by simply having authority. It becomes especially important to understand how different forms of language used by the intimidator can actually improve the perception of the intimidator and, therefore, lessen overall intimidation to improve compliance.

Furthermore, the current study aimed to make a practical contribution to the literature on authority and compliance, as understanding the relationship between compliance and intimidation helps authority figures in assessing how to approach their positions better. Before discussing intimidation further, we first explore the theoretical basis underlying the present study. We then present a pilot study which helped us articulate a definition of intimidation, and an experiment in which different types of authority figures, based on the pilot study, were manipulated.

Compliance

Compliance has been defined as the process by which influence is accepted (Choi et al., 2019). Wheeless et al. (1983) defined compliance as the behavioral change in a target because of the power exercised by an agent: "compliance refers simply to target performance of agent-desired behaviors(s), whether an intervening cognitive (or other) process is present or not" (p. 111). Tyler and Huo (2002) discussed how individuals generally comply and agree with decisions if they perceive the action as legitimate and fair. However, when an action is perceived as unfair, individuals' willingness to comply and their opinions of the other can worsen. Procedural justice theory claims that the willingness to comply with authorities is built around trust (e.g., Radburn & Scott, 2019; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Fair treatment and respect are what influence trust and positive opinions about law enforcement – and doubtless other figures. Differing outcomes of compliance may be the result of different types of authority. Before articulating how intimidation can influence compliance, intimidation (as above) must be adequately defined. Such a definition was be foregrounded by an initial pilot study that unpacked intimidation into core concepts

Communication and Language

Clark and Brennan (1991) proposed that a conversation has both a presentation and an acceptance phase that require the speaker and the recipient to work together to create a joint understanding of each other. When both interactants

can successfully understand one another, this is labeled as grounding (Clark & Brennan, 1991). Grounding is a decision that both interactants must arrive at consciously. However, in the scope of an authority figure, assessing how to speak to someone to lessen fear, the speaker must take a more proactive approach to ensuring that whoever they are speaking to does not feel overly intimidated. The adjustment towards the recipient is highlighted in the construct of recipient design.

Recipient design refers to adjusting speech to better suit the recipient (see Carrard et al., 2016). Speakers use knowledge of whom they are speaking to while designing their messages (Schegloff, 1996). This construct is not limited to the types of words being used, but extends to the order of words, how they are sequenced, and the topic they choose to speak about. Although recipient design focuses on the actual adjustments a speaker makes as opposed to why they make them, it can still be a valuable construct to consider when gauging different types of language as an intimidator. Grounding and recipient design are adjustments that do imply that language can improve overall understanding within a conversation. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) accounts for these and other adjustments while also giving more reason for why speakers make them (Gasiorek, 2016).

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory has produced a large program of research spanning decades across social contexts, cultures, and languages that explores the antecedents and social consequences of communicatively accommodating or nonaccommodating others (see Giles, 2016). Much compliance is accommodative, but it can also be achieved with little or no accommodation through force or excessive intimidation. Although being accommodative can sometimes lead to negative outcomes (as, for example, when its intent its perceived as Machiavellian), studies exploring responses to accommodation often find reciprocal accommodation between subjects when an initial accommodator is powerful and or socially attractive (e.g., Giles et al., 1973; Giles et al. 2007).

The early principles of CAT examined the communicative behaviors that lead to convergence or divergence towards a partner face-to-face and, more recently, in digital communication (Giles, 2016). It examines the motivations and social consequences that arise when individuals choose, whether consciously or nonconsciously, to accommodate or not. One specific relationship that CAT research has focused on is between accommodative behaviors and compliance. Convergent accommodative behaviors generally lead to a favorable perception and more compliance, dependent on the situation (e.g., Buller & Aune, 1992). The opposite reactions may occur when divergent behaviors are used. Particularly in authoritative relationships, accommodative behaviors can lead to more trust which, in turn, can lead to more reported and voluntary compliance (e.g., Choi et al., 2019).

