

## Research Report

## Positive fantasies dampen charitable giving when many resources are demanded

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## Abstract

Previous research found that positive fantasies about an idealized future yield low energy to pursue the fantasized future. We examined how positive fantasies about the resolution of a crisis (i.e., a lack of pain medication in Sierra Leone, the risk of flooding after Hurricane Irene) influence people's agreement to donate to charitable efforts directed at crisis resolution. In three studies, positive fantasies dampened the likelihood of agreeing to donate a relatively large amount of money, effort, or time, but did not affect the likelihood of agreeing to donate a relatively small amount of these resources. The effect of positive fantasies was mediated by perceiving the donation of larger (but not smaller) amounts of resources as overly demanding. These findings suggest that charitable solicitations requesting small donations might benefit from stimulating positive fantasies in potential donors, but those requesting large donations could be hurt.

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## Introduction

In the present economic environment, garnering donations is a significant challenge for charitable organizations (West, 2004). American charitable contributions dropped by 3.2% from 2008 to 2009; this was one of the largest drops recorded in more than 50 years (Giving USA Foundation, 2010). One tool that charities deploy in an attempt to engage donors is imagery of a future in which a crisis has been resolved. For example, charitable organizations encourage donors to imagine that poor children are attending school or that cancer no longer threatens health. However, little is known about how such positive imagery of an idealized, best-case-scenario future affects giving (see Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996). Accordingly, we examined the effect of these positive fantasies about future crisis resolution on the decision to give to charity.

## Theoretical framework

*Positive fantasies*

Mental simulation, “the imitative representation of some event or series of events,” (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998, p. 430), is an umbrella term for imaginary visions of both past and future events. Such imaginary visions, or fantasies, are not constrained by the cognitive mechanisms that make people appraise factual information (Klinger, 1971, 1990; Singer, 1966). Though some imaginary visions may depict actions and events that violate natural laws or social norms, people most frequently fantasize about futures that are not yet realized but are possible in principle. One way to simulate such possible futures is to depict them in an idealized positive way, and such images are referred to as positive fantasies (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; review by Oettingen, 2012). As pure, idyllic imagery of future events and behaviors, positive fantasies differ from other positive thoughts and feelings about the future.

For example, positive fantasies differ from positive thinking in the form of expectations, which are beliefs about the likelihood of

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future events. Generally, people base their expectations about the future on what they or relevant others have experienced in the past (Bandura, 1997; Kappes, Oettingen, & Mayer, 2012; Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996; Roese & Sherman, 2007). Thus, expectations are constrained by past performance. People also have future-oriented emotions such as hope, which “is a positively valenced emotion evoked in response to an uncertain but possible goal-congruent outcome” (MacInnis & de Mello, 2005, p. 2). Positive fantasies may arouse emotions (see D’Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2007) but are not themselves emotions. Indeed, it is not clear that positive fantasies are consistently prone to evoke hope, since the idealized futures they depict might not be congruent with the individual’s personal goals.

### *Effects of positive fantasies*

Because they allow people to mentally enjoy a desired future in the present, positive fantasies yield the relaxation associated with success rather than the energy needed for effortful action (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011). Accordingly, positive fantasies predict the investment of low effort and subsequent low success over time, for example, regarding losing weight, finding a romantic partner, getting good grades, and finding a job after college (Kappes et al., 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). Experiments that have induced positive fantasies and measured their effects on solving challenging tasks also find that positive thoughts and fantasies produce low action toward achieving the imagined future (e.g., mastering everyday challenges over a one-week period, Kappes & Oettingen, 2011; throwing darts, Spencer & Norem, 1996). These findings suggest that positive fantasies decrease effort toward tasks because they yield low levels of energy.

Previous research on positive fantasies has focused on tasks that are relatively demanding. Accordingly, it is possible that the effect of positive fantasies on people’s willingness to engage in tasks might depend on the amount of resources (e.g., effort, time, money) required to solve the task. That is, although positive fantasies yield low energy (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011), this might not affect consumers’ actions on tasks that demand little energy and few resources. However, when tasks demand many resources, positive fantasies should leave consumers unprepared to invest these resources. Indeed, by virtue of their low energy, consumers might perceive demanding tasks as *overly* demanding; as requiring more than they feel prepared to invest. Thus, we hypothesized that the amount of resources demanded would moderate the effect of positive fantasies: such fantasies should hamper action when tasks are relatively demanding (i.e., people are asked to commit a great deal of money, effort, or time), but not when tasks are relatively undemanding. We conducted three studies to test this idea in the domain of charitable donations.

## **Study 1**

We had participants read about an obscure but important crisis—a lack of pain medication in Sierra Leone—and then asked half of them to generate positive fantasies about the resolution of this crisis (people receiving the medication they need). We had control participants generate factual descriptions of the crisis

resolution, so that the only difference between conditions was whether or not they imagined crisis resolution in idealized positive terms. We then manipulated the amount of resources required to actually help resolve the crisis by stating that a relatively large (\$25) or small (\$1) donation was required to help relieve someone’s suffering. We hypothesized that positive fantasies would result in lower contributions than the control manipulation when helping required a \$25 donation, but equal or greater contributions when it required \$1.

## *Methods*

### *Participants and design*

Eighty-one American undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial course credit, and were randomly assigned to one cell of the 2 (positive fantasies, factual description control)  $\times$  2 (\$1, \$25 required to help) design ( $ns = 20\text{--}21$ ).

### *Procedure and materials*

Participants read a September 2007 *New York Times* article describing the suffering of people in Waterloo, Sierra Leone, who lack access to pain medication. They were told that researchers were interested in how people process and respond to information related to newspaper articles that they had read.

### *Manipulation: Positive fantasies versus control*

To induce positive fantasies about the resolution of the Waterloo medication crisis, we used the following instructions (italics indicate wording that differed in the control condition):

Imagine that the people of Waterloo are given the medication they need. Picture the Waterloo medication crisis as being resolved. *What is the most positive thing that you associate with the Waterloo medication crisis being resolved? Now really think about this positive thing.* Imagine the relevant events and scenarios as *vividly* as possible! *Let your mind go! Do not hesitate to give your thoughts & images free reign.* Take as much time as you need.

In the control condition, participants identified and elaborated on a factual description of the medication crisis. We used the following instructions (italics indicate wording that differed in the positive fantasies condition):

Imagine that the people of Waterloo are given the medication they need. Picture the Waterloo medication crisis as being resolved. *Now please describe the situation in Waterloo.* Imagine the relevant events and scenarios as *factually* as possible! *Do your best to remain matter-of-fact in your descriptions.* Take as much time as you need.

### *Manipulation: Resources required*

Participants learned about an organization, *Treatment 4 All*, which had been formed to address the medication crisis. We manipulated the amount of resources required to help resolve the crisis by varying the size of the financial donation to this organization that would relieve one person’s suffering.

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