



Empathy as added value in predicting donation behavior[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Past behavior and socio-demographics represent traditional predictors of charitable giving. The present study examines, in a real fundraising setting, whether measures of empathy (i.e., empathic concern and personal distress) can improve these predictions. The findings confirm the relevance of traditional predictor sets and the added value of including measures of empathy. Empathic concern positively affects the donation decision. In addition, empathy negatively affects the donor's generosity toward one charity. However, for people with high empathic concern, considering only generosity toward one charity could be misleading because such people are more likely to donate to different charities. This result has implications for overall generosity. Therefore, a clear distinction between both personality traits is necessary.

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1. Introduction

Understanding charitable giving is a crucial element in attracting and retaining private donors, and traditional predictors rely on prior behavior and socio-demographics. The former captures recency, frequency, and monetary value (i.e., RFM variables), whereas the latter reflect features such as income, age and gender. Prior studies also regularly consider intentions as good indicators of consumer behavior.

This study examines whether and how psychological measures of empathy might improve traditional models of charitable giving. Using hierarchical multiple regression analysis, this study investigates the incremental value of including measures of empathy together with traditional predictor sets, with a focus on empathic concern and personal distress as personality traits. According to Davis (1983a), both constructs involve emotional dimensions of empathy and reflect distinctive feelings toward unfortunate others or the self, in that empathic concern is other oriented, and personal distress is self-oriented.

Whereas previous research proposes empathy to explain helping behavior, this study notes the predictive power of both personality measures on top of past behavior, intentions, and socio-demographics. In particular, this investigation considers two distinctive aspects of charitable giving: the decision to contribute and the extent of generosity (i.e., donation amount, assuming a donation). As another important

contribution, for both dimensions, this article reports the relevance of the predictor sets in a real charitable fundraising setting. A first study uses the database of a European charity to calculate RFM variables and data augmentation through questionnaires to collect information about the other predictor sets. With transactional data about responses to charitable fundraising appeals, the real-life study considers the dependent measure of donation behavior toward one charity. Therefore, the study tests both models of donation decision and generosity for a single charity. The results demonstrate the added value of psychological measures of empathy; the two emotional dimensions of empathy have differential influences on the decision to donate and generosity. Because of an unexpected result, a second study investigates reported donation behavior across multiple charities, to explore whether empathic concern relates differently to generosity toward one versus multiple charities. Considering only generosity toward one charity can produce incorrect interpretations; assessments should include donation behavior across different charities.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section provides the theoretical background regarding traditional predictor sets of charitable giving, followed by an elaboration of the role of empathy in helping behaviors, which leads to the research question and hypotheses. Next, this paper presents the methodology for a first study in cooperation with a European charity, which tests the research question and predictions derived from the theoretical background in a real-life setting. Although the first study measures charitable giving in a real-life setting, this approach means the study ignores donation behavior toward other charities. Therefore, the next section reports the methodology for a second data collection and investigation of the relationship of empathy with reported donation behavior across all possible different charities. After the presentation of the results from both studies, this

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paper concludes with a discussion of the results, suggestions for further research, and implications for fundraising management.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Charitable giving

Recent interest in understanding helping or charitable behavior continues to grow. Existing studies capture a variety of helping behavior, such as volunteering, donating blood, or monetary contributions. However, most research investigates helping in a laboratory setting by measuring intentions to help. Some academics (e.g., List, 2008) stress the growing importance of field studies, because of the possible discrepancy between a laboratory setting and a field situation, yet few studies investigate monetary donation behavior in real life. In this context, direct mail is one of the most important instruments for fundraising and the most successful medium for individual donations (Direct Marketing Association, 2010). For monetary gifts and helping in general, two decisions are important to potential donors. On the one hand, the potential donor must decide to help or not to help. On the other hand, after deciding to help, the donor decides how much to help. Investigations of helping behavior often neglect this latter aspect. Therefore, this study investigates the decision to donate money as well as the generosity of the donor in a real-life direct mail fundraising setting.

2.2. Traditional predictors of charitable giving

Direct marketing and direct mail fundraising generally use past response behavior as the best predictor of future responses. Most conceptualizations of past donation behavior rely on recency, frequency, and monetary (RFM) value. In a charitable context, recency involves the number of days since the last donation; frequency usually reflects the number of donations over a set period of time; and monetary value is the total amount donated by a particular donor (Bitran and Mondschein, 1996). Prior studies show that past donation behavior drives both donation decision and generosity (e.g., Bult et al., 1997; Jonker et al., 2004). From a practical point of view, the computation of RFM variables is relatively easy, because the charity stores the information in its database and does not need to perform an additional data collection.