Pilot Study

An online questionnaire was administered to 48 undergraduate college students (67% female, 33% male) from a large public university in the Western USA, recruited through a university-run research participation system. They were given course credit for the task and invited to recall a time when they felt intimidated and to describe the person and situation in detail. The questionnaire highlighted interactions they might have had with police officers, instructors, peers, and strangers. Subsequently, participants were also asked what makes a person intimidating, regardless of their title. Due to the entire process being online, no additional or follow up questions were asked. Based on the scarcity of research that addresses intimidation directly, the online questionnaire was used as a rationale for categorizing core concepts in intimidation. By means of a grounded theory approach, students' answers were grouped into themes by two trained graduate students. From these, four core concepts of intimidation emerged: authority, mean-spiritedness, being an outgroup member, and individual physical traits. Of these, authority was the most prevalent (see Table 1).[1] Furthermore, when individuals reported they felt intimidated, they reported feelings of fear, pressure (primarily anxiety), a lack of power, inferiority, and threat/discomfort. Hence, from the pilot study findings, intimidation herein is defined as a feeling of fear or pressure caused by a perceived threat or a lack of power that is developed from discomfort which arises from initial inferiority or otherness.

Main Study

Findings from the pilot study revealed that people view authority figures as intimidating because they felt pressure to be compliant towards them based on past experiences. Accommodative behavior, including polite language, can be adopted to accomplish a desired outcome. Thus, measuring how different approaches (accommodating or mean spirited) by intimidating individuals lead to compliance is a worthwhile pursuit. Beyond compliance to a social target, other outcomes important to authority, such as interpersonal accommodation to them, may be influenced by intimidation as well.

When conceptualizing how different language patterns from an intimidator can generate varying levels of compliance, understanding not only where compliance is at its highest, but also figuring out when individuals are compliant yet do not feel negatively intimidated, could be considered the "sweet spot" of nullifying intimidation. Insights arising from the pilot study suggest that authority figures who use too little or too much intimidation do not warrant favorable perceptions. They are either portrayed as "pushovers" or "someone to avoid." High levels of intimidation were related to perceptions of mean-spiritedness. Therefore, the

1   Full results of the pilot study can be obtained from the authors upon request.

Table 1. *Summary of Pilot Study Findings for Men and Women Within Two Contexts*

	Police	Teacher	Individual Characteristics
Men	**Low:** Lack of weapon, uniform, or authority; hesitation or unsure; internalized cultural stigma of law enforcement or of intimidation. **High:** Power over individual; personal history; direct and sure of themselves. **Extreme:** Perceived use of weapon and potential for taking a life; unwilling to listen and screaming (mean).	**Low:** Lack of intelligence; hesitation or unsure; internalized cultural stigma of education or of intimidation. **High:** Power over individual; personal history; direct and sure of themselves. **Extreme:** Perceived unjust use of power; unwilling to listen and screaming (mean),	**Low:** Lack of intelligence; unkept appearance; hesitation or unsure and soft spoken. **High:** Physical fitness and superiority; confidence; affiliations with an outgroup; wealth. **Extreme:** Mean spiritedness; large amounts of physical superiority.
Women	**Low:** Lack of weapon, uniform, or authority; hesitation or unsure; internalized cultural stigma of law enforcement or of intimidation. **High:** Power over individual; personal history; direct and sure of themselves. **Extreme:** Perceived use of weapon and potential for taking a life; unwilling to listen and screaming (mean).	**Low:** Lack of intelligence; hesitation or unsure; internalized cultural stigma of education or of intimidation. **High:** Power over individual; personal history; direct and sure of themselves. **Extreme:** Perceived unjust use of power; unwilling to listen and screaming (mean).	**Low:** Lack of intelligence; unkept appearance; hesitation or unsure and soft spoken. **High:** Attractiveness; confidence; affiliations with an outgroup. **Extreme:** Mean spiritedness; aggressive behavior.

hypothesized sweet spot is likely to be at the top of a curvilinear relationship. Based on the relationship between accommodation and compliance as discussed in regards to authority figures (Tyler & Huo, 2002), when an authority figure is perceived as intimidating, they should strive for a middle-ground. It would allow for the intrinsic intimidation that comes with having authority, but also promote respect towards whom they are seeking compliance from. To test this supposition, a three-condition study was designed to measure compliance.

