

Psychological Entitlement Predicts Failure to Follow Instructions

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Abstract

Six studies examined the relationship between psychological entitlement and not following instructions. In Study 1, more entitled individuals were more likely to ignore instructions about how to format their responses. Studies 2–4 investigated possible boundaries on the association between entitlement and ignoring instructions; however, entitled people were more likely to ignore instructions even when following instructions was low cost for the self, instructions were given in a less controlling way, or punishment was highly likely to result from a failure to follow instructions. To explore another possible explanation for the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions, Study 5 examined whether entitled people were more sensitive to situations potentially unfair to them; indeed, they were more likely to reject offers in an ultimatum game. Building on this finding, in Study 6, more entitled individuals' greater likelihood of ignoring instructions was predicted by their viewing instructions as an unfair demand on them.

Keywords

psychological entitlement, instructions, fairness, compliance

Well-functioning groups, organizations, and societies depend on people's willingness to follow instructions. An efficient boarding process at the airport requires people to follow gate agents' directives. Many medical procedures hinge on staff's willingness to follow exactly the orders of an attending surgeon. When crossing streets, pedestrians must follow the rules provided by traffic lights to prevent traffic jams and accidents. If people routinely ignored instructions, chaos would ensue in a variety of domains. Thus, it is important to understand what makes people more or less likely to comply with instructions. An abundance of social psychological research has investigated the situational determinants of people's willingness to comply with requests (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Complementing this tradition, in this article, we argue that an individual difference construct—psychological entitlement—is an important predictor of whether a person will follow instructions.

Psychological entitlement is the feeling that one is more deserving of positive outcomes than other people are (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). Individuals with a higher sense of entitlement (hereafter *entitled people* for brevity; we do not intend a categorical distinction with this phrase) are more likely to believe they are owed valuable resources or benefits (e.g., a higher salary, a better grade, special treatment) regardless of their effort or performance relative to others (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Past research indicates that entitled people are less likely to demonstrate concern for what is socially acceptable or beneficial for others when deciding what they wish to do. For example, entitled people are more

likely to behave opportunistically, be dishonest, and make unethical decisions (Burt, Donnellan, & Tackett, 2012; Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008; Malhotra & Gino, 2011; Poon, Chen, & DeWall, 2013; Tamborski, Brown, & Chowning, 2012; Vincent & Kouchaki, 2016), and one study showed that they were more likely to drop out of a parenting class even though material learned in it could benefit their children (Snow, Kern, & Curlette, 2001). We predict that they would also be more likely to ignore instructions from other people for several reasons.

First, entitled people are more selfish and lower in agreeableness and empathy, and they are less likely to enjoy helping others and tend to have self-image goals but not compassionate goals (Campbell et al., 2004; Moeller, Crocker, & Bushman, 2009; Watson & Morris, 1991; Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). They are also more likely to think that dull tasks waste their time (O'Brien, Anastasio, & Bushman, 2011). Thus, while other people might follow instructions to help the person asking (e.g., Berkowitz, 1972; Burger & Caldwell, 2003), entitled

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individuals might not want to expend time and energy doing things that others want them to. Second, entitled people are more averse to being controlled by others (Rose & Anastasio, 2014). Thus, because they resent being told what to do, they might refuse to follow instructions to maintain a sense of autonomy (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Third, entitled people might be more likely to think they will escape punishment for failing to follow instructions. They have very high expectations in general (Grubbs & Exline, 2016), and therefore, they might think they will be able to avoid sanctions for ignoring instructions (e.g., through good luck or the ability to talk themselves out of it). Entitled people are more likely to demand special treatment (Fisk & Neville, 2011); perhaps they have had success with getting what they want in the past and expect this to continue. Fourth, entitled people might be more likely to think the instructions that they have been given are unfair. Because entitled people are more easily offended and more likely to believe that they are being mistreated by others (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Harvey, Harris, Gillis, & Martinko, 2014; McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003), instructions that other people accept might be viewed as abusive and unfair by an entitled person, and people are less likely to comply with rules and requests that they perceive as unfair or illegitimate (e.g., Colquitt, 2001; Tyler, 1997; Tyler & DeGoey, 1995).

