



## Case Report

## Both selfishness and selflessness start with the self: How wealth shapes responses to charitable appeals

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Social class is associated with differences in people's self-concepts.
- These self-concepts should define effective appeals for encouraging generosity.
- Charitable appeals emphasizing agency encourage donations for more affluent.
- Charitable appeals emphasizing communion encourage donations for less affluent.
- Tailoring messages to fit wealth-based self-concepts enhances charitable giving.

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 July 2016

Revised 29 October 2016

Accepted 18 November 2016

Available online 5 December 2016

## Keywords:

Charity

Wealth

Altruism

Prosocial behavior

Self-concepts

## ABSTRACT

Wealth is associated with differences in people's self-concepts. We propose that these self-concepts should define the types of appeals that are most effective at motivating generosity. Across three field studies, we randomly assigned participants to view an appeal for a charitable organization that emphasized agency (the pursuit of personal goals) or communion (the pursuit of shared goals). When the appeal emphasized agency, wealthier individuals reported greater willingness to give and donated more money to charity. In contrast, when the appeal emphasized communion, less wealthy individuals reported greater willingness to give. These findings could not be explained by relevant demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, or gender. This work adds to a growing body of research suggesting that wealth does not inherently result in selfishness or generosity. By tailoring messages to fit with people's self-concepts, it is possible to catalyze giving across the socioeconomic spectrum.

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## 1. Introduction

The average American family donates approximately 3.4% of its discretionary income to charity each year (Giving USA Foundation, 2016). What inspires individuals to give? Although people routinely express a desire to help those in need (De Waal, 2008), people also routinely fail to follow through on their best intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999). One factor that may affect the likelihood of giving is the potential donor's own wealth. Yet, the effect of wealth on charitable giving is unclear. Some research suggests that the more money individuals make, the more that they choose to give away (Smeets, Bauer, & Gneezy, 2015), whereas other research suggests precisely the opposite (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). We propose that neither selfishness nor generosity is an inherent outcome of one's own financial standing. Instead, we

suggest that wealth should define the types of appeals that are most likely to be effective at motivating prosocial behavior.

Differences in wealth are associated with differences in the self-concept (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). In particular, lower-class individuals typically develop more communal self-concepts, whereby the self is primarily defined by one's social connection to others, whereas upper-class individuals typically develop more agentic self-concepts, whereby the self is primarily defined by one's individual capacity for personal control (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Consistent with this theorizing, people with higher incomes—and those who subjectively feel higher in social rank—report higher perceptions of personal control (Kraus et al., 2012), and higher-class individuals show a greater desire to make decisions for the self (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). Related research suggests that money produces a self-sufficient, agentic mindset because having money enables people to meet personal goals without relying on the help of others (Gasiorowska, Chaplin, Zaleskiewicz, Wygrab, & Vohs, 2016; Lea &

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**Table 1**  
Participant demographic characteristics across studies.

Study	1	2	3
N	185	448	445
% donated	26% <sup>a</sup>	50%	87%
M. donation amount	–	\$7.22 <sup>b</sup>	\$74.77 <sup>c</sup>
% female	58%	52%	58%
% Caucasian	85%	73%	59%
Md. (range), age	44 (17–85)	35 (18–78)	28 (18–70)
Md., range, income	\$70K–\$80K (<\$10K to \$2.5M)	\$70K–80K (<\$10K to \$500K)	\$70K–\$80K (10K to 500K)
Md. (range), net worth	\$100K–\$250K (\$1 to \$40M+)	\$50K–\$100K (\$1 to 10M+)	\$50K–\$100K (\$1 to 10M+)

<sup>a</sup> This measure captures donation intentions (vs. monetary donations).

<sup>b</sup> This represents \$7.22 of a possible \$10 that participants could have donated in the study.

<sup>c</sup> This represents \$74.77 of a possible \$100 that participants could have donated in the study.

Webley, 2006; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006, Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2008). As such, the motivation to achieve personal success is often in conflict with the motivation to value one's community and to help other people (Grouzet et al., 2005; Schwartz, 1992).