Three types of authority figures that reflect varying approaches to intimidation were created: (a) a low authority figure appearing accommodative (low authority + accommodating), (b) a high authority figure appearing accommodative (high authority + accommodating), and (c) a high authority figure appearing mean-spirited (high authority + mean-spirited). Given the proposed predictive nature of intimidation, the following was hypothesized:

H1: An approach using high authority while being accommodating (Type B) will yield more (a) compliance and (b) attributed social attraction than one using little to no intimidation, or an approach using high of intimidation

This study also hypothesizes significantly more accommodative behaviors (measured through self-report, discussed in the Measures section) to an authority figure in the middle ground condition than the other two conditions. If an

individual is perceived as a pushover or someone to avoid, then the medium level should lead to being perceived as a socially attractive authority figure.

H2: The high authority + accommodating condition will yield more accommodation than both the no authority and high authority- + mean-spirited conditions.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through a university-run research participant website, did not include those from the pilot study, and were given course credit for participating. Each was provided with clear instructions (see below) and had the right to stop at any point during the procedure. Participants were 128 undergraduate college students (61% female, 39% male) from a large public university in the Western USA. The students ranged in age from 18 to 31 (M = 20.42, SD = 2.19). Forty-eight (37.50%) identified as Asian, 45 (35.20%) as White, 21 (16.40) as Latino/a, 8 (6.30%) as Multi-Ethnic, 5 (3.90%) as Other, and 1 (0.08%) as African American/Black.

Procedure

The three conditions were determined using three of the major themes that emerged in the pilot study. As participants came to the lab, they were told that they would watch an instructional video on a task they were about to engage in. The video featured two confederates and a hired actor who played the part of the administrator. The video introduced in detail a task of locating countries on a map under the guise of a multitasking study. The lab was a small room with a computer and a world map on the wall. The participants were told that in the past, the study was done in person but now the instructions are being tested on a computer for efficiency and the video they watched is a recording of one of the old sessions. Each participant was randomly shown a video in one of the three conditions. Each condition had the same actors playing the roles of the administrator and the two confederates. Following the video, each participant took part in the same activity as described in the video. On the same computer in which they watched the instructions, they were given the task of locating countries on a blank map.

Three Authority Conditions and Video Descriptions

All participants were given the same task of locating countries on a blank map, but in each of the three conditions, they watched a video with the administrator explaining the task using varying levels of intimidation.

Low Authority + Accommodating. The administrator enacted low levels of intimidation by means of a friendly demeanor and accommodating behaviors. They also expressed a lack of authority using elements in direct contrast with what

was found to be intimidating in the pilot study. Those assigned to this condition watched a video where the administrator began by introducing herself and asking about the participants' classes. She was accommodating each participant by asking if they needed water or if the temperature of the room was ok. She also respectfully and politely responded to confederates. Her lack of authority was highlighted when one of the confederates asked if they will still receive credit if they do not thoughtfully complete the study. The administrator responded, "yes, but we recommend you still attempt the task." At this point, the video ended, and participants were prompted to complete the assigned task (described below).

High Authority + Accommodating. Much of the video remained unchanged. However, a difference occurred when the confederate asked if they would get points for not actively participating. The administrator firmly explained that she could disqualify any student from receiving the research credit should she deem them not putting forth enough effort. Thus, it was a mixture of friendly and accommodating, but also authoritative behaviors.

High Authority + Mean Spiritedness. The administrator employed both authority and mean-spiritedness in this condition. The video remained the same as the high authority condition, except the administrator disparaged the intelligence of the confederates and made somewhat cruel remarks about their chances of having a successful college career. Like the high authority condition, she explained that she could disqualify any student from receiving the research credit should she deem them not putting forth enough effort.

Post-Video

In each condition, participants were informed that they would be completing a straightforward task of locating countries on a blank world map on a computer to serve as the control group in a larger multitasking study. The task consisted of participants being told to label 10 different countries by clicking on an unlabeled world map where they believed the countries to be located. Next to each participant was a large world map displayed on the wall. They were told that they could use the wall map if they wanted to. Participants were given 10 min to complete the task.

After completing the map task, a questionnaire about both the individual whose level of intimidation was manipulated and the activity itself was administered. Quality of compliance and accommodation was measured by self-report questions detailed below.

