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Young-Old Age is Factor in Passing Salt and Pepper: Updating Research with New Study Proposal

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Abstract

This research proposal examines factor of age in passing of salt, extending it to the pepper. One hundred participants (50 infants, 50 elderly adults) complete a questionnaire with snacks and drinks and a salt shaker and a pepper shaker beside them on the table. They are asked by another infant or elder who seems to complete questionnaire, but who is working with the experimenter, to pass the salt or pepper. According to expectations, every subject does so, but is slower with pepper (estimated means responses times 1.7s to 5.1s) than with the salt (responses times 1.5 to 3.5s) and with someone of their own age (1.7s to 5.1s) than with someone of the age different (2.0s to 3.3s). Response times are slowest of all when the infant asked the infant to pass the pepper (5.1). Implications for theory are presented and, in light of possible criticisms of the current work, suggestions are made for the future research going forward.

Keywords: Age differences, Salt and pepper passing

Introduction

Various writers in the English tradition seem to have mentioned passing the salt from one person to another, and philosophers have speculated about its meaning symbollically (Pencil, 1976). Also, research has examined conditions under which salt is passed: two reviews state that frequency with which a person passes salt is associated with various variables, including politeness of the request to pass salt, how many people are around the table, and both attitudes and race of sender and person receiving [1,2]. It has also been shown that salt may not be passed because of distraction [3]. Pacanowsky and Pencil say that more research must be done, particularly to study the sex differences. The first purpose of this experiment many years later is to do that and see whether sex of the person making request and sex of sender play roles in salt passage.

Similarity theory [4] predicts that people might be more likely to pass salt to people of their age than to people of different age. That is, we act favourably towards the people who we think are like us. "Like" may actually have two meanings. First, we may like people because we see them as like us (similar to us). As the old English saying goes "Birds of a feather flock together".

The second purpose of present extension to past research was to investigate passing of pepper. Salt and pepper are often together, which would imply that results would not differ. However, if pepper has psychological characteristics that are different from salt, then people may not act the same way when requested to pass it. In particular, pepper tickles the nostrils more than salt, so people might hesitate about passing it in case it flies around when they pick it up and causes the sneezing, which could be embarrassing. To go out on a limb, this interesting possibility is what is expected here. That is less passing for pepper than for salt. Indeed, the effect might be exaggerated when the two people are different in age, because of extra embarrasment. That is, infants would be very cautious about passing pepper to an elder and elders would be very cautious about passing pepper to an infant. This means that the results with age for pepper would be opposite to those for salt.

In summary, we predict

- Salt will be passed when asked.
- People will be less likely to pass salt when the person is different age from them. That is, people will be more likely to pass salt to person of the same age.
- Pepper will be less passed than salt.
- People will be less likely to pass pepper when the person is the different age. That is, people will be more likely to pass pepper to person of the same age.

Materials and Methods

Subjects

One hundred French people (50 infants, 50 elederly) are put into four conditions: receiver and sender both infant (inf-inf), receiver and sender both elederly (eld-eld), receiver elderly male and sender infant (eld-inf), and receiver elderly female and sender infant (inf-eld).

Materials and procedure

Materials are a salt shaker with salt, a pepper shaker with pepper, and a questionnaire about TV show preferences. Details of questionnaire are not given because it is part of the cover story given to participants.

Subjects are tested individually in the psychology laboratory (laboratoire de psychologie). When arriving, the experimenter tells them that they and other subject will sit opposite each other at a table and complete questionnaire, taking approximately 20 minutes. The other subject is a trained subject "in league with" (works for) the experimenter and who plays role of receiver. That person always makes request and true subjects are always senders (they are asked to pass the salt or pepper). Because salt and pepper shakers are placed closer to sender, the two participants are given their places according to a fixed draw (le draw fixée).

When subjects are seated, they complete questionnaire at town pace. Each subject is given two large bowels, one filled to brim with unsalted peanuts and one with unsalted potato chips, and a choice of water, orange juice and cranberry juice to drink. They can snack and drink as much or as little as they want. However, to keep control over conditions, they do not have the permission to leave room.

Two people, one infant and one elederly, are confederates of the experimenter. Each is paired with infant or elederly subject to form the four groups of inf-inf, eld-eld, inf-eld and eld-inf receiver-sender pairings as noted above. The confederates completed questionnaire as if they were a real participant, but they ask the subject to pass salt or pepper. The first request is made after five minutes and then the second one later after six minutes. For half of the subjects, first request is for salt and second is for pepper and for other half the requests are made in the order opposite. The first and second requests are delivered like this respectively (the English translation): "Excuse me, would you pass the salt (pepper)?" and "Sorry to bother you again, but would you pass the pepper (salt)?" If request is honoured, receiver returns the salt or pepper shaker.

The behaviour of sender (complying or not complying with the request) is watched by two independent observers through a one-way mirror. In addition, using stopwatches, they independently record the time from when the request was made until sender touched the shaker.

Statistical methods and results

Estimated datas were entered according to expectations of proposal and analyzed using advanced SPSS (PASW Statistics 18), with alpha at 0.05.

Compliance behaviour

Every subject passes the salt or the pepper. That is, 25 out 25 people (100%) in each of four age conditions do as they were asked. However, there differences apper in the response times.

