

Research Article

The impact of mortality salience on the relative effectiveness of donation appeals☆

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Abstract

Some donation appeals emphasize the magnitude of the help that is needed. Other, “bandwagon” appeals emphasize the fact that many others have already donated. The relative effectiveness of these appeals can depend on individuals’ awareness of their mortality. Four experiments converge on the conclusion that need-focused appeals are effective when individuals are not conscious of their own mortality. When people’s mortality is salient, however, bandwagon appeals have relatively greater influence. This is particularly true when others’ donations have put the goal of the donation campaign within reach. These effects are evident when people have little a priori interest in the individuals being helped and sympathy does not play a major role in donation decisions.

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Introduction

People are frequently asked to donate time, money or other resources to help victims of natural disasters (earthquakes, famines, tsunamis, etc.). Many factors can influence the impact of such appeals. For example, people are particularly likely to help victims who are virtuous, who are not responsible for their predicament, and who elicit sympathy (e.g., Batson, 1990; Batson & Oleson, 1991; Miller, 1977). In many instances, however, individuals have little a priori interest in the victims of misfortune and might even dislike them. What factors determine the effectiveness of a donation appeal in such cases?

To answer this question, we distinguished between two types of appeals, each of which is based on a different assumption about the criterion that recipients use as a basis for their decisions to help. One, *need-focused* appeal emphasizes the magnitude of the need and the fact that many donations will be necessary in order to alleviate the problem at hand (e.g., Silverman, Robertson, Middlebrook, & Drabman, 1984; Vesterlund, 2003). The other, *bandwagon* appeal indicates that many others have already donated and that it is desirable to get on the “bandwagon.”

The criteria underlying the effectiveness of these appeals are not mutually exclusive. The need for help and the fact that many people have made a donation could both contribute to a donation decision. The relative effectiveness of these factors is likely to depend on the normative principle that recipients are likely to think about at the time they consider donating. People typically believe that although they should help persons in need, the help they should provide is proportional to the magnitude of this need (Smith, Faro, & Burson, 2013). To the extent this belief is salient, a need-focused appeal, which emphasizes that only a few people have donated and that a lot

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more help is required, should be effective. On the other hand, people might also believe that helping others is socially desirable (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Frey & Meier, 2004). If this belief is more salient, a bandwagon appeal should have more impact.

Numerous individual and situational differences can influence the application of these criteria (Finkelstein, 2008). However, the factor we examined, mortality salience, is of particular interest in light of the fact that victims' mortality is often a concern in the situations to which a donation appeal pertains (e.g., natural disasters). In such cases, the appeals could spontaneously call individuals' attention to their own mortality as well as that of the victims. With very few exceptions (e.g., Ferraro, Shiv, & Bettman, 2005), this factor has not been considered in research on donation behavior. Terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, Schimel, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2004), however, suggests that calling people's attention to their mortality can increase their motivation to defend their cultural worldview and to reaffirm the standards that are dominant in the society in which they live. Consequently, when others' behavior reflects what is socially desirable, and thus exemplifies the worldview that is dominant in the society at large, people whose mortality is salient may be motivated to conform to this behavior. If this is so, a bandwagon appeal might be particularly effective.

Four experiments confirmed this possibility. Participants whose mortality either had or had not been made salient received an appeal to help victims for whom they had little a priori interest or sympathy. We found that when people's mortality was not called to their attention, a need-focused appeal had more influence on their donation decisions than a bandwagon appeal. When individuals were made aware of their mortality, however, a bandwagon appeal had relatively greater impact.

Theoretical background

Effects of donation appeals

The willingness to donate money or other resources to a charity is undoubtedly influenced by factors that affect helping behavior in general. These factors include liking for the potential beneficiaries (Emmons & McCullough, 2004), feelings of social or personal responsibility (Latane & Darley, 1968), feelings of obligation to reciprocate the benefits one has received in the past (Schwartz, 1967), perceptions that the request is legitimate (Langer & Abelson, 1972) and perceptions of oneself as a generally helpful person (Langer & Abelson, 1972). People are also more willing to help when they expect to receive feedback that their efforts have been successful (Smith, Keating, & Stotland, 1989).

People's helping decisions can also be influenced by their feelings of social closeness to the persons in need of help (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007; Kogut & Ritov, 2007). These feelings can induce empathy and sympathy for the victims and can increase the desire to help them for this reason (Aron & Aron, 1986; Batson & Shaw, 1991; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Hornstein, 1982). In the case of donation appeals, empathy can be

induced by a picture of the victim and the use of self-referencing in the text (Hung & Wyer, 2009). When empathy for victims elicits negative emotions, individuals can be stimulated to eliminate these emotions by helping to remedy the situation that gave rise to them (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Cunningham, Steinberg, & Grev, 1980).

Many of the aforementioned effects, however, assume that people feel sympathy for the individuals being helped and these feelings motivate them to eliminate the victims' suffering. When individuals have little a priori interest in the victims, empathy or sympathy is less likely to play a role. Ein-Gar and Levontin (2013), for example, found that although empathy increased participants' willingness to help a single individual, it had little impact on donations to a charitable organization. When people do not know the victims and have little if any positive regard for them, their donation behavior may be influenced primarily by criteria that they apply independently of their feelings of sympathy or empathy.

In the latter circumstances, two criteria may come into play. On one hand, people may believe they should provide help to those in need regardless of other considerations (Reed & Aquino, 2003; Winterich, Mittal, & Ross, 2009). If people hold this belief, they might base their donations on the principle that the help given should be proportional to the help needed (Smith et al., 2013). On the other hand, people might also believe that making a donation is socially desirable and might use others' donation behavior as an indication of its desirability. The differential effectiveness of the appeals we described earlier may reflect the relative impact of these criteria.

To reiterate, need-focused appeals emphasize that the amount of help already provided is substantially less than the amount required and so the need for help is particularly great. The effectiveness of these appeals may increase to the extent individuals invoke a social responsibility norm, an implication of which is the amount of help provided should increase with the amount required (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004; Slovic, 2007). As Slovic (2007) proposed, this norm is more likely to be applied when decisions are based on analytical thinking rather than feelings. Thus, for example, people donate more to four pandas than to one panda under conditions in which the appeal for help was unlikely to elicit affect (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004).

Unlike need-focused appeals, bandwagon appeals emphasize that many donations have already been made, suggesting that other people consider the victims to be deserving and believe the appeal's objectives to be socially desirable (Potters, Sefton, & Vesterlund, 2005, 2007). Therefore, if individuals are motivated to behave in a way that others consider to be appropriate, their donation decisions should be influenced by a bandwagon appeal. Mortality salience may provide this motivation.

Effects of mortality salience

Awareness of the inevitability of death can create anxiety. This anxiety, in turn, can have two related effects (Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004). First, it can increase the desire to bolster one's social self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). To this extent, it may increase

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