Measures

Perceptions of Administrator. After watching the video, participants were asked to rank their perception of the administrator. The traits, "intimidating," "accommodating," "friendly," and "mean-spiritedness" were ranked on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very*) on single item measures that were expected to vary depending on each condition.

Previous Knowledge. Three different items checked the participants' previous

coursework and self-perceptions of knowledge in geography, and confidence in performing the map task. This was used as a covariate on their performance on the map task. The item on the previous coursework was a binary question. 81.4% (105) participants had not taken a college course on geography. The item measuring self-perception of knowledge in geography had response options that appeared on a continuum ranging from 1 (*I am a beginner*) to 3 (*I am an expert*). The mean ($M =$ 1.51, $SD = 0.56$) reflected that most participants viewed themselves as beginners or somewhere in the middle (51.9 % and 44.2% respectively). The final item measured confidence in the activity and appeared on a continuum ranging from 0 (*not confident at all*) to 10 (*very confident*). The item indicated higher scores as having greater confidence. The mean ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 2.33$) reflected that most participants were closer to not confident at all than very confident.

Quality of Compliance. Since all participants complied at a fundamental level by even completing the study, a measure of quality of compliance was introduced: "I tried my best to comply with the administrator from the video's request." The activity scores ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*, $M = 5.91$, $SD = 2.35$). To ensure validity of using the map task score as an indicator of compliance, a correlation was run between the map task scores and quality of compliance question. Results of a Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant positive association between the two, $r(128) = .61$, $p < .001$. Thus, higher scores on the map task corresponded with perceptions of compliance.

Accommodation. To measure how accommodative a person would be to the administrator, indicators were used to measure if the participant would hypothetically be accommodative to the administrator if the activity had been conducted in person. The questionnaire also asked questions about if the administrator deserved respect, courtesy, and politeness as measures of accommodation (see Coupland et al., 1988). Five items were developed to ask about specific accommodative indicators ("After watching the administrator in the video… I would be pleasant and courteous; respectful and polite to her if I went to the activity in the lab." "I think the administrator in the video is a person who…. deserves attention when speaking; respect & politeness; and courtesy"). The five items were averaged for each participant, with higher scores indicating more accommodative behavior towards the administrator ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .94$).

Results

Manipulation Check

The three conditions were successfully manipulated because each of the conditions were significantly different from each other in terms of perceived

Table 2. *Summary of Manipulation Check*

Manipulation	Condition	M	SD
Intimidation	Low+Accommodative	*2.03*	2.13
	High+Accommodative	3.50	2.43
	High+Mean	7.10	2.55
Authority	Low+Accommodative	6.19	1.98
	High+Accommodative	7.42	1.35
	High+Mean	7.94	1.79
Mean-Spiritedness	Low+Accommodative	1.28	1.57
	High+Accommodative	1.09	1.72
	High+Mean	8.55	1.48

Note. Based on observed means.

intimidation, $F(2, 127) = 27.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .40$ (see Table 2)[2]. The manipulations for mean-spiritedness $F(2, 127) = 185.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$ and authority, $F(2, 127) = 185.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ were also successful (see Table 2).

Hypothesis Testing

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with intimidation as the independent variable was conducted to test the hypotheses and the omnibus test revealed a significant main effect, Pillai's Trace = .847, $F(2, 96) = 34.15, p < .001$. There was a statistically significant difference in both compliance and accommodation in the different conditions, $F(2, 96) = 13.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$ for compliance and $F(2, 96) = 82.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .64$ for accommodation, respectively. More specifically, H1 predicted that high authority only conditions would yield more compliance than the low authority and high authority + mean-spirited conditions. Accuracy was used to measure the quality of compliance in this study. The low authority and high authority + mean-spirited conditions both elicited statistically significantly less compliance than the high authority condition. The difference between the low authority and high authority + mean-spirited conditions was not statistically significant, $t(61) = .73, p = .154$. All the other combinations saw statistically significant differences at $p = .001$ or lower (see Table 3). Thus, the high authority only condition elicited compliance at a statistically significantly higher rate than those in the low or high + mean-spirited conditions. H1 was supported (see Figure 1).

H2 predicted that the high authority condition would yield more accommodation for the administrator than both the no authority and high authority + mean-spirited conditions. Both no authority and high authority (the conditions without a mean-spirited administrator) yielded the most accommodation. There were statistically significant differences between the two friendly administrator

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2   η^2 was hand-calculated using the formula suggested by Levine and Hullett (2002).

