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When positive ends tarnish the means: The morality of nonprofit more than of for-profit organizations is tainted by the use of compliance techniques

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that prosocial behavior that is driven by selfish intentions is evaluated negatively. In the present research, we focus on people's perceptions of action that does not benefit the actor but leads to societal benefit. Concretely, two studies examined the extent to which nonprofit (compared to for-profit) organizations are perceived as less moral when they use compliance techniques to raise donations. We reasoned and found that an ethical nonprofit organization that uses compliance techniques deviates from people's expectations of how such organizations typically behave, which in turn lowers its perceived morality. In contrast, using a compliance technique is less deviant from people's expectation of how a for-profit organization behaves, and accordingly, the perceived morality of the for-profit organization is less likely to be diminished. Thus, paradoxically, because the ultimate ends are noble, nonprofit organizations are condemned more drastically for using a deceptive recruitment technique than are for-profit organizations. Potential consequences for fund raising tactics are discussed.

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations use their funds to serve needy targets or the general public rather than benefit any owners. To fulfill their purpose, nonprofit organizations typically rely on donations and, hence, they conduct active fundraising campaigns. Nonprofit organizations are widely seen as being vital for society so—even when they are not willing to donate—people typically appreciate the nonprofit organizations' actions to raise funds. Some nonprofit organizations, however, use compliance techniques that many consider manipulative. For example, people are approached on a street corner and are asked a large favor that is highly likely to be declined. However, a second, smaller request is then more likely to be accepted than if the second request was made without the first one (Cialdini et al., 1975). Likewise, the reverse strategy is employed: a small request is proposed first, which is then followed by a second, large request. Again, the second request is more likely to be accepted compared to a situation where no first request preceded (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). These strategies prove highly effective, but they may also be manipulative in that the use of these strategies misleads or deceives the respondents, because the solicitant intentionally uses the first request to increase compliance with the second request. Naturally, individuals do not like to feel vulnerable to manipulation. So if they become aware that a solicitor attempts to manipulate them, the solicitor's actions will likely be morally discredited. The present research examines whether deceptive techniques will be particularly condemned when they are used by a nonprofit rather than a for-profit organization.

2. Discounting of prosocial intentions

In general, actors that behave prosocially are perceived positively by others (e.g., Flynn, 2003; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). However, if generosity is perceived to involve self-interest, the actor's reputation is discounted. For example, a person who volunteers at a homeless shelter in order to gain one of the co-worker's affection is perceived as less moral than a person who works at a coffee shop for the same reason (Newman & Cain, 2014). Thus, paradoxically, a self-interested behavior that produces a charitable benefit is evaluated as less moral than analogous behavior that produces no charitable benefit. Similarly, prosocial actors that benefit from their acts are judged less favorably than actors that do not benefit, even if the benefit is randomly determined and out of the actor's control (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013). Indeed, individuals adjust their charitable behavior in public, in that they behave less prosocially for a cause that provides financial benefits. In contrast, in a private condition, incentives did increase prosocial behavior (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009). Moreover, good deeds that are performed for religious reasons are perceived as less moral (Gervais, 2014), and religious and health-oriented organizations that use

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commercial marketing strategies are perceived negatively (McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). Likewise, a company that contributes to charity but spends even more money on advertising campaigns to publicize their contribution is perceived more negatively than a company that does not make any donation at all (Schweinsberg et al., 2016). Finally, donors that have a personal connection to a cause (e.g., a donor to a leukemia charity whose best friend died of leukemia) are perceived as less benevolent than donors that have not been personally affected (Lin-Healy & Small, 2012).

Overall, there is substantial evidence that prosocial behavior that appears to be driven by external rewards is evaluated negatively. However, even when no selfish intentions can be inferred, individuals may disapprove action that ultimately leads to societal benefit. Consider a nonprofit organization that uses compliance techniques to grant donations that will later promote societal good. Learning that a nonprofit organization performs a manipulative action to achieve its goals is clearly incongruent with the positioning of a moral organization, and because of this inconsistency, its perceived morality might be tainted. Now consider a for-profit organization that uses the very same technique to collect payments that will not later benefit society but the owners. Whereas a nonprofit organization that uses compliance techniques is in stark contrast to people's beliefs about how such organizations typically behave, people may expect nothing different of a for-profit organization. Hence, its perceived morality might be less likely to suffer if the organization uses a manipulative technique.

