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# When the going gets tough, individualizers get going: On the relationship between moral foundations and prosociality

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present research examines the link between moral foundations (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2007) and prosociality. Adopting a person × situation interaction perspective, we suggest that individualizers (whose morality is driven by considerations of harm and justice) act in accordance with their moral values particularly in situations that contain cues of neediness.

**Method:** In Study 1, we measured participants' visual attention toward varying degrees of suffering (within-participants). In Studies 2 and 3 participants were exposed to strong need or not (between-participants) and their moral regard and prosocial intent was assessed.

**Results:** In the face of visual cues of suffering (Study 1) or the presence of strong need (Studies 2 and 3), individualizers reacted with increased attention toward suffering, greater moral responsibility, and stronger prosocial intent. Individuals high on the binding foundations (whose morality is driven by ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity), however, avoided suffering irrespective of its degree (Study 1), did not oblige themselves with moral responsibility (Study 2), and reported reduced prosocial intent in reaction to need (Study 3).

**Conclusion:** An interactionist account of foundation-based prosociality demonstrates that individualizers are likely to help when helping might be perceived as futile, however this potential needs to be activated.

*“Help, I need somebody  
Help, not just anybody  
Help, you know, I need someone  
Help!”*

– John Lennon & Paul McCartney (1965)

## 1. Introduction

Who responds to a cry of help? Do people who attend to suffering differ from people looking the other way? And are people who care about suffering necessarily more helping and caring? What has people's morality to do with these differences? These are the questions asked in the present research.

When people decide whether or not to help others in need, numerous factors influence their behavior. Past research has, for example, shown that dispositional anxiety (Karakashian, Walter, Christopher, & Lucas, 2006) or social threat (McGovern, 1976) reduce the willingness to help. Conversely, having a self-important moral identity increases

helping (Reed II & Aquino, 2003). Other research has focused on the links between personality traits and prosocial behavior (e.g., for the link between agreeableness and prosocial behavior, see Hilbig, Glöckner, & Zettler, 2014) and several theories have been developed that speak to the distinct aspects and processes involved in helping behavior (norm-activation model, Schwartz, 1977; the decision model of bystander helping, Latané & Darley, 1970). In the present research we focus on moral foundations (Haidt, 2007)—that is, the *content* of individuals' morality—as predictors of helping.

### 1.1. Moral foundations

According to moral foundations theory (MFT; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2007), the moral mind is not a “blank slate” at birth but comes equipped with a set of modules that evolved to solve reoccurring adaptive challenges. These modules—or “moral foundations”—are susceptible to personal and cultural influences. Importantly, MFT advances the notion that morality is not restricted to concerns that aim at protecting others and the self from harm or unfairness (Gilligan,

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1982; Kohlberg, 1969), but extends to concerns that protect human groups and communities as a whole. Whereas the two moral foundations of harm and fairness that mark individuals' rights and freedom are categorized as "individualizing foundations", the three foundations of ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity point to individuals' obligations and duties as members of human groups and are referred to as "binding foundations" by proponents of MFT (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012). In the past, depending on the question at hand, research using moral foundations has either treated the five foundations separately (e.g., Dickinson, McLeod, Bloomfield, & Allred, 2016; Iyer, Graham, Koleva, Ditto, & Haidt, 2010) or formed two dimensions that comprised the individual and binding foundations (e.g., Lewis, Kanai, Bates, & Rees, 2012; Napier & Luguri, 2013; Niemi & Young, 2016; Smith, Aquino, Koleva, & Graham, 2014). In the present research, participants were confronted with suffering and unfair living conditions. Thus, in the present research context a focus on individuals' well-being (harm foundation) as well as a focus on individuals' rights (fairness foundation) may instigate prosocial behavioral tendencies. Hence, the present research focused on how the individualizing foundations – as one dimension that combines harm and fairness concerns and thus aims at protecting individuals from suffering and exploitation – relates to prosocial behavioral tendencies.

Until now, the link between moral foundations and political ideologies is what MFT is best known for (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2007). Other research has demonstrated the robustness of ideological differences in moral foundations across cultures (Graham et al., 2011), used moral foundations to predict preferences for presidential candidates (Iyer et al., 2010), or investigated implicit political identity in relation to different moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009). The extent to which moral foundations predict socially relevant behaviors beyond attitudes and judgments, however, has not been addressed so far. The present research aims to go a first step into this direction by focusing on the links between moral foundations and prosocial behavioral tendencies. Concerning the direction of this link, we advocate the notion that this relationship is *conditional*, that is, contingent on specific situational cues, rather than unconditional.

