



The congruency between moral foundations and intentions to donate, self-reported donations, and actual donations to charity



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ABSTRACT

We extend past research on the congruency between moral foundations and morally relevant outcomes to ingroup- and outgroup-focused charitable giving. We measured intentions to donate to outgroup members (begging EU-migrants) and self-reported donations to ingroup (medical research) and outgroup (international aid) charity organizations in a heterogeneous sample ($N = 1008$) and actual donations to ingroup (cancer treatment) and outgroup (hunger relief) organizations in two experimental studies ($N = 126$; $N = 200$). Individualizing intuitions predicted helping in general across self-report and behavioral data. Binding intuitions predicted higher donations to ingroup causes, lower donations to outgroup causes, and less intentions to donate to outgroup members in the self-report data, and they predicted lower donations overall in the behavioral data.

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1. Introduction

Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) is rapidly becoming the main paradigm for the study of individual differences within the moral domain. It is based upon the idea that traditional moral psychology is plagued by liberal bias, focusing exclusively on “individualizing” concerns with fairness, liberty, and harm prevention, which prevail in Western, liberal contexts. In order to broaden the scope of moral psychology, it seeks to incorporate also moral intuitions pertaining to ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and (physical as well as spiritual) purity within the moral domain. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) labeled these intuitions, which are prevalent in conservative and non-Western cultural contexts, “binding” intuitions, arguing that they exert a moral function by binding individuals into roles and duties so as to suppress their selfishness and strengthen groups and institutions, rather than promoting the rights and welfare of individuals.

Kugler, Jost, and Noorbaloochi (2014) have, however, objected that it would be misleading to label the binding intuitions ‘moral’ if these intuitions are in fact associated with behaviors that are

unequivocally normatively immoral. Several studies do indeed suggest that the binding intuitions are associated with outgroup hostility and support for discrimination while the individualizing intuitions are negatively associated with these outcomes (Hodson et al., 2012; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012; Kugler et al., 2014). But other studies yield a more complex picture, suggesting that this relationship is attenuated by a strong moral identity (Smith, Aquino, Koleva, & Graham, 2014), and that both individualizing and binding intuitions may reduce psychopathy¹ (Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015).

Although these studies begin to map the relations between moral intuitions and morally relevant outcomes, virtually all of them rely upon self-reports of attitudes, intentions, and behaviors rather than measurements of actual behavior. This is a crucial drawback given the ubiquity of moral hypocrisy manifested in a lack of congruence between explicitly endorsed moral standards and action (Batson, Kobryniewicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008) and the well-documented susceptibility of self-report measures of behavior to social desirability biases (Paulhus, 1984).

¹ As one reviewer pointed out, it is still possible that individualizing intuitions represent the highest, most universalistic stage of moral development, whereas binding intuitions represent a lower, more conformist stage that is still more morally elevated than the stage reflected by psychopathy.

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In the current studies, which were conducted in Sweden, we sought to extend previous research on moral intuitions by elucidating their relationship to charitable giving, which is particularly morally relevant in highly affluent countries. We included both self-report measures of donations to charity organizations and intentions to donate to begging EU-migrants in a large online survey and measures of actual donations in experimental settings. We expected the potential effects of moral intuitions on charity donations to depend upon what kind of aid the charity organizations provide. Specifically, we hypothesized that binding intuitions predict donations to charities that are likely to benefit members of the ingroup, such as charities for medical research, whereas individualizing intuitions predict donations to charities in general, and especially to those that have a more universalistic moral focus, such as reducing world hunger and poverty.

1.1. Political, religious, and moral orientations as predictors of charitable giving

Past research has shown that individualizing and binding intuitions are, in line with Moral Foundations Theory, consistently associated with left- and right-wing political orientations respectively (Graham et al., 2011), even in an extraordinarily secular and liberal country such as Sweden (Nilsson & Erlandsson, 2015). Political orientation has, in turn, been amply addressed in research on charitable giving. Although left-wingers typically explicitly espouse self-transcendence values more strongly than right-wingers do (Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011), research has revealed that this does not necessarily mean that they donate more money to charities. In fact, Brooks (2007) found that conservatives donate considerably more money to charities than liberals do in the United States. This finding is, however, complicated by the fact that the US liberal-conservative divide is intertwined with the divide between secularity and religiosity. Most of the charity gap between liberals and conservatives that Brooks identified could be accounted for by the well-documented finding that persons who frequently pray and attend religious services tend to engage in prosocial behavior (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Zagefka & James, 2015). This relationship between religiosity and prosocial behavior may, furthermore, vary across cultures; in countries that have strong secular institutions and social safety nets (e.g., Sweden), it tends to be weak or nonexistent, which suggests that religion may lose its role as the main source of prosociality when governments take over this function (Norenzayan, Henrich, & Slingerland, 2013).