In addition to past behavior, this study investigates the usefulness of donation intentions. Using the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), De Cannière et al. (2009) report that behavioral intentions predict purchase behavior, even in combination with actual past behavior. Although these authors investigate purchase behavior rather than charitable giving, they conclude that intentions capture unique variance in purchase decisions that past behavior does not. Accordingly, the present study investigates if intentions contribute to explaining charitable giving, beyond real-life past behavior.

Despite overwhelming evidence that RFM variables are important predictors, different studies also investigate other predictors, most of which, such as socio-demographic variables, require additional data collections. In line with prior research findings, this study expects that age positively affects charitable giving (e.g., Van Slyke and Brooks, 2005). This prediction also matches current practices in fundraising; charities target older people. Starting with the integrated theory of volunteer work (Wilson and Musick, 1997).

Bekkers (2006) also finds that financial capital promotes traditional philanthropy (i.e., monetary donations), such that the availability of resources in the form of financial capital reduces the cost of charitable giving. For people with higher incomes, a \$100 donation to a charitable organization is less costly than for those earning lower incomes, for example. Therefore, income should be an important driver of generosity. Considering Pessemier et al.'s (1977) finding that women are more willing than men to donate body parts, gender might be relevant as well.

Finally, this study examines whether and how measures of empathy might improve traditional models.

Research Question 1: To what extent are the traditional predictor sets of past behavior, intentions, and socio-demographics important for predicting charitable giving in a direct mail fundraising setting, and can the inclusion of empathy-related personality measures improve these models?

2.3. Empathy as a predictor of charitable giving

In the past two decades, the number of studies that propose empathy as an explanation for prosocial behavior grows substantially. In general, these studies acknowledge the multidimensional nature of empathy, with cognitive and affective dimensions (e.g., Strayer, 1987), as well as the diversity of possible emotional responses to a distressed target (e.g., Eisenberg and Fabes, 1990). One research stream investigates empathy as a mental state and manipulates empathy generation (e.g., Batson, 1991). These studies examine how reported mental states, including sympathy and personal distress, induce helping behavior. In contrast to this mental state approach, because most people demonstrate a predominant manner when reacting to someone in need, a second research stream defines empathy as a personality trait and investigates how individual differences in empathy affect helping behavior (e.g., Davis, 1983b). A well-known measurement of empathy is the interpersonal reactivity index (Davis, 1983a), which demonstrates considerable convergent and discriminant validity in various studies (Davis, 1994). More than 800 studies refer to this measure. Accordingly, the current study also investigates empathy as a personality trait according to the interpersonal reactivity index (Davis, 1983a) and focuses on the affective dimension. According to Davis (1983a), this affective dimension consists of two negative emotional components. Empathic concern refers to feelings of sympathy and compassion for distressed others and is other rather than self-oriented (Davis, 1994). Personal distress is another affective response the observer experiences, though in the form of self-oriented feelings of personal anxiety, discomfort, and unease in tense interpersonal settings in response to unfortunate others.

Consistent with this view, the empathy–altruism hypothesis addresses the distinction between empathic concern and personal distress and differentiates altruistically versus egoistically motivated behavior (e.g., Batson, 1991). This hypothesis further states that a confrontation with others in need may increase levels of empathic concern or personal distress. People who feel empathic concern focus on the person in need, with a selfless and altruistic motivation to reduce his or her distress. In contrast, when people experience personal distress, attention focuses on the self, which leads to an egoistic helping motivation to reduce that distress. Both types of motivations likely stimulate helping behaviors (Bendapudi et al., 1996).

Most prior empathy studies investigate various volunteering and helping behaviors through self-reported questionnaires or laboratory studies, leading to a lack of research on the relationship between empathy and donations in a real fundraising setting. Therefore, this study explores the relevance of personality measures of empathy for predicting monetary contributions, based on direct mail fundraising campaigns sent to active donors. With respect to the decision to help, considerable evidence shows that heightened feelings of empathic concern lead people to help a regrettable other. For example, Davis (1983b) demonstrates that higher empathic concern scores align with a greater tendency to contribute time or money. People with higher empathic concern thus decide to help to reduce the stress of regrettable others.

This view is in accordance with altruistically motivated helping, because the motivation is directed toward the goal of increasing the other's welfare. Less research notes the relationship between personal distress and helping (e.g., Unger and Thumhuri, 1997). Batson (1991) finds that feelings of personal distress lead to helping only if avoiding the provision of help is difficult. Because traditional philanthropy

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