Motivational conflicts can inhibit action and prevent people from successfully following through with their goals. For example, when individuals are led to focus on achievement (vs. benevolence) they are less likely to offer help to a person in need (e.g., Maio, Pakizah, Cheung, & Rees, 2009). One approach for minimizing motivational conflicts is to tailor messages to an individual's specific goal orientation. Indeed, research suggests that messages are more impactful when they fit with people's underlying motivations (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Lee & Aaker, 2004). This is because such messages encourage motivational fit and increase the perceived value of the intended action (Higgins, 2000). Following from this work, we suggest that providing a fit between a charitable appeal and the donor's self-concept should increase generosity. If recent theorizing is correct, wealthier individuals should be more inclined to donate in response to appeals that emphasize agentic goals, whereas less wealthy individuals should be more inclined to donate in response to appeals that emphasize communal goals.

## 2. Overview of the studies

Across three field experiments, we assessed the impact of agentic and communal appeals for increasing charitable giving across the wealth spectrum. In Study 1, we conducted an experiment through the website of an established poverty relief charity (*The Life You Can Save*). In this study, participants were randomly assigned to view one of two charitable messages that emphasized agency (the pursuit of personal goals) or communion (the pursuit of shared goals; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) and we measured whether participants chose to click a link to a webpage where they could make a donation. In Study

2, we conducted a more controlled field experiment to assess the efficacy of agentic vs. communal messages on actual monetary donations. In Studies 1 and 2, to maximize external validity, we selected actual charitable appeals already in use by the *Life You Can Save* organization that differed in the extent to which they emphasized agency or communion. In Study 3, to increase internal validity, we constructed new charitable appeals and conducted another controlled field experiment to assess the impact of these revised appeals on participants' donation intentions. In Studies 2 and 3, we focused our analyses on donation amount, which we were unable to measure in Study 1. To maximize transparency, we report the donation likelihood results in the Supplemental Online Material (SOM). Results are consistent across all measures (SOM).

Social class is a complex construct that includes people's objective wealth (i.e., their income and net-worth), their subjective wealth (i.e., their subjective socioeconomic standing), as well as their occupation and educational attainment (Weber, Gerth, & Wright, 1958). Yet, emerging research suggests that these constructs do not always predict similar outcomes. For example, recent research suggests that objective and subjective measures of wealth are better predictors of ethical decision making than other indicators of social class, such as occupation or education (e.g., Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015). Furthermore, research on financial generosity has shown that objective and subjective indicators of wealth are critical predictors of financial generosity (e.g., Kessler, Zhang, & Milkman, 2016; Piff et al., 2010; Smeets et al., 2015). Thus, building on this work, we chose to focus on objective (i.e., income and net-worth) and subjective indicators of wealth (i.e., subjective socioeconomic standing).

From a practical perspective, we were also interested in identifying the appropriate levels at which more and less wealthy people were impacted by various charitable appeals. Indeed, to be of practical use, it is helpful to know the objective levels of wealth whereby people are more or less responsive to various charitable appeals. For example, it could be helpful for non-profit organizations to know which messages to send to each individual as a function of their income.

Across studies, we used an experimental moderation-of-process design (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005), rather than relying primarily on statistical mediation. Past research shows that people have difficulty accurately introspecting about motivational conflicts, even when those conflicts shape their behavior (Maio et al., 2009). Given this challenge, an ideal way of testing our hypothesis is to change the framing of the charitable appeal (thereby removing the motivational conflict between wealth and charitable giving) and to document between-condition differences on giving among wealthier and less wealthy individuals. Thus, across experiments, we measured participants' wealth, manipulated the framing of the appeal, and measured the donation behavior of more and less affluent people in response to each appeal.

Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants from each study are presented in Table 1. In this paper, we report all exclusions, every condition that was run, every measure that was given, and the stopping rule for each study (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011).

**Table 2**  
Charitable appeals used in Studies 1 and 2.

Condition	Charitable appeal
Communal	This is an ad for a charitable organization called The Life You Can Save. Please take a moment to look over this advertisement. <i>The Life You Can Save spreads knowledge of what all of us can do together to reduce poverty.</i> The Life You Can Save encourages people to pledge a percentage of their income to poverty-related aid organizations.
Agentic	This is an ad for a charitable organization called The Life You Can Save. Please take a moment to look over this advertisement. <i>The Life You Can Save spreads knowledge of what each person can do individually to reduce poverty.</i> The Life You Can Save encourages people to pledge a percentage of their income to poverty-related aid organizations.

Note: These appeals were taken directly from advertisements in use by *The Life You Can Save*. Although images look slightly pixelated here, these images did not look pixelated in the Qualtrics survey that individuals viewed as part of the study.

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