In this article, we examine whether more entitled people are more likely to ignore instructions than less entitled people, and if so, explanations for this relationship. We first report a pilot study in which we reanalyzed data from another project to test the predicted relationship. Then, in Study 1, we examine whether entitled people are more likely to ignore formatting instructions for a word search. In Studies 2–4, we explore whether entitled people are less likely to follow instructions due to selfishness, not wanting to be controlled by others, or a perceived unlikelihood of being punished. We manipulate features of the situation to remove each potential barrier to entitled individuals' following of instructions and examine whether they then follow instructions. Finally, in Studies 5–6, we examine whether entitled people are less likely to follow instructions because they perceive the instructions as unfair. We report all manipulations and all measures of entitlement and instruction-following that we included in our studies. Sample size decisions were made a priori with a goal of maximizing power for main effects, and we did not exclude any data.

Pilot Study: Reanalysis of an Existing Data Set

As an initial test of our hypothesis, we reanalyzed a data set from a project on entitlement and hunger. In the original study, participants ($N = 156$) had been told to complete the study before or after dinner, and they reported their entitlement on the Psychological Entitlement Scale (PES; Campbell et al., 2004). We gave them specific instructions about how to complete the survey and what counted as before or after dinner, but when analyzing the data, we noticed that many participants ignored

the instructions (34.6%). Thus, it was hard to test our original hypothesis that hunger leads to higher entitlement. However, this problem inspired us to test the present hypothesis that entitled people would be less likely to follow instructions. Given the sample size, we would have power of .76 to detect the mean effect size in our field of $r = .21$ (Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003). We observed a significant point-biserial correlation between entitlement and having to be removed from the data set for not following instructions, $r_{pb} = .218$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [.063, .363], $p = .006$.

Study 1

In an attempted replication of our pilot study using a new method, in Study 1, we instructed participants about how to format their survey responses. We predicted that individuals with greater psychological entitlement would be more likely to ignore the instructions.

Method

Participants ($N = 202$; 105 men, 95 women, 2 other; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.4$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.0$) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were paid US\$0.35.¹ Participants first completed the PES ($\alpha = .90$; Campbell et al., 2004), the most commonly used measure of the entitlement disposition. They rated items such as “I honestly feel I’m just more deserving than others” and “Great things should come to me” (1 = *strong disagreement*, 7 = *strong agreement*). Then, they completed the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), indicating whether certain characteristics (“sympathetic and warm”) described them. The TIPI was originally included as a filler, but it allowed us to examine whether any of the Big 5 personality traits accounted for the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions. Finally, participants were asked to complete a word search according to a set of specific instructions (find words in a certain orientation, list five total words, find words of at least three letters, find distinct words, type words in all capital letters, put a semicolon and space in between the words, and put a period after the last word). We summed the total number of instructions (out of seven) they ignored.²

Results and Discussion

Entitlement ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.20$) was positively correlated with the number of word search instructions that participants ignored ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.51$), $r = .145$, 95% CI [.007, .277], $p = .040$.³ Thus, people higher in psychological entitlement were more likely to format their word search responses incorrectly. Further analysis (reported in the online Supplemental Materials) showed that the Big 5 personality characteristics could not account for this relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions.⁴

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations and Their 95% Confidence Intervals, and Cronbach's α s (Shown in Boldface on the Diagonal) for Study 2.

Measure	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3
1. Entitlement	3.49 (1.02)	.86		
2. Condition	-0.006 (1.00)	-.05 [-.20, .11]	-	
3. Ignoring instructions	2.95 (0.86)	.33* [.19, .46]	.14 [†] [-.02, .29]	.77

Note. $N = 157$. Condition: 1 = more costly, -1 = less costly.

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .1$.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to explore whether entitled people are more likely to ignore instructions because they do not want to inconvenience themselves (i.e., because they are selfish). Thus, we presented various scenarios to participants and manipulated how personally costly it was to follow instructions in each scenario. We predicted that if entitled people ignore instructions because they want to avoid inconvenience, then the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions should be attenuated when following instructions is not as personally costly.

