



## Are nurses more altruistic than real estate brokers?

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### ABSTRACT

We report results from a dictator game experiment with nurse students and real estate broker students as dictators, and Amnesty International as the recipient. Although brokers contributed substantial amounts, nurses contributed significantly more, on average 76% of their endowment. In a second part, subjects chose between a certain repetition of the experiment and a 50–50 chance of costly exit. About one third of the brokers and half of the nurses chose the exit option. While generosity was indeed higher among nurses, even when taking exits into account, the difference cannot readily be attributed to different degrees of altruism.

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## 1. Introduction

There seems to be a myth that people holding certain occupations, such as nurses, are generally more caring, generous or altruistic than others. As wonderfully represented by the Hollywood character Gordon Gekko in his famous statement *greed is good*,<sup>2</sup> certain other occupations – such as financial market traders – seem, on the other hand, to be associated with egoism. In the present paper, we explore this myth by comparing the generosity of two student groups – nurse students and real estate broker students (henceforth, *nurses* and *brokers*) in an economic experiment. The main questions we address are the following: Are nurses more generous than brokers? If so, can this be attributed to a higher degree of altruism, the way this concept has been defined in the economics literature?

We approach these issues by means of a double-blind dictator game experiment in which a charity, Amnesty International, is the recipient. In Part 1 of our experiment, every subject was asked to share 100 Norwegian kroner (NOK), or about 16.5 USD,<sup>3</sup> between themselves and Amnesty International. Our results show that brokers contribute, on average, a substantial

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are the authors' and do not reflect the views of the Ministry.

<sup>2</sup> From Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street* (1987).

<sup>3</sup> Exchange rate per November 23, 2010.

61% of their endowment; nurses' contributions were significantly larger, however, reaching an average of 75%. Thus, in this particular context, nurses were indeed more generous than brokers.

To our knowledge, the dictator behavior of neither nurses nor brokers has previously been explored in the literature. Our interest, however, lies not only with the level of generosity, but also with its possible underlying causes – in particular whether nurses have stronger preferences for others' welfare. Dictator game giving is still not well understood; several recent studies indicate that care for the recipient's welfare is not, in fact, the primary motive for dictator giving (e.g. Lazear, Malmendier, & Weber, 2009; List, 2007).

Part 2 of our experiment is inspired by the work of Dana, Cain, and Dawes (2006), Dana, Weber, and Kuang (2007), Lazear et al. (2009), Broberg, Ellingsen, and Johannesson (2007). These authors show that when subjects are given the option to exit a dictator game, or when the consequence for others of the dictator's choice is obscured, generosity is substantially reduced. In the second part of our experiment, therefore, subjects were given the choice between two options, A and B. Option A implied repeating the game from Part 1 with certainty. Option B implied a 50% probability of repeating the game from Part 1, and a 50% probability of receiving 90 NOK with no opportunity to donate to Amnesty International. Thus, option B implied a 50% probability of costly exit from the dictator game situation.

Nurses were substantially more likely to opt for the exit alternative than brokers: 36% of brokers and 51% of nurses chose B. Interestingly, however, those subjects who opted for exit but drew a repetition of the dictator game contributed substantial amounts: 31% for brokers and 42% for nurses. Even after accounting for exit behavior, nurses were more generous than brokers (in Part 2 and in total).

As we discuss in more detail below, this pattern of behavior is hard to reconcile with most standard models of social preferences. One possible explanation, however, could be that nurses experience a stronger sense of duty to conform with moral ideals (Brekke, Kverndokk, & Nyborg, 2003; Cappelen, Drange Hole, Sørensen, & Tungodden, 2007; Konow, 2010; Nyborg, in press), and that this sense of duty applies more strongly to sharing decisions than to exit decisions.

## 2. Occupational differences in generosity: theory and evidence

Previous theoretical research within economics provides several reasons why one might expect occupational differences in generosity.

First, there is a recent strand of literature arguing that more cooperative individuals may self-select into certain jobs or professions, nursing being one much used example (Besley & Ghatak, 2005; Brekke, Hauge, Lind, & Nyborg, in press; Brekke & Nyborg, 2008, 2010; Delfgaauw & Dur, 2008; Heyes, 2005; Prendergast, 2007). The argument is, in brief, that a combination of relatively low pay and intrinsically rewarding work is attractive only to those who are intrinsically motivated. Brekke and Nyborg (2010) distinguish between two production sectors, one in which workers are paid according to their marginal productivity and another, 'nursing', where efforts are not verifiable and wages are thus fixed. Brekke and Nyborg show that a preference to be important to others simply reinforces market incentives in the first sector, not changing effort choices at all, while a similar preference can have profound effects on effort in the nursing sector. They show, moreover, that if nurses' wages are kept sufficiently low, workers with strong preferences for being important to others will self-select into nursing, thus ensuring that nurses provide high effort levels even in the absence of monetary incentives to do so. Since the essential difference between the two sectors in their model is the different incentive structures, not the nature of the work, this provides one rationale for picking real estate agent students as the group being compared to nurses in our study: While fixed, relatively low wages seems to be the standard for nurses, real estate agents typically receive a substantial share of their pay through performance measures.

Occupational differences in generosity could, alternatively, be caused by socialization into occupation-specific norms and identities (Freidson, 2001) rather than self-selection by highly motivated individuals. Akerlof and Kranton (2000) assume that there exists a plurality of social categories, as well as a prescription of appropriate or ideal behaviors for each group. Deviating from the prescription induces a utility loss via weakening the person's feeling of identity or 'sense of self'. If, for some reason, the social category *nurse* is associated with different prescriptions than *broker*, identity concerns could cause students identifying with each of these categories to behave differently even in a completely anonymous laboratory experiment.<sup>4</sup>

Although dictator game experiments have often been used to study generosity, dictator behavior can hardly yet be said to be well understood. Dictator giving is, for example, highly sensitive to the construction of choice sets (Asheim, Helland, Hovi, & Høyland, 2010; Bardsley, 2008; Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006; List, 2007), whether endowments are earned (Cherry, Frykblom, & Shogren, 2002) and the degree of dictator anonymity (Hoffman, McCabe, & Smith, 2008). Such findings are hard to reconcile with standard economic models of preferences defined only over final outcomes. Thus, it is of interest to explore whether a higher generosity among nurses could be explained in the perhaps most straightforward way; that nurses, for

<sup>4</sup> Note that our experimental design cannot distinguish between the self-selection and socialization theories; both provide reasons, however, that looking for occupational differences in generosity may be worthwhile. Cappelen, Nygaard, Sørensen, and Tungodden (2010) found substantial differences in generosity between the student population at the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration and the general population (with business/economics students being less generous), while Cappelen, Sørensen, and Tungodden (2010) compared the behavior of first- and last-year students at the same school and did not observe substantial differences; these findings would speak for at least some self-selection effect.

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