



## Reports

## Goal gradient in helping behavior

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- People are more likely to pitch in as charitable campaigns approach their goals.
- Three studies showed evidence of this goal-gradient helping behavior.
- Perceived impact and heightened satisfaction explain the late stage contributions.

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 8 June 2012

Revised 7 February 2013

Available online 15 July 2013

## Keywords:

Prosocial behavior

Goal-gradient hypothesis

Motivation

Decision making

## ABSTRACT

People are more likely to pitch in as charitable campaigns approach their goals. Such “goal gradient helping” occurs in part because late-stage efforts provide donors with a heightened sense of personal impact, an influential source of satisfaction from prosocial acts. Using web robot technology in an Internet field study of micro-lending, Study 1 demonstrated that charity contribution rates increase as recipients approach their fundraising goals. Study 2, a large-scale field experiment, found that funds close to reaching campaign goals received more donations than did funds far from reaching campaign goals. Study 3 replicated the goal gradient helping effect in a controlled scenario experiment, and mediational analyses showed that increased perceived impact of late-stage contributions, and the resultant satisfaction from this impact, explain goal gradient helping. In conclusion, people are not charitable simply to be kind or to relieve negative emotions; they find satisfaction from having personal influence in solving a social problem.

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## Introduction

Generous acts can increase happiness. People who have greater opportunities to volunteer are happier than those who have fewer (Meier & Stutzer, 2008). Mesolimbic reward systems in the brain that activate when we receive rewards also activate when we donate to charity (Moll et al., 2006). There even is evidence that helping others can provide greater satisfaction than helping ourselves; people who are randomly assigned to spend money on others report greater happiness than do those who are randomly assigned to spend the same amount of money on themselves (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008).

Where does the joy of giving come from? In this paper, we explore the idea that perceptions of personal impact are an influential source of prosocial satisfaction. Specifically, we use the domain of goal pursuit, and the finding that people experience a greater feeling of progress

when they approach achieving a goal, to explore the role of impact as both a driver of charitable acts, and as a source of satisfaction from prosocial behavior.

## Theoretical background

As humans and other animals approach reaching a goal, their efforts toward that goal increase (Locke & Latham, 1984). Rats run faster as they approach a food reward (Hull, 1934), and humans increase effort as they approach rewards such as gift certificates (Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006) or goals such as visual finish lines (Cheema & Bagchi, 2011). This pattern of increased effort in proximity to goals has been termed “goal gradient” motivation, a phenomenon originally described in the 1930s by the behaviorist Hull when observing patterns of acceleration in rat maze navigation (Hull, 1934).

One reason that goal gradient patterns occur, at least in humans, is that people judge late-state events to have greater value than equivalent early-stage events. In many situations, this makes perfect sense because the ratio of benefit to (remaining) cost increases as one approaches a goal. For example, when someone must rate 10 more songs to receive \$10, the expected value of rating the next song is \$1.

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In contrast, when the person advances and must rate only 2 more songs to receive \$10, the expected value of rating the next song is \$5.

However, goal gradient effects have also been observed in situations in which the normative rationale is less, if at all, compelling. In one study scenario, two people flipped a coin and won a prize if the flip outcomes matched each other (both heads or both tails). Participants reported that the person who flipped last would receive more blame for a failed outcome than would the person who flipped first, even though both contributors had equal objective impact (Miller & Gunasegaram, 1990).

In some cases, participants have explicitly stated that late-stage actions seem more impactful than early-stage actions. Participants randomly assigned to receive a coffee loyalty reward card with 7 out of 10 coffee purchases already completed, stated that they would make greater progress toward the 10-drink goal with 1 additional drink purchase than did participants who received a card with 3 out of 10 coffee purchases already completed (Koo & Fishbach, 2012). The same objective unit of progress (one drink) seemed more impactful later in the sequence than earlier in the sequence, consistent with the notion that as distance to a goal decreases, each incremental step represents greater proportional progress in the shrinking portion that remains (Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998).

These patterns of increased impact as goal progress advances are important to the present investigation because a greater sense of impact predicts prosocial acts. People are more likely to donate when their donation amount is matched by an outside source, allowing the original gift to feel more substantial (Karlan & List, 2007). People also are more likely to donate when they receive detailed information, rather than broad information, about a charity because specific information increases the perceived impact of a contribution (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013). A similar pattern occurs in work settings when employees are motivated to behave prosocially when they feel that their actions will meaningfully help others or have impact (Grant, 2007; Grant et al., 2007).