Method

We offered this study for extra credit in an introductory undergraduate course, and 157 participants signed up (63 men, 94 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.2$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.16$). Participants first completed the PES and the TIPI. Then, participants were presented with 13 brief hypothetical scenarios in which they imagined being given instructions by another person. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in which it was either higher or lower cost for them to follow instructions in each scenario. For example, participants imagined that a professor told them to use a different citation style for an article, and it would take them either a few hours or a few minutes to make the changes. For each scenario, participants rated how likely they would be to not follow instructions (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*), thereby doing what was more convenient for them. We took the mean response across these 13 scenarios as a measure of ignoring instructions.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, ignoring instructions was predicted by both entitlement and condition. Instructions were more likely to be ignored when the recipients of the instructions were more entitled and when following instructions was personally costly. However, there was not a significant interaction between entitlement and condition (more costly vs. less costly) in our multiple regression (see Table 2). Thus, the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions was not weakened when following

Table 2. Coefficients From an OLS Multiple Regression Model Predicting the Likelihood of Ignoring Instructions From Entitlement (Centered), Condition (1 = More Costly, -1 = Less Costly), and Their Interaction for Study 2.

	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial <i>r</i> [95% CI]
Intercept	2.95 (.064)	45.8	.000	
Entitlement	0.287 (.063)	4.54	.000	.344 [.197, .476]
Condition	0.130 (.064)	2.02	.045	.162 [.004, .312]
Entitlement \times condition	-0.072 (.063)	-1.13	.259	-.091 [-.245, .068]

Note. $N = 157$. $R^2 = .140$. CI = confidence interval; OLS = ordinary least squares.

instructions was described as less costly. In other words, even when following instructions would be only a minor inconvenience, entitled people were still more likely than less entitled people to ignore the instructions. Interestingly, the interaction effect was opposite the predicted direction in this study. Thus, this study did not provide evidence that entitled people's failure to follow instructions is driven by their desire to avoid doing anything that is costly for them.

Study 3

In this study, we examined whether entitled people are less likely to follow instructions because they are especially averse to being controlled by others. We manipulated whether following instructions was framed as optional or mandatory, predicting that the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions would be weaker when following instructions was framed as optional.

Method

Participants ($N = 300$; 165 men, 134 women, 1 other, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.3$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.7$) were recruited from MTurk and were paid US\$0.35. They first completed the PES and TIPI, as in previous studies. Then, participants were told that they would be asked to complete a word search on the next screen according to specific instructions. They were either told that following instructions was mandatory (and that they would be punished by losing out on a 10-cent bonus for failing to follow instructions) or optional (and that they would be rewarded with an additional 10-cent bonus for following instructions). Finally, they were given a word search similar to the one used in Study 1, but about animals and with slightly different instructions (list words, find only animal names, find words in a certain orientation and ignore others, list five total words, type words in all capital letters, indicate the orientation of each word with a symbol, put a semicolon and space between the words, and put a period after the last word). We summed the total number of instructions (out of eight) they ignored.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations and Their 95% Confidence Intervals, and Cronbach's α s (Shown in Boldface on the Diagonal) for Study 3.

Measure	M (SD)	1	2	3
1. Entitlement	3.36 (1.38)	.93		
2. Condition	0.007 (1.00)	-.05 [-.16, .06]	–	
3. Instructions ignored	1.16 (1.98)	.18* [.07, .29]	-.16* [-.27, -.05]	–

Note. $N = 300$. Condition: 1 = mandatory, -1 = optional.
* $p < .05$.

Table 4. Coefficients From an OLS Multiple Regression Model Predicting the Number of Instructions Ignored From Entitlement (Centered), Condition (1 = Mandatory, -1 = Optional), and Their Interaction for Study 3.

	b (SE)	t	p	Partial r [95% CI]
Intercept	1.16 (.112)	10.4	.000	
Entitlement	0.249 (.081)	3.07	.002	.176 [.064, .284]
Condition	-0.295 (.112)	-2.64	.009	-.152 [-.261, -.039]
Entitlement \times Condition	0.049 (.081)	0.598	.550	.035 [-.079, .148]

Note. $N = 300$. $R^2 = .056$. OLS = ordinary least squares.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, ignoring instructions was predicted by both entitlement and condition. Instructions were more likely to be ignored when the recipients of the instructions were more entitled and when following instructions was framed as optional. However, there was not a significant interaction between entitlement and condition (mandatory vs. optional) in our multiple regression (see Table 4). Although there was a weaker relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions when following instructions was framed as optional, as we had predicted, the interaction effect was small and nonsignificant in this study. Entitled individuals were similarly more likely to ignore instructions regardless of whether the instructions were optional or mandatory. Thus, this study did not provide evidence for the hypothesis that entitled people ignore instructions because of their aversion to being controlled by others' mandatory rules.

