



Cheapened altruism: Discounting personally affected prosocial actors

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ABSTRACT

Are charitable donors always perceived as charitable? Three studies suggest that although having a personal connection to a cause motivates much charitable giving, donors who have been personally affected by the target cause are given less “credit” for their donations, i.e., are perceived as less intrinsically charitable. These donors are perceived as having selfish motivations even when they have nothing economic or social to gain from the donation. More specifically, personally-affected donors are perceived as driven by *emotional selfishness*, or a desire to improve their own hedonic state rather a desire to improve the welfare of others, which lessens the charitable credit that they receive. In addition, although donors who have been personally affected by the target cause are seen as less charitable, they are perceived more favorably in other ways (e.g., more loyal).

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Introduction

Imagine two donors to a leukemia charity. The first has a sibling with leukemia and the second does not. Who is more charitable? Because the first may be genetically predisposed to leukemia, she can potentially benefit from her donation. Therefore, one can logically conclude that the second donor is more charitable.

Now imagine that the first donor has a friend who currently suffers from leukemia and the second donor does not. Who is more charitable? In this case, the first donor may still benefit if her friend feels indebted and reciprocates the kind action (Trivers, 1971). Therefore, it is likewise logical to conclude that the second donor is more charitable.

Now imagine that the first donor lost her best friend to leukemia, and the second donor has not known anyone with leukemia. Who is more charitable? Neither donor will benefit by supporting this cause. But the first has been personally affected by the cause.

This paper explores how donors’ personal connections to a cause influence perceptions of their charitable traits and behavior. We use the term *charitable credit* to refer to the perception that a donor is a benevolent person whose prosocial behavior is untainted by self-interest. When donors get credit is an important question because research has shown that people perceived as charitable enjoy higher status (Flynn, 2003; Hardy & Van Vugt,

2006) and more respect (Price, 2006), and that expectations of social rewards can motivate prosocial actors (Grant & Gino, 2010; Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). It is therefore critical to investigate when and why credit is granted.

We examine this question in the context of donors’ personal connections to the target cause. Personal connections to causes are strongly related to charitable giving (Small & Simonsohn, 2008). Although a personal connection is often confounded with direct self-interest, Small and Simonsohn (2008) found an effect on giving even without any possible economic or social gain. Specifically, people who know someone who suffered from a particular misfortune are more caring towards other victims of the same misfortune even when they get nothing in return.

We theorize that a personal connection to a charitable cause cheapens the prosocial act in the eyes of others, thus diminishing the actor’s image of benevolence. Importantly, such acts are cheapened even in the absence of potential economic or social gain. Logically, it makes sense to grant less credit when a donor expects such a gain. For instance, in the context of a donor’s relationship with a victim, a donor to a leukemia charity who has a family history of leukemia may indeed be incentivized to give. A friend of a woman with leukemia might also gain from donating if her friend feels indebted to reciprocate. In these cases, observers may reasonably perceive a selfish motivation that cheapens such helpers’ generous actions. In contrast, friends of deceased victims do not directly benefit by supporting the cause that claimed their friend’s life yet their charitable choices are tied selectively to their personal experience.

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In sum, we predict that donors who have been personally affected by a cause are given less credit for their donations. In other words, the very thing that empirically increases charitable giving nevertheless makes donors appear less charitable.

Background

Behavioral decision research and related disciplines have explored a wide variety of determinants of charitable giving. Research has focused on characteristics of the cause description (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Verrochi, 2009) and on characteristics of successful donation request strategies (Briers, Pandelaere, & Warlop, 2007; Liu & Aaker, 2008; Shang & Croson, 2006). Other research has sought to understand the fundamental motives driving charitable giving. Psychologists and economists have long debated whether prosocial behavior is ever caused by pure altruism or whether such behavior, however altruistic in appearance, can be explained by self-interest. One alternative explanation for altruistic-appearing behavior is that the actors are benefiting in some *emotionally selfish*, rather than economically or socially selfish way (Andreoni, 1990; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984). Specifically, it has been argued people are motivated to relieve their own sadness upon witnessing suffering rather than to relieve victim's suffering (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973) and that people experience a "warm glow" from the act of helping others (Andreoni, 1990). On the other hand, there is also evidence that empathy can cause people to want to help others without concern for potential self-benefit (Batson, 1991).