Because impact is important for prosocial acts, and because the perception of impact increases with goal proximity, we predicted that people would be more likely to help as prosocial campaigns approached their goals. Importantly, we predicted this pattern of goal gradient, or accelerated, helping despite the fact that prosocial goals do not offer explicit rewards. Many demonstrations of goal gradient motivation involve material incentives, and in these cases, as discussed above, accelerated efforts near the end of goal progress have a clear rationale: the expected value of each incremental unit of effort increases.

Prosocial goals, however, do not usually offer such explicit incentives, nor do they even offer a clear sense of personal achievement when the goal is reached. Many times, prosocial contributors, particularly those who contribute to charity campaigns, never even learn whether the goals they contribute to are achieved or not. However, because of the connection between late-stage contributions and impact, and the connection between impact and generosity, we expected to observe a goal gradient in helping behavior.

We also investigated a subsidiary hypothesis that impact will serve as a source of satisfaction from prosocial acts. Although evidence is building regarding the hedonic benefits of giving (Dunn et al., 2008; Harbaugh, Mayr, & Burghart, 2007; Meier & Stutzer, 2008), little is known about where this happiness comes from. Here, we propose that one source of the happiness from giving is a sense of personal impact (see also Sonnentag & Grant, 2012).

We tested for the existence of goal gradient helping in three studies. Study 1 examined patterns of contributions in an observational field study that measured how rates of contributions to an online microloan website changed as loan recipients approached their fundraising goals. Study 2, a large-scale randomized field experiment, measured donations to charitable campaigns when those campaigns were close to, versus far from, reaching their goals. Study 3, a controlled scenario experiment, tested how goal proximity influenced helping behavior while attempting to hold constant the certainty of the goal's success.

Finally, Study 3 also investigated the explanatory roles of impact and satisfaction for goal gradient helping.

### Study 1: Kiva field study

Study 1 relied on information from the Kiva website ([www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org)). Kiva is an organization that connects potential microloan recipients and microloan providers via the web. Recipients request the loans for specific amounts from local microloan agencies who then contract with Kiva to raise the funds. The Kiva website lists hundreds of potential recipients with information about their background, the nature of their loan request, and, most important for this study, the progress that recipients have made so far toward reaching their loan amount goal. Progress information is presented via both numerical percentages and a progress bar, and is updated immediately when a contribution is made. Private individuals can go to the Kiva website and contribute money toward individual recipients' loan needs. Each contribution is not a pure donation, but is a loan with a very high (98.57%) average repayment rate (Kiva Microfunds, 2010). There is no interest return on the loan to the individual contributor and the default contribution amount is \$25.

### Method

Using a web robot (a 'bot'), we collected information every hour, every day, for approximately one week for each loan recipient listed on the Kiva website (number of recipients = 209; number of observations = 2011). The main variable of interest was the percent progress that loan recipients had made toward their goal at every hour of observation. Because the Kiva website updates every time that a recipient receives a contribution, we could measure how quickly recipients were making progress toward their goal based on the level of progress that they had achieved so far.

### Results and discussion

Results supported the hypothesis that rates of helping increase as recipients approach their fundraising goals. The rate of contribution when recipients were 33.01–66% of the way toward reaching their fundraising goals was significantly greater than when recipients were 0–33% of the way toward reaching their fundraising goals ( $M_{33-66\%} = 10.8\%$  per hour,  $M_{0-33\%} = 6.7\%$  per hour;  $t(1, 208) = 4.7, p < 0.0005$ ; Fig. 1). Similarly, the rate of contribution when participants were 66.01–100% of the way toward reaching their fundraising goals was significantly greater than when participants were 33.01–66% of the way toward reaching their goals ( $M_{66-100\%} = 12.8\%$  per hour,  $M_{33-66\%} = 10.8\%$  per hour;  $t(1, 208) = 2.53, p = 0.01$ ). This pattern of increasing rates of donation was robust across different choices of cutoffs; for example, comparisons of progress rates at 0–20% progress, 20–80% progress, and 80–100% progress yielded the same pattern of increasing rates as recipients approached their fundraising goals ( $p$ 's < 0.01).

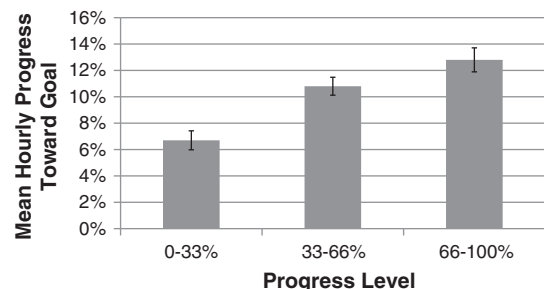


Fig. 1. Microloan recipients' rate of progress toward the goal based on the level of progress achieved so far.

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