Table 3. *Summary of Conditions*

Dependent Variable	Condition	M	SD
Quality of Compliance	Low +Accommodative	4.56*	2.14
	High + Accommodative	7.09*	2.14
	High +Mean	5.29*	1.85
Accommodation	Low + Accommodative	4.61*	0.47
	High + Accommodative	4.68*	0.65
	High +Mean	2.68	0.91

Note. Based on observed means. *$p < .001$

Table 4. *Summary of Mean Differences Among Conditions*

Dependent variable	Condition	Condition	Mean difference	p
Quality of Compliance	Low Authority + Accommodation	High Authority +Accommodation	−2.53*	< .001
		High Authority +Mean	−.73	.15
	High Authority + Accommodation	Low Authority +Accommodation	−2.53*	< .001
		High Authority +Mean	1.8*	< .001
	High Authority + Mean	Low Authority +Accommodation	−73	.15
		High Authority +Accommodation	1.8*	< .001
Accommodation	Low Authority + Accommodation	High Authority +Accommodation	−0.05	.70
		High Authority +Mean	1.93*	< .001
	High Authority + Accommodation	Low Authority +Accommodation	−0.05	.70
		High Authority +Mean	1.98*	< .001
	High Authority + Mean	Low Authority +Accommodation	1.93*	< .001
		High Authority +Accommodation	1.98*	< .001

(low authority and high authority only) conditions and the high authority + mean-spirited condition (ps < .001). The low authority and high authority condition were not statistically significantly different, $t(63) = .05$, $p = .700$. Therefore, H2 was not supported (see Figure 2 and Table 4).

Discussion

Intimidation is not behavior that should be used lightly or, worse, weaponized. But when a position tends to make someone seem intimidating, it is important to understand the power it confers and how to mitigate it to increase the likelihood of benefits. The results demonstrate a potential sweet spot for quality of compliance with the combination of having substantial authority yet still being seen to be
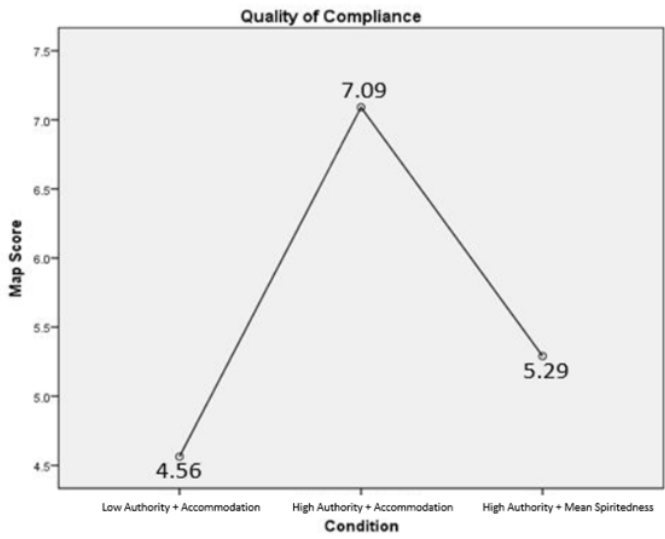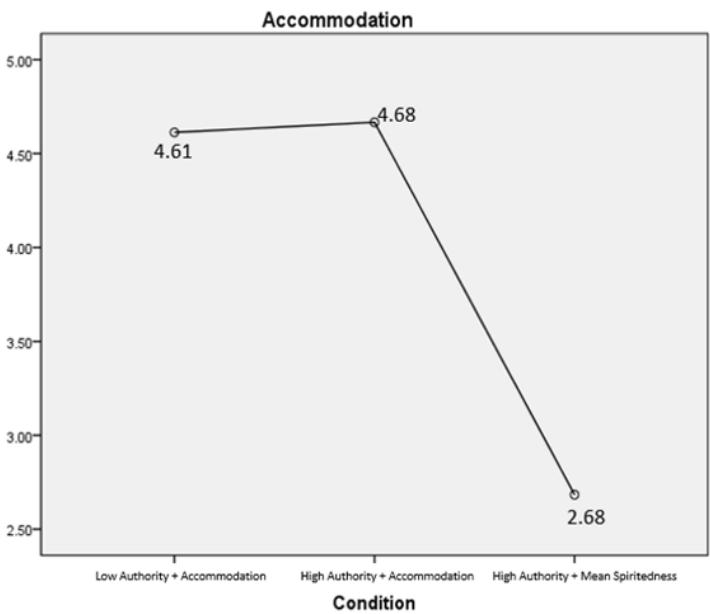
Figure 1. *Hypothesis 1 results.*