Study 4

In Study 4, we examined whether entitled people are more likely to ignore instructions because they think they are unlikely to be punished for doing so. We manipulated the chance of punishment and asked participants to report how likely they would be to ignore instructions when punishment was either highly unlikely or highly likely. We predicted that the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions would be weaker when punishment was described as highly likely, as entitled people would not want to do something that

would have a clear and unavoidable negative consequence for them (see Daddis & Brunell, 2015, on entitled individuals' prudential concerns).

Method

Participants ($N = 401$; 204 men, 196 women, 1 other, $M_{age} = 35.3$, $SD_{age} = 11.2$) were recruited from MTurk and were paid US\$0.45. As before, they first completed the PES and TIPI. Participants then read five short scenarios that described situations in which they were asked to follow instructions. In each scenario, the following information was mentioned: the benefits to others of their following instructions, the costs to themselves of following instructions, and the punishment for not following instructions (if caught). Participants read scenarios in which punishment for ignoring instructions was either highly unlikely or highly likely. For example, participants imagined that a requester on MTurk wanted them to write out an answer of at least three sentences but that they did not want to generate a response that long. They were told to imagine that they were sure, based on past experiences with the requester, that he or she would or would not actually check to see whether the workers followed the instructions. Participants rated for each scenario how likely they would be to ignore the instructions (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely), and we took the mean of the five ratings as our dependent variable. Participants also rated how bad it would be for them if they got punished after each scenario (1 = not at all bad, 7 = very bad), and we took the mean of these ratings as well. After reading all scenarios, participants rated how likely they thought the authority figures would be to enforce the punishments (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely), as a manipulation check, and how happy they would be if they got away with ignoring instructions across the scenarios (1 = not at all happy, 7 = very happy).

Results and Discussion

As shown in Tables 5 and 6, ignoring instructions was predicted by both entitlement and condition. Instructions were more likely to be ignored when the recipients of the instructions were more entitled and when punishment was unlikely. However, there was not a significant interaction between entitlement and condition (highly unlikely vs. highly likely) in our multiple regression (see Table 6). Although, as we had predicted, there was a weaker relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions when punishment for not following instructions was described as highly likely, the interaction effect was small and nonsignificant in this study. Entitled people were more likely to ignore instructions to the same degree regardless of the likelihood of punishment. Thus, this study does not provide evidence for the hypothesis that entitled people ignore instructions simply because they think they can avoid punishment.⁵

We expected a very high rate of instruction-following for all participants when they were told that they "were sure" they

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations and Their 95% Confidence Intervals, and Cronbach's α s (Shown in Boldface on the Diagonal) for Study 4.

Measure	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Entitlement	3.28 (1.25)	.91					
2. Condition	0.012 (1.00)	-.02 [-.12, .08]	–				
3. Ignore instructions	2.15 (1.18)	.25* [.15, .34]	.30* [.21, .39]	.70			
4. Punishment likelihood	4.88 (2.23)	.04 [-.06, .14]	-.65* [-.70, -.59]	-.32* [-.40, -.22]	–		
5. Happiness about escaping punishment	4.04 (1.74)	.21* [.12, .31]	.04 [-.06, .14]	.28* [.19, .37]	-.13* [-.22, -.03]	–	
6. How bad if punished	5.37 (1.13)	.04 [-.06, .13]	-.09 [-.18, .01]	-.32* [-.40, -.23]	.20* [.10, .29]	-.10* [-.20, -.00]	.77

Note. $N = 401$. Condition: 1 = unlikely, -1 = likely.

* $p < .05$.

Table 6. Coefficients From an OLS Multiple Regression Model Predicting the Likelihood of Ignoring Instructions From Entitlement (Centered), Condition (1 = Punishment Highly Unlikely, -1 = Punishment Highly Likely), and Their Interaction for Study 4.

	b (SE)	t	p	Partial r [95% CI]
Intercept	2.14 (.054)	39.4	.000	
Entitlement	0.238 (.044)	5.48	.000	.265 [.171, .354]
Condition	0.362 (.054)	6.65	.000	.317 [.226, .403]
Entitlement \times Condition	0.034 (.044)	0.784	.434	.039 [-.059, .137]

Note. $N = 401$. $R^2 = .155$. OLS = ordinary least squares.

