



# What drives the gender gap in charitable giving? Lower empathy leads men to give less to poverty relief



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 September 2013

Revised 2 October 2014

Accepted 30 December 2014

Available online 12 January 2015

### Keywords:

Charitable giving

Gender

Empathy

Prosocial behavior

## ABSTRACT

We draw upon past research on gender and prosocial emotions in hypothesizing that empathy can help explain the gender gap in charitable giving. In a nationally representative survey, we found that men reported less willingness to give money or volunteer time to a poverty relief organization, gaps that were mediated by men's lower reported feelings of empathy toward others. We also experimentally tested how effective a variety of different ways of framing poverty relief were for promoting giving. Framing poverty as an issue that negatively affects all Americans increased men's willingness to donate to the cause, eliminating the gender gap. Mediation analysis revealed that this "aligned self-interest" framing worked by increasing men's reported poverty concern, not by changing their understanding of the causes of poverty. Thus, while men were generally less motivated by empathy, they responded to a framing that recast charitable giving as consistent with their self-interest. Exposure to the same framing, however, led women to report lower willingness to volunteer time for poverty relief, suggesting that framing giving as consistent with self-interest may discourage those who give because of an empathic response to poverty.

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## 1. Introduction

The United States is unique among developed, Western democracies for maintaining a relatively small welfare state and offering relatively limited public assistance to the poor (Lipset, 1996; Smeeding, 2008). Consequently, the U.S. is also distinct for its heavy reliance on non-governmental organizations (e.g., churches, secular charities) for the funding and delivery of relief services to the poor (Katz, 2001). As a result, the well-being and life chances of the American poor are more influenced by contributions to antipoverty organizations than in other advanced democracies. Because of this reliance on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the provision of assistance to the poor, it is especially important to develop a strong understanding of the factors that elicit concern and support among Americans for the poor and the NGOs that provide for them. In contrast to this, past research on Americans' poverty concern has overwhelmingly focused on support for governmental policy, while little research examines the factors influencing support for non-governmental poverty relief (Gilens, 2000; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). However, such an understanding is essential if poverty relief is to be sustained, especially during difficult economic periods when demand for relief increases as contributions decline (Boris et al., 2010).

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Among the most reliable findings in research on the determinants of Americans' charitable giving and voluntarism is the tendency for men to give less than women (Einolf, 2011; Kamas et al., 2008; Mesch et al., 2006, 2011; Piper and Schnepf, 2008). Research finds that women are specifically more likely to be donors to causes that benefit the poor, such as human services organizations, and some evidence suggests that this pattern extends to the specific domain of poverty relief (Marx, 2000; Regnerus et al., 1998). One implication of the gender difference in charitable giving is that women tend to carry a disproportionate burden in the provision of most charitably-funded public goods in the U.S. But why is it that men give to such causes at lower levels? And how might this gap be reduced?

In seeking to explain and address the gender gap in charitable assistance we draw upon a burgeoning line of research from social psychology on gender and the emotional underpinnings of generosity. A variety of recent studies have shown consistent gender differences in the likelihood of experiencing empathy and compassion in response to the suffering of others (Rueckert and Naybar, 2008). Research finds that these prosocial emotions are primary motivators of helping behavior toward needy others, both in general (Dovidio et al., 2006) and in particular for poverty-related charitable giving (Slovic, 2010). Here we hypothesize that gender differences in the likelihood of responding empathetically to others' distress can help explain the gender gap in charitable giving, and giving to antipoverty efforts in particular. Further, knowledge of these underlying processes may help inform effective interventions to promote giving among men.

To this end, we investigate a variety of ways in which poverty relief could be framed that might increase men's poverty concern and willingness to give. Theory and research from linguistics, psychology, and political science show that message framing can have large impacts on individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Lakoff, 1996; Rothman and Salovey, 1997). We extend this research by investigating what sorts of messages might lead men to be more concerned about poverty and want to give at higher levels to poverty relief. We conducted a survey-embedded experiment on a nationally representative sample of Americans. Respondents were surveyed for their chronic levels of empathic concern before being presented with one of several different messages regarding poverty and poverty relief organizations. We then assessed the effects of these different messages on respondents' reported poverty concern and willingness to donate money and time to a fictitious poverty-relief organization. The messages we tested were culled from past research in sociology and social psychology. Most relevant to our research questions, we test the possibility that a message designed to foster a sense that poverty negatively affects everyone might lead respondents to view poverty relief as in line with their self-interest, a framing that could be uniquely effective among men, who we predict are less likely to give on the basis of a spontaneous empathic response to poverty.

Our research makes a variety of contributions to the literatures on poverty, charitable giving, and gender. First, we seek to establish that the previously documented gender gap in charitable giving also obtains for the willingness to give to poverty-related charities. Second, we test whether lower levels of empathy among men can account for this gender gap. Third, we test the effectiveness of reframing the poverty issue as a social problem that has negative effects for all Americans, an intervention we argue is uniquely likely to increase men's poverty concern and charitable giving. In the sections that follow, we review two relevant background literatures, one on factors influencing charitable giving and poverty concern, the other on the gender gap in compassion and generosity. We then present the results of a survey-based experiment designed to test our claims.

## 2. Past research

### 2.1. Gender and charitable giving

Among the most consistent demographic predictors of charitable giving is gender. Research on gender differences in charitable giving finds that women are more likely to donate money and volunteer time to charitable organizations than men (Einolf, 2011; Kamas et al., 2008; Mesch et al., 2006, 2011; Piper and Schnepf, 2008; Rooney et al., 2005; Simmons and Emanuele, 2007; Leslie et al., 2013). Men and women also donate differently, with women and men differing in their preferences for different causes. For example, studies find that women are more likely to give to education related causes and health care organizations (Einolf, 2011; Mesch et al., 2011; Piper and Schnepf, 2008). Further, Marx (2000) finds that women are almost twice as likely as men to give to charities focused on human services, a category that includes child care centers, legal aid for the poor, foster care, homeless services, food assistance, emergency relief, housing or shelter, welfare agencies and various other causes and organizations with a focus on poverty. Consistent with these results, at least one study finds that women give at higher levels to poverty-related charities (Regnerus et al., 1998). By contrast, men's charitable giving and volunteering has a very different complexion, with men giving at higher levels to sports, adult recreation, veterans', and civil rights organizations (Einolf, 2011).

Despite the relatively large body of work documenting gender differences in charitable giving, the reasons for these differences are poorly understood (Mesch et al., 2011). Of note, recent research highlights that giving to poverty-related causes may be driven more by emotion-laden intuition than rational calculation. For example, research on the "identified victim effect" (Small and Lowenstein, 2003) shows that people make greater charitable contributions when confronted with a single individual in need than with statistical accounts of large numbers of needy people, a finding that highlights the likely importance of empathy in charitable giving (Small et al., 2007; c.f., Ein-Gar and Levontin, 2013). In turn, there is reason to expect that women are driven more by prosocial emotions like empathy and compassion, while men's giving may be more calculated. Preliminary evidence suggests that women are more likely to donate anonymously and more likely to feel a

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