In spite of this ongoing interest, almost no work has explored folk psychological beliefs about those motivations. In other words, regardless of whether prosocial actors are actually motivated by altruism or self-interest, when do others think they are? This paper explores this question in the context of evaluating donors to a charity who have been personally affected by the target cause.

Evaluating prosocial actors

The limited research on trait perceptions of prosocial actors focuses on favor-recipients' perceptions of their favor-givers. This research finds that the recipients are sensitive to the favor-givers' motives, and such perceptions predict their propensity to reciprocate (Ames, Flynn, & Weber, 2004; Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Jones, 1964; Schopler & Thompson, 1968). For example, Ames et al. (2004) found that recipients are more inclined toward future interaction and reciprocation when they perceive that a favor was motivated by positive feelings about them than when they perceive that the favor was motivated by the favor-giver's role or a cost-benefit analysis. More generally, people tend to be astute detectors of ulterior motivation for good deeds and thus may be especially sensitive to signals of selfishness (Fein, 1996; Miller, 1999; Vonk, 1998).

Although the findings on favor-giving are informative, they may not generalize to other prosocial acts. Inferences about motives are important in the context of favor-giving because they provide the favor-recipients with information about their underlying relationship with the favor-giver—information that can help them interact with the favor-givers in the future. In contrast, for many prosocial acts, such as charitable giving, the recipients are strangers or other abstract entities. There is no expectation of future interaction and no opportunity to reciprocate. Observers are likely judging the character of the actor rather than something about their relationship to them.

We propose that in the context of charitable donations, observers perceive donors who have been personally affected by the target cause as less benevolent. Even in the absence of potential economic or social gain, people infer that these donors had greater selfish motivations compared with donors who have not been personally affected.

Why are they viewed as more selfish? We expect that people hold a theory that *emotional selfishness* can motivate prosocial behavior and that this is the motive that drives friends of victims to support causes that benefit victims of the same misfortune suffered by their friend. This theory is akin to theories of actual motivation for prosocial behavior. Cialdini and Kenrick's negative-state-relief model argues that seemingly altruistic behavior can be attributed to a motivation to relieve the self-suffering inherent in witnessing others' suffering (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976). Batson and colleagues, who do assert that a pure altruistic motive exists, argue that there is a qualitatively distinct vicarious emotion, personal distress, which results in behavior directed toward reducing that distress (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). In our context, we define perceived emotional selfishness as a belief that donors are motivated to improve their own emotional state as opposed to improving the welfare of others in need. Even though there is no potential economic or social gain, we predict that friends of deceased victims are nonetheless perceived as selfishly motivated because people believe that "true" charity is about caring for others, and that friends of victims instead are motivated by emotional selfishness. This selfish signal will lessen the charitable credit they would otherwise be given.

Finally, we theorize that giving a donor charitable credit is not the same as viewing that donor more positively in general. While people may perceive personally affected donors who have been personally affected by the target cause as less charitable compared with donors who have not, people may nonetheless view the former more positively on other dimensions.

In sum, we theorize that donors who have been personally affected by a cause signal selfish motivation, even in the absence of potential economic or social gain, and people give them less charitable credit as a result. In the subsequent section, we describe three experiments that tested our predictions.

Overview of studies

We tested our hypotheses by examining perceptions of donors to a charity, some of whom lost a friend to the misfortune supported by the charity ("friends of victims"). We use this particular operationalization of a personal connection because, unlike relatives, friends of victims cannot infer a genetic predisposition to the disease, which would make the donation potentially personally beneficial. Moreover, we use deceased friends so that friends of victims cannot help their own friend by donating. In other words, many personal connections to causes are confounded by a possible immediate or future gain for the donor. Examining friends of deceased victims is a conservative test because such donors have been personally affected by the cause yet can help only strangers.

Study 1 tested the first hypothesis that compared with donors who have not known any victims, friends of victims who donate to the cause that claimed their friend's life are given less charitable credit for their donations. Study 2 directly tested the mediating role of perceived selfish motivation on charitable credit. In addition, Study 2 sought to distinguish charitable credit from other positive trait perceptions. Study 3 further examines this mechanism and shows that friends of victims are perceived as more *emotionally* selfish, or as acting prosocially to relieve the guilt they feel for their friend's death. Together, the studies shed light on the psychological mechanisms that drive evaluations of charitable donors.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants read about a donor to a leukemia charity who either lost a friend to the disease or has not known any victims of the disease. Participants evaluated the donor's charitable traits and made predictions about the donor's likelihood to engage in future prosocial behaviors in other domains.

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