Table 7. The Percentage of People Who Rejected Each Ultimatum Game Offer, the Point-Biserial Correlation Between Entitlement and Rejecting the Offer, and the Associated 95% Confidence Interval for Study 5.

Offer to Respondent	Percent Rejecting the Offer	Correlation With Entitlement
\$0	89.4	.14 [†] [-.00, .27]
\$1	62.8	.17* [.04, .31]
\$2	55.8	.16* [.02, .30]
\$3	42.7	.20* [.06, .33]
\$4	14.6	.14 [†] [-.00, .27]
\$5	1.5	.15* [.01, .29]

Note. * $p < .05$. [†] $p < .1$.

would get punished; we were thus initially surprised by the lack of an interaction. To understand why entitled individuals would risk punishment, we ran a follow-up study. In one scenario, participants were asked how likely they would be to ignore a landlord's instructions to have a carpet cleaned. If participants said that they would not follow the landlord's instructions even when this would mean losing their security deposit, we asked them to explain their answer. Instruction-ignoring individuals, especially those high in entitlement, expressed anger at the landlord for asking them to have the carpet cleaned. For

example, they commented, "I feel this requirement is above and beyond what should be expected and is part of the landlord's responsibility" and "I feel it would be unfair to ask me to clean a carpet that wasn't even dirty!" It seemed that people were willing to risk losing the security deposit in order to spite the landlord for having an unfair rule. In the next studies, we test whether this theme emerging from the open-ended responses might explain why entitled people do not follow instructions.

We also examined the correlations across conditions between entitlement and the other responses to the scenarios to try to understand better why entitled people failed to follow instructions (see Table 5). Entitled people were not significantly more likely to believe they would avoid punishment or to think it would be less bad if they were punished, providing evidence against these explanations. Entitled people were, however, significantly more likely to say they would be happy if they escaped punishment for not following instructions. Thus, perhaps entitled people do not want to follow instructions because they know from past experiences that they are likely to feel happy if they get away with ignoring unfair requests, similar to the "cheater's high" people feel when they get away with unethical behavior with no obvious victim (Ruedy, Moore, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2013). We will explore this more in the subsequent studies.

Study 5

In this study, we took a brief detour to learn whether entitled people are particularly sensitive to potentially unfair situations and willing to protest the unfairness even in ways that might hurt themselves. To do this, we asked participants to respond to ultimatum game offers. If entitled people were more likely to reject offers in the ultimatum game, this would shed light on the nature of psychological entitlement and might help us understand why entitled people do not follow instructions.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations and Their Associated 95% Confidence Intervals, and Cronbach's α (Shown in Boldface on the Diagonal) for Study 6.

Measure	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Entitlement	3.19 (1.18)	.91					
2. Ignore instructions	2.41 (1.20)	.21* [.07, .33]	.68				
3. Fairness of instructions	4.20 (0.96)	-.23* [-.35, -.09]	-.36* [-.47, -.23]	.66			
4. Punishment likelihood	5.41 (1.28)	-.04 [-.17, .10]	-.26* [-.38, -.12]	.20* [.07, .33]	–		
5. Happiness about escaping punishment	4.52 (1.72)	.22* [.08, .34]	.32* [.19, .44]	-.33* [-.45, -.21]	-.06 [-.20, .08]	–	
6. How bad if punished	5.03 (1.52)	-.03 [-.17, .11]	-.21* [-.34, -.08]	.16* [.03, .29]	.39* [.27, .50]	-.08 [-.21, .06]	–

Note. $N = 203$.

* $p < .05$.