Figure 2. *Hypothesis 2 results.*

helpful and friendly (i.e., the high authority + accommodation condition) being more likely to gain compliance. This is because it not only gives the intimidator the most compliance, but it also allows the intimidated individual to comply and be accommodating without conflict. The results suggest that in the high authority condition, participants increased their effort while still feeling intimidated but, more importantly, not afraid. Nevertheless, further research on authoritative/ accommodative language within the high authority + accommodating condition would give much more precise insight into such a sweet spot.

The relationship between intimidation and accommodation was not as clear as when the administrator was perceived as less intimidating. CAT studies have shown that, generally, accommodative behaviors are reciprocated when the original accommodator is powerful (Giles. 2016). The current study further confirmed the link between accommodation and positive reactions. The two conditions that had an accommodating administrator yielded much more favorable opinions of the administrator. However, of these conditions, the one that yielded more intimidation also yielded the highest compliance overall. Although the conditions with a friendly administrator led to the most accommodation towards the administrator, the results showed that accommodation itself did not lead to higher quality of compliance. This suggests that people are not very good at estimating the effects of intimidation and that compliance was affected more by intimidation than the subjects might have believed. These results highlight that even when controlling for authority, accommodation by itself does not generate better quality of compliance. An important result of this study suggests that accommodative language can lessen intimidation from authority and, under certain circumstances, can maximize its potency for valued compliance.

Future research should improve the measure for the quality of compliance, as this study used one of many possible options. Other measures might lead to different results. Also, because this study was conducted in a lab and using video stimuli, it lacked face-to-face intimidation. The emotions felt could be much stronger or even different if the administrator participated in-person. However, using the video provided more experimental control. Many variables still need to be accounted for, including gender, perception of the confederate or other actors beyond the administrator, context, and culture, or varying types of intimidation. Preliminary results from the pilot study suggested that participants found others of their own gender to be the most intimidating. Because women were the majority in the study's setting, all the roles in the stimuli videos were played by women. Varying the genders in the videos and obtaining a more diverse sample (e.g., with respect to gender, ethnicity, and age) could yield different results. Further research should be done to investigate these differences.

The relationship between authority, accommodation, and intimidation requires further inquiry. As previously noted, the administrator who was accommodative, authoritative, and intimidating yielded the most compliance. If interaction with such an individual is perceived as positive, this study could shed insight on

relationships with authority. Further research should explore if different positions of authority (e.g., officers, teachers, instructors, parents, etc.) generate similar results in compliance and perceptions. If perceptions are positive and compliance is high, authoritative relationships, like those between officers and civilians, could be improved overall. The relationship between police and civilians is often tense given its intergroup characterization. So, finding a potential sweet spot could help perceptions and responses toward police (Giles et al., 2021). If intimidation is present in that relationship, each position of authority would have a different use for it and, in turn, different sweet spots. The reach of intimidation is present in politics, advertising, media, and beyond. Even within these areas, where intimidation occurs and whom it affects differ greatly. Students may find a specific instructor intimidating due to certain features, but others may find an entire field of study intimidating, which may point to instances of institutionalized intimidation. This study is only a starting point for understanding intimidation. Thus, there is a vast array of opportunities to examine intimidation not only as a human behavior but also as a construct embedded within society.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

There are no conflicts of interests for this study

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Research Ethics Statement

I confirm that proper consideration has been given to any ethics issues raised. The pilot study and experiment were vetted through the University of California-Santa Barbara Human Subjects Committee (HSC) which serves as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved.

Authorship Details

Mohemmad Hansia: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article. Norah E. Dunbar: research concept and design, critical revision of the article. Howard Giles: research concept and design, critical revision of the article.

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