

Altruism towards strangers in need: costly signaling in an industrial society

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Abstract

In the present study, the costly signaling theory (CST) is used to examine the effect of an offer of charity on social recognition. On behalf of a charitable organization, 186 students enrolled in 16 different courses were asked to offer support to unfamiliar persons in need. In accordance with our predictions, the results show that significantly more subjects are willing to give assistance if they make charity offers in the presence of their group members than when the offers are made in secret. In accordance with CST—but not with the prevailing explanations in social psychology—the likelihood of charity service was strongly influenced by the expected cost of altruistic behavior. Publicly demonstrated altruistic intentions yielded long-term benefits: Subjects who were willing to participate in a particular charity activity gained significantly higher sociometry scores (as a sign of social recognition) than did others. The cost of volunteerism correlated with social recognition in the case of a charity act judged as the most expensive (giving assistance to mentally retarded children), but not for the other categories of charity offer. Our results suggest that public generosity towards strangers as a costly signal may convey reliable information about subjects' personality traits, such as cooperativeness, but our data do not support the hypothesis that the signaling mechanism is related to sexual selection and mate choice.

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1. Introduction

Why do people help others who are unfamiliar to them and cannot be expected to return the favor? Generosity seems to be a cross-culturally ubiquitous feature of life. It is well documented that humans are often altruistic toward unrelated individuals, even strangers. Several evolutionary explanations have been provided for explaining generous acts towards non-kin: indirect reciprocity (Alexander, 1987; Milinski, Semmann, Bakker, & Krambeck, 2001), strong reciprocity (Bowles & Gintis, 2004; Fehr, Fischbacher, & Gächter, 2002), reputation-building (Bereczkei, Birkas, & Kerekes, 2007; Milinski, Semmann, & Krambeck, 2000; Semmann, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2005), competitive altruism (Barclay, 2004; Hardy & Vugt, 2006), altruistic punishment, etc. (Bernhard, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2006;

Boyd, Gintis, Bowles, & Richerson, 2003). In the light of these theories, generosity does not seem to be an unconditional motive. Instead, it appears to be strategic: the actual situation in which an altruistic act occurs and the personality of both donor and recipient deeply influence behavioral output (Smith & Bliege Bird, 2000, 2005).

1.1. Costly signaling theory

Costly signaling theory (CST) states that generosity is one means by which individuals gain social recognition and preferential treatment in their group and thereby gain reproductive benefits in the long run (Gurven, Allen-Arave, Hill, & Hurtado, 2000; Bliege Bird & Hawkes, 2002; Smith & Bliege Bird, 2000, 2005; Sosis, 2000). Individuals who engage in altruistic acts serve their own interests by reliably demonstrating qualities that underlie the altruistic act, such as resource control, trustworthiness, social skills, etc. For the signal to be reliable, it should be costly in terms of energy, time expenditure, and potential risk (Hawkes & Bliege Bird, 2000; Smith, 2000). Public

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generosity—providing collective goods, charity, donation, etc.—implies especially tremendous costs in terms of physical activity, time, money, etc. This kind of helping behavior is considered an indiscriminate or unconditional altruistic act because it is usually directed to strangers who have no chance of returning the favor.

Public generosity as a honest signal may benefit both signaler and observers. The payoff to the altruist comes from being favored by the others as a reliable partner in cooperative relationships and chosen as ally, mate, or competitor (Gurven et al., 2000). Studies with experimental games have revealed that donations to strangers deeply influence the social attitudes of group members toward the altruist (Milinski et al., 2000; Semmann et al., 2005). The payoff to the observer comes from the usefulness of the information inferred from the altruistic act as a signal. The observer can evaluate the signaler's qualities that would be beneficial in future social interactions in the group, involving friendship, alliance, and mating. In this respect, costly signaling may be regarded as a kind of reputation-gaining strategy. The difference is that CST specifies mechanisms leading to the benefits (social recognition, prestige, preferential treatment) that individuals gain within their groups. The signaling mechanism provides information about the relevant underlying qualities of the altruist (signaler). This information could then favorably alter the behavior of other group members towards the altruist (Smith & Bliege Bird, 2005).

CST has been tested in pre-industrial societies: for example, among the Ache of Paraguay (Gurven et al., 2000), in the Ifaluk society (Sosis, 2000), and in the community of the Conambe (Ecuadorian Amazon) (Patton, 2005). Turtle hunting and the associated public feasting among the Meriam of Torres Strait, Australia, is one of the best documented forms of public generosity (Bliege Bird & Bird, 1997; Smith & Bliege Bird, 2000, 2005; Smith, Bliege Bird, & Bird, 2003). Although successful male turtle hunters receive no recompense, not even portions of their catch in the subsequent feast, they gain net benefit from their risky endeavor, which is realized through multiple avenues (Gurven, 2004). Those who lead turtle hunts appear to be signaling leadership skills, specialized knowledge and generosity in supplying collective goods, as well as their good physical condition and willingness to take risks, which are highly valued traits in this community. As a possible result, they were found to gain social recognition, have an earlier onset of reproduction, achieve higher age-specific reproductive success, and gain highly ranked mates.

The solid empirical foundation of CST comes from the preindustrial societies. Although there have been several investigations on costly signaling applications in contemporary urban communities (Farthing, 2005; Goldberg, 1995; Lyons, 2005), well-controlled empirical studies have not yet been conducted in modern industrial

societies. This failure is especially pressing, if a crucial difference between technically less and more advanced societies is taken into consideration. Studies in pre-industrial societies have referred to circumstances where both signaler and observer lived in the same group and both generosity and preferential treatment toward altruists occurred inside the group. However, it is well documented that humans are often altruistic to strangers, especially in industrial societies, for example, in donating to charities.

1.2. *Charity service and social recognition*

Our research is based on a realistic (life-like) situation in which subjects have an opportunity to decide freely whether they wish to help unfamiliar people (Bereczkei et al., 2007). A representative of a charity organization requested students in a seminar course to support unfamiliar people in need (alone, elderly, homeless, and mentally retarded people). In one setting, students could make their offers publicly in the presence of their group, while in another setting, the offers were concealed, so the others in the group were not aware of them. We expected that both altruistic behavior and the subsequent change in social recognition would differ as a function of these circumstances, as follows.

Prediction 1. People who can make their charity offers in the presence of group members are more likely to offer support to strangers than those whose intention to provide assistance remains concealed from the group.

Prediction 2. Subjects who make their charity offers to the needy in the presence of and with the knowledge of their group members should gain social recognition (reputation, prestige, and popularity) within the group.

1.3. *Costs for helping*

However, these predicted relationships between altruistic acts and social recognition can be interpreted by certain non-evolutionary theories, especially social-psychological explanations. Although the presence of others can inhibit people from responding to an emergency (Latané & Darley, 1970), in general, people are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior when they are observed by others (Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995). The presence of others has long been known to stimulate altruism, generosity, and cooperation (Berkowitz, 1972; Eisenberg-Berg, 1979; Hofman, McCabe, Shachat, & Smith, 1994; Hogg & Vaughan, 2005; Jerdee & Rosen, 1974). Studies in evolutionary psychology have also found that an increase in the visibility and decrease in the anonymity of individuals enhances their cooperation in social dilemmas (Haley & Fessler, 2005; Kurzban, DeScioli, & O'Brien, 2007). From this perspective, the visibility of potential altruists can be, in itself, responsible for the higher frequency of a charity offer without the need to assume altruistic signaling and reputation-gaining strategies.

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