Method

One hundred and ninety-nine MTurk users (103 men, 96 women, $M_{age} = 34.5$, $SD_{age} = 10.2$) completed this study for US\$0.30. They first completed the PES ($\alpha = .92$) and TIPI, as in previous studies. Then, participants were told to imagine that they were playing a game with another MTurk worker and that the other person was the “proposer” and they were the “responders.” Participants read the following: “The proposer has to come up with an offer to propose to you that states how much of \$10 to allocate to himself or herself and how much to give to you. You can either accept the offer, which means that you and your partner will both get the proposed amounts, or you can reject the offer, in which case neither of you gets paid anything.” Similar to what has been done in other research (e.g., Koenigs & Tranel, 2007), participants were then presented with a series of hypothetical offers, one at a time in random order, where the proposer suggested the following allocations: \$10/\$0, \$9/\$1, \$8/\$2, \$7/3, \$6/4, and \$5/5. Participants indicated whether they would accept or reject each offer.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 7, entitlement ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.37$) was significantly or marginally correlated with rejecting all offers. Entitled people, who believe they deserve more than others, are more likely to reject potentially unfair offers in an ultimatum game. They seemingly would rather take a loss themselves than agree to an offer that does not reflect their worth. Although we did not expect a correlation between entitlement and rejecting the fair offer of a \$5/\$5 split, perhaps entitled people think they are special and deserve more than half, such that even this offer feels unfair to them. However, because only three people rejected this offer, we do not want to make too much of this particular result.

The results of this study, which examined the relationship between entitlement and behavior in the ultimatum game for the first time, are consistent with the idea that entitled people do not follow instructions because they would rather take a loss themselves (i.e., get punished) than agree to something unfair.

Study 6

In this study, we examined whether entitled people are less likely to follow instructions because they are more likely to believe the instructions are unfair. We presented participants with scenarios in which they imagined being given instructions. We asked them to rate the instructions' fairness and how likely they would be to ignore them.

Method

Two hundred and three MTurk users (95 men, 108 women, $M_{age} = 35.8$, $SD_{age} = 11.1$) completed this study for US\$0.45. They first completed the PES and TIPI. Then, they read five scenarios similar to those in Study 4 but with no mention of the likelihood of punishment. After each scenario, participants rated how fair it is that they were asked to follow the particular set of instructions (e.g., a boss asking them to format a report in a certain way; 1 = *very unfair*, 7 = *very fair*) and how likely they would be to ignore the instructions (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). We calculated the mean fairness rating and the mean likelihood of ignoring instructions across the five scenarios. Then, as in Study 4, after reading all the scenarios, participants were asked to rate overall how likely the authority figures would be to enforce the punishments, how happy they would be if they escaped punishment for not following instructions, and how bad it would be for them if they were punished.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 8, entitlement was again correlated with ignoring instructions. Furthermore, entitled people were less likely to think the instructions they were given were fair and more likely to report that they would be happy if they got away with not following instructions. In a multiple regression, entitlement and the rating of how bad punishment would be were not significant predictors of ignoring instructions, but the fairness rating of the instructions, the anticipated happiness about escaping punishment, and the perceived likelihood of punishment were (see Table 9).⁶ Moreover, as predicted, the indirect effect from entitlement to ignoring instructions through fairness,

Table 9. Coefficients From an OLS Multiple Regression Model Predicting the Likelihood of Ignoring Instructions From Ratings of Entitlement, the Fairness of the Instructions, the Likelihood of Punishment, Anticipated Happiness About Escaping Punishment, and How Bad It Would Be if They Got Punished for Study 6.

	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial <i>r</i> [95% CI]
Intercept	3.74 (.596)	6.27	.000	
Entitlement	0.106 (.066)	1.60	.112	.113 [−.027, .248]
Fairness of instructions	−0.270 (.087)	−3.12	.002	−.217 [−.346, −.080]
Punishment likelihood	−0.148 (.065)	−2.30	.023	−.161 [−.294, −.022]
Happiness about escaping punishment	0.144 (.047)	3.06	.003	.213 [.076, .342]
How bad if punished	−0.075 (.054)	−1.39	.167	−.098 [−.234, .042]

Note. $N = 203$. $R^2 = .224$. OLS = ordinary least squares.

as calculated using the PROCESS bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 iterations (Hayes, 2013), was significant, 95% CI [.011, .116]. This provides some evidence that the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions may be explained by fairness perceptions. And consistent with Study 4, the indirect effect through happiness about escaping punishment was significant as well, 95% CI [.012, .107]. Thus, although this cross-sectional study cannot establish causality, this pattern of results is consistent with the suggestion that entitled people fail to follow instructions because they are more likely to think the instructions are unfair and would be happier if they could get away with not following them.