Response times for compliance

Recorded response times for the two observers should always be within 200 ms of each other. Final datas for analysis consist of the mean of the two expected estimated times for each subject.

Datas entered into SPSS then analysed as follows. To check for order effect, these response time datas **(Table 1)** were first examined a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (Age of Receiver X Age of Sender X Substance X Order of Presentation) mixed model ANOVA with repeated measures on substance and order. Because order was not significant anywhere, datas were collapsed over order and analyzed with a 2 X 2 X 2 (Age of Receiver X Age of Sender X Substance) mixed ANOVA.

Table 1: Mean Response Times (sec) in Each Condition.

Salt Pepper						
Receiver	**Sender**	**n**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Infant	Infant	25	5.13	1.17	3.48	0.51
	Elder	25	2.43	0.33	1.99	0.55
Elder	Elder	25	1.69	0.35	1.51	0.43
	Infant	25	3.27	0.48	3.04	0.43

All effects were significant: age of receiver, $F(1, 96) = 81.03$, $p < 0.001$, age of sender, $F(1, 96) = 7.58$, $p = 0.007$, age of receiver X age of sender, $F(1, 96) = 349.97$, $p < 0.001$, substance, $F(1, 96) = 50.34$, $p < 0.001$, age of recipient X substance, $F(1, 96) = 22.96$, $p < 0.001$, age of sender X substance, $F(1, 96) = 10.98$, $p = 0.001$, and the three-way interaction, $F(1, 96) = 13.15$, $p = 0.001$.

Overall, response times were slower for pepper than for salt (**Table 1**). Table 1 also shows that two-way interaction between age of recipient and age of sender occurs because both inf and eld senders respond more quickly when recipient was of opposite age to them. With different ages, passing she faster. That is, subjects were slower with own age. For the significant three-way interaction, inspection of Table 1 shows that the sex interaction pattern just described occurs for both the salt and the pepper, but difference in time is greatest when a child requested an adult sender to pass the pepper.

Results and Discussion

Despite suggestions for research to be done going forward (Pacanowsky, 1978; Pencil 1976), it has been many years since the question of passing the salt was studied. Consistent with the previous reports, it is expected here that participants passed salt when asked to do so. In addition, extending these results, they also respond positively to a request to pass pepper. However, in the present experiment, there is 100% compliance. This is unusual; because previous reported compliance rates were lower (Pacanowsky, 1978; Pencil 1976). Most of past research was dated in 1960s and 70s in U.S.A. This present research is to be done with peoples in a selective spiritual location in a touristique part of France, where people

may be more agreeing. Notably, compliance has been found to vary in various countries (Pacanowski, 1976). Future research after this project going forward might compare rates of salt and pepper passing for other countries than the U.S.A and France, making the work more cross-cultural. In fact, politeness also varies across countries [5]. To focus on the agreeable possibility, it would be a good idea to give a personality test of the Big Five traits [openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN); [6] going forward to examine if compliance varies with agreeableness. It would be predicted that in countries with more agreeableness there would be more compliance. For example, because agreeableness is high in the Czeck Republick and low in Morocco [7], salt and pepper passing might be faster and slower respectively in these countries.

Although rates of compliance did not vary with age of receiver or age of sender here, time to fulfil the request is related to both factors, but not the sex. The age factor is an interesting result because age differences in salt or pepper passage were not examined before. In particular, both infs and elds are expected faster to respond when request to pass the salt was made by member of different age. This is inconsistent with similarity theory [8], according to which people would respond faster to members of their own age. Going forward, future investigation might directly examine if rate or response time for salt passing would vary other characteristics of recipient (and perhaps also sender).

Present experiment also extends previous research by examining whether results would be different for a request to pass pepper compared to pass salt. It was predicted and shown in these datas that senders were slower to respond to pepper request than to salt request. This is consistent with speculation that pepper is more likely to induce the sneezing fits, making participants more hesitant about complying. The slower passing of pepper may also occur because it is less usual to shake pepper over peanuts and chips than it is shake salt. If the request is perceived as surprising, this might slow response time. Further research might investigate the reasons why people are slower to pass pepper than to pass salt. In particular, it would be interesting to see what happens in India, where black pepper originated (Black pepper nutrition facts). This would also be consistent with the suggestion made above to replicate the present experiment in different countries.

In addition, a particularly interesting interaction is expected between age and substance because the slower response time to person of the same age was even greater when the two people were young and when the request is to pass the pepper. Perhaps infs in the present experiment find it highly unusual for another inf to ask for pepper on snack food. However, although highly reliable, any difference like this should be confirmed going forward with datas collected and replicated before explanations are tested.

As a criticism of this work, the design is not completely experimental because of the subject variables (inf, eld), but some was experimental (salt, pepper both passed and experimentally counterbalanced for control of order and sequence effects). Also, with infs, there may be some problems of comprehension at times. This could be rectified in future research going forward with post-experimental questionnaire exploring understanding and removing cases that had the problem here.

Conclusion

According to expectations, people at a table are perfectly willing to pass salt or pepper when asked. Perhaps this simply reflects standard norms of politeness in their area of the country. However, they are expected faster to honour request made by a member of same age, supporting the theory of similarity. Most interestingly, they also pass pepper more slowly than salt, particularly when both people are infs. Hopefully, going forward, future results will confirm and replicate this finding, perhaps more cross-culturally than before.

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