It should be noted that prior good acts may make observers more willing to excuse subsequent immoral deeds. Most previous research has focused on first party licensing that people are less willing to behave morally after they had engaged in moral behavior (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011; Monin & Miller, 2001; for reviews, Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010), but there is also evidence for third party licensing in that people are less likely to condemn a transgression when the transgressor had previously performed good deeds in a different domain (Effron & Monin, 2010). Hence, it may well be that a nonprofit (relative to a for-profit) organization's use of a compliance techniques is more likely to be forgiven. Nevertheless, based on expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1993, 2009), we anticipated that the morality of a nonprofit organization would be particularly tainted because the use of a compliance technique would deviate from people's expectations how such organizations typically behave.

3. Expectancy violations theory

Unexpected behavior typically has negative effects on impression formations. As Tedeschi and Norman (1985) put it: "Violating norms or rules projects an identity of the actor as an immoral and bad person" (p. 300). However, disconfirmation can lead to both negative and positive interaction outcomes, as pointed out by expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1993, 2009). Expectancy violations theory deals with how violations of expectations account for how individuals perceive interpersonal communication. Expectations are cognitions about what individuals expect others to do in interpersonal interactions. These expectations can be either confirmed or disconfirmed and the greater the magnitude of the deviation, the larger is the effect. Finally, the valence of the deviation moderates the impact of the disconfirmation on impression formations. Whereas rewarding behaviors by others that were unexpected are preferable to confirmations of expectations, non-rewarding behaviors produce even more negative impressions if they were unexpected.

The theory has been successfully applied to nonverbal behaviors but also to organizational research. In particular, and most relevant to the present studies, corporations that have a good reputation are more likely to suffer in times of crisis than corporations with less favorable reputations. For example, Sohn and Lariscy (2015) found causal evidence that when the integrity of an organization was challenged, participants had a less favorable attitude toward an organization with a good reputation than toward a neutral organization. Likewise, an inappropriate response by a company that has been described as helpful and socially responsible led to less favorable attitudes, whereas the same response by a callous and socially irresponsible company yielded even an increase in regard (Dean, 2004). Another study (Rhee & Haunschild, 2006) showed that U.S. automobile industry firms with good reputation suffer more market penalty than those with poor reputation as a result of product recalls. Overall, it appears that a good reputation is a liability rather than an asset when learning negative information about an organization. Hence, we anticipated that charitable fundraising using compliance techniques would be particularly likely to be morally condemned because the (unmoral) action is counter to people's expectation of how nonprofit organizations typically behave.

Abundant social psychological research has shown that people are typically reluctant to revise their initial expectations (Nickerson, 1998). To give just two examples, empirical investigations into the so-called 'prior belief effect' demonstrated that new information that is consistent with previous expectations is evaluated more positively than inconsistent information (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), and this tendency is a barrier to the revision of incorrect initial judgements (Greitemeyer & Schulz-Hardt, 2003). Moreover, stereotypic expectations about a target person shape how a perceiver interprets ambiguous information about this person (Darley & Gross, 1983). Based on this research, one could anticipate that individuals who learn about unexpected action from a non-profit organization tend to discredit this information and thus maintain their positive image of how moral the non-profit organization is. Importantly, however, expectancy conformation is assumed to only occur when the new information contains at least a certain degree of ambiguity. In fact, if pieces of information contain no ambiguity, they are not devalued (Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998) and people do revise their initial expectations. Given that learning about the use of a compliance technique is rather unequivocal, we anticipated that this information would have an impact on how the organization's action is perceived.

3.1. The present research

Two studies examined to what extent nonprofit (compared to for-profit) organizations are perceived as less moral when they use compliance techniques. In both studies, participants learned about either a nonprofit or a for-profit organization that asks for donations/payments. It was further varied whether or not the organization uses a compliance technique to achieve this goal. The use of the compliance technique consists of two consecutive requests of which the first is only made to increase compliance with the second one. In a control condition, participants were told about both requests but without learning that this action represents an influence technique.

We anticipated that the morality of a nonprofit organization is tainted to a greater extent by the use of a compliance technique than is the morality of a for-profit organization. As noted above, we reasoned that using a compliance technique should violate the expectation of how nonprofit organizations typically behave. In contrast, the use of a compliance technique should be less deviant from people's expectation of how a for-profit organization behaves. This differential impact on the extent to which expectations are violated should account for the effect that the perceived morality of a nonprofit organization is particularly tainted by the use of a compliance technique.

All participants were run before any analyses were performed. There were no data exclusions, and all manipulations and all measures analyzed are reported. Given that we were unsure about the size of the crucial interactive effect, we did not determine sample sizes by doing a priori power analyses but rather we employed relatively large samples (about 100 participants per experimental condition) to warrant adequate statistical power. A sensitivity analysis showed that the current