General Discussion

As shown in our studies, more entitled people are less likely to follow instructions. They are more likely to ignore instructions from the researcher (Pilot Study, Study 1, and Study 3) and to say they will ignore instructions from others in hypothetical scenarios (Studies 2, 4, and 6). Our studies suggest that the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions may be due to entitled individuals' greater likelihood of regarding instructions as an unfair imposition on them. It seems that entitled individuals would rather incur a personal cost than agree to something unfair (Studies 5 and 6), and they would be happy to escape punishment for not following instructions (Studies 4 and 6).

We did not find evidence that entitled people fail to follow instructions because they want to avoid doing something inconvenient, because they do not like being controlled, or because they think they can avoid punishment. However, it is still possible that these factors contribute to entitled individuals' disinclination to follow instructions. Studies 2–4 were underpowered to detect an average-sized interaction in our field (Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pierce, 2005) and may not have manipulated the constructs in the best way. Future research should further explore why entitled people fail to follow instructions.

Entitlement, compared to other individual difference constructs, may be particularly relevant to ignoring instructions because entitled people are unlikely to want to do something that is worse than what they believe they deserve (such as follow instructions), and entitled individuals are especially likely

to believe they are being treated unfairly (Harvey et al., 2014; McCullough et al., 2003). Nonetheless, future research should examine the specificity of our results to entitlement. We did not find evidence that the Big 5 traits could account for the relationship between entitlement and ignoring instructions, but it is possible that other individual differences correlated with entitlement might do so. Another artifactual explanation might also be considered—perhaps lower concerns about social desirability predict both more endorsement of psychological entitlement and more ignoring of instructions—but the limited empirical evidence indicates that any relationship between PES scores and social desirability is weak to nonexistent (e.g., Campbell et al., 2004; Grubbs, Exline, & Twenge, 2014) and thus not likely a full explanation for why entitled people ignore instructions.

We hoped to learn from this series of studies how entitled individuals might be made to follow instructions to the same degree as less entitled people. Organizations and societies run more smoothly when people are willing to follow instructions, and entitled people themselves could also benefit from following instructions, as this would help them to avoid punishments. Indeed, when entitled people's failure to follow instructions results in their being punished, they are likely to perceive the punishment as unjust suffering, which in turn may intensify their sense of entitlement to behave selfishly and ignore inconvenient social demands in the future (Zitek et al., 2010; see also Grubbs & Exline, 2016). Thus, it is plausible that increasing entitled people's compliance with instructions might actually help to stem a cycle that feeds their entitled attitudes and behaviors.

Although we were not able to eliminate the relationship between entitlement and failure to follow instructions in our studies, the results of Study 6 suggest that making instructions seem fairer may encourage entitled individuals to follow them. Unfortunately, this may be difficult to accomplish, insofar as all of the instructions/rules described in the scenarios were things that people are regularly asked to do in everyday life (e.g., how to format a report, where to cross the road), yet the entitled individuals still thought them unfair. Future research should identify conditions under which entitled individuals might regard instructions as fair. One possibility is to alter whom the instructions come from. Entitled people do not like out-group members (Anastasio & Rose, 2014); if the

instructions come from an in-group member such as a peer instead of from an authority figure, perhaps entitled individuals would be more likely to view the instructions as fair and therefore follow them. Identifying a way to increase entitled people's instruction-following could have important practical implications in schools, the workplace, and anywhere else where we count on people to follow instructions.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. We set an a priori sample size of 200 for our MTurk studies with one condition and either 300 or 400 for our MTurk studies with two conditions. The final sample size for each study varied slightly from these numbers depending on the number of completed survey responses we received. As mentioned in the General Discussion, our studies were likely underpowered to detect interactions (see Mackinnon, 2013).
2. When participants partially followed an instruction (e.g., they included a semicolon but no space in between words), they received a .5.
3. See the Supplemental Materials for a reanalysis of the data from Studies 1 and 3 using a negative binomial regression to account for the nonnormal residuals.
4. See the Supplemental Materials for the TIPI results from all studies.
5. See the Supplemental Materials for the results with exclusions based on incorrect responses to the manipulation check.
6. One person in this study skipped the punishment likelihood question. The mean score on this question was inputted for this participant to avoid having to exclude him from the regression analysis. The results were the same regardless of whether this data point was included or excluded.

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