### 1.2. Moral foundations: pulling the trigger

Building on the social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001), moral foundations are proposed to elicit intuitive responses (i.e., automatic evaluations) to a set of *relevant* environmental triggers (Haidt, 2012). These triggers were once acquired in our phylogenetic past to find solutions to reoccurring adaptive challenges. If, for example, a marauding group of hunters enters another group's traditional hunting grounds, reacting with a strong degree of ingroup loyalty among the threatened group is helpful to ward off the intruders and to enhance the own group's chance of survival. Thus, foundation-congruent behavior should be triggered by situational cues (such as perceived threat to the group in case of the ingroup loyalty foundation). In other words, MFT assumes a systematic ("synergistic") person  $\times$  situation interaction: People who endorse a specific moral foundation are more attentive toward ("functionally equivalent") cues that indicate a violation or threat of the respective moral standards inherent in that foundation. People who endorse binding foundations should be more likely to express outgroup hate and ingroup love when their ingroup faces a threat; people who endorse individualizing foundations should be more likely to express moral outrage and helping behavior when they witness harm, suffering, and injustice. Thus, when visual or auditory signs of suffering as triggers of the individualizing foundation's harm component are present (Haidt, 2012), we expect that individualizing foundations predict prosocial behavioral tendencies, in the absence of such cues no or a significantly reduced effect is expected. Thus, MFT is in fact a theory that is firmly rooted in person  $\times$  situation interactionism (Kihlstrom, 2013) and thus the predicted pattern of results matches those that interactionist theories of person and situation factors would propose (e.g., the Traits As Situational Sensitivities model, Marshall & Brown, 2006).

### 1.3. An alternative view

It has intuitive appeal to assume that individualizers—people who emphasize issues of harm and fairness in their moral judgments—are more helpful and prosocial *in general* than people who view these issues as less relevant. In line with this notion, Graham et al. (2011) have shown that endorsing individualizing foundations, but not binding foundations, is related to empathy (a strong dispositional predictor of helping; see Pavey, Greitemeyer, & Sparks, 2012). Notably, however, conservatives (who score higher on the binding foundations) donate more of their money, time, and blood to people in need than harm- and fairness-concerned liberals do (Brooks, 2006). Thus, higher scores on individualizing foundations might not necessarily translate into unconditional prosociality.

## 2. The present research

The present research investigates the relationship between moral foundations and prosociality. We assume that prosocial behavior is determined by characteristics of the individual (i.e., differences in individualizing foundations) *and* the situation (i.e., the presence of foundation-relevant triggers). More precisely, we will focus on situations in which perceptions of suffering and unfairness trigger prosocial behavioral tendencies (Haidt, 2012). Thus, our focus is on situations that resonate with the moral concerns of individualizers.

In Study 1, we systematically varied the severity of visually depicted suffering (within-participants). We measured participants' visual attention toward these stimuli as an unobtrusive proxy for prosocial behavior – as attention toward suffering could be regarded a necessary first step in a decision to help (cf. Latané & Darley, 1970). Building on the assumption that stronger triggers elicit a stronger activation of the underlying foundation, we hypothesized that attentiveness toward depictions of harm and suffering is amplified by the endorsement of individualizing foundations, but not by the endorsement of binding foundations.

In Studies 2 and 3, we followed up on this study by manipulating exposure to people in need (between-participants) and assessed participants' subsequent moral regard (Study 2) and prosocial intent (Study 3). Again, we hypothesized that exposure to neediness increases prosociality, and that this effect is positively moderated by the endorsement of individualizing foundations.

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants and design

A power analysis was conducted using GLIMMPSE (Kreidler et al., 2013). The power analysis<sup>1</sup> yielded a necessary sample size of 38 participants to detect the hypothesized interaction in a mixed model with a

<sup>1</sup> Sample size was estimated using GLIMMPSE an open-access tool for calculating power and sample size online. The program was used to determine the necessary sample size for the hypothesized interaction effect between individualizing foundations and degree of suffering on view time (i.e. attendance to suffering). For the sample size calculation individualizing foundations was treated as a between-subjects variable (as if it were dichotomized at the median). Moreover, GLIMMPSE only allows up to 10 repeated measures. As a higher number of repeated measures as well as not-dichotomizing continuous variables increases power, this deviation from the actual design should result in a more conservative sample size calculation. The expected effect was specified as follows (GLIMMPSE requests estimates of means): Whereas for people low in individualizing foundations no change on attention was expected due to degree of suffering (mean attention set at .50 across the 10 repeated measures), for people high in individualizing foundations a linear increase due to degree of suffering was specified (starting at .50 and increasing in steps of .025 to .70 at T9 and T10 [assuming an upper limit of the effect]). It was assumed that repeated measures (i.e., participants' relative attention toward the photographs) correlate with each other on average at  $r = .50$  and the standard deviation of the dependent variable was estimated at .30 (it was .18 in the final sample).

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