There is also a growing literature suggesting that left- and right-wingers are both inclined to donate to charity but to different causes and under different conditions. Most important, a series of experiments conducted by Winterich, Yinlong, and Mittal (2012) suggests that persons who self-identify as being on either end of the left-right political spectrum are more likely to donate insofar as the charity appeal is congruent with their moral intuitions. When the charity appeals emphasized caring for the vulnerable and protecting the rights of every individual (individualizing intuitions), liberals who had a strong moral identity donated the most; when they emphasized community and family support, traditions, and spiritual needs (binding intuitions), conservatives who had a strong moral identity donated the most. The effects appeared both when donations were measured in terms of hypothetical scenarios and when actual donation behavior was measured.

These studies demonstrate that Moral Foundations Theory helps to elucidate when and why people donate money to charity. But while Winterich et al. (2012) focused on how the framing of charity appeals for any given cause can be tailored to different political groups, we suggest that Moral Foundations Theory also can help elucidate what different kinds of cause people donate to. Although most charitable giving in general is directed at ingroups (Zagefka & James,

2015), the extent to which people donate to ingroup- or outgroup-focused causes is, we suggest, dependent upon their moral intuitions. The binding foundations should promote donations to ingroup causes insofar as their function is to strengthen the groups and social systems the donor is embedded within. The individualizing foundations, on the other hand, should promote charitable giving in general insofar as their function is to promote and protect the well-being of individuals regardless of group membership, and they should especially promote donations to outgroups insofar as they make people overcome their natural bias toward helping their fellow ingroup members.

Broadly consistent with our hypotheses, left-wing political orientation predicted donations to international causes, independent of the effects of demographic characteristics and religiosity, in a large Dutch survey study (Wiepking, 2010). Left-wing orientation also predicted donations to human rights and cultural causes but did not predict donations to international relief, whereas a right-wing orientation predicted donations to veterans and to religious causes, in a large survey conducted in the United States (Grey Matter Research, 2011; see also Zagefka & James, 2015). Whether these relations can be attributed to the association between conservatism and religiosity is not clear. Although some studies suggest that religiosity promotes ingroup donations, others demonstrate that it predicts donations to a wide range of both religious and secular causes (Brooks, 2007; Norenzayan et al., 2013).

It is, however, important to note that most of the findings reported above – and the vast majority of studies on how individual differences predict charitable giving in general – are based on survey measures of moral inclinations, which are notoriously fraught with social desirability biases, including self-deception and impression management (Paulhus, 1984). Meta-analyses conducted within the field of behavioral economics have revealed that the amount of money people say they would be willing to pay for a public good (e.g., the moral good that results from donating to charity) exceeds the amount they would actually be willing to pay when faced with a real decision situation by an average factor of three to one – this effect is often called *hypothetical bias* (Murphy, Allen, Stevens, & Weatherhead, 2005). Hypothetical bias does not occur in all contexts. Johansson-Stenman and Svedsäter (2012) have found that it may occur predominantly when people estimate their willingness to pay for a moral good, such as contributions to charity organizations, as opposed to other kinds of non-moral goods, such as a restaurant voucher, and they argue that this is because people derive a positive self-image simply by expressing moral opinions or attitudes, especially when these have no direct consequences. A meta-analysis has also revealed that hypothetical bias tends to be particularly large in experiments conducted with student samples in group settings, such as classrooms, computer labs, or church halls, rather than individual settings, such as online surveys (Murphy et al., 2005).

These and other studies demonstrate that it is indeed particularly important to take both self-reported and actual behavior into account when addressing moral orientations. Although past studies suggest that preferences are stable across hypothetical and actual choice scenarios (Carlsson & Martinsson, 2001) and that hypothetical and actual donations are affected similarly by contextual factors, such as degree of anonymity and information about the contributions of others (Alpizar, Carlsson, & Johansson-Stenman, 2008), a recent study (Gospic et al., 2014) suggests that real decisions to donate money to charity organizations are associated with greater amygdala activation than hypothetical decisions are.

1.2. Overview of research

In Study 1, we investigated the relations between moral intuitions and intentions to donate to street-begging EU-migrants

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