

Research Article

# Acts of emptying promote self-focus: A perceived resource deficiency perspective

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## Abstract

No one likes feeling empty. When people feel empty they seek replenishment, which usually takes the form of increased self-focused behaviors that provide value to the self and decreased other-focused behaviors that provide value to others. This research demonstrates how exposure to the concept of emptiness by simply performing or observing acts of emptying (vs. filling or control) of a glass vase, coat pockets, a glass jar, or a duffle bag triggers the cognitive metaphor of resource deficiency. The resource deficiency metaphor in turn leads people to engage in self-focused behaviors such as eating candy or planning a dream vacation and to disengage from other-focused behaviors such as donating to charities or helping others.

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## Introduction

We all understand what emptiness means – empty pockets, empty-handed, empty soul, empty house, and empty heart are all expressions that describe the lack of resources. “An empty sack cannot stand upright” speaks to the importance of sustenance – someone who is “empty” cannot function properly. That is, the concept of emptiness seems to be closely associated with resource deficiency, or the state of not having enough.

Just like any organism striving to survive in its environment (Darwin, 2009), humans who experience emptiness or resource deficiency of any kind are motivated to acquire and/or conserve resources. In this paper we argue that merely being exposed to

acts of emptying can trigger the cognitive metaphor of resource deficiency and in turn prompt people to seek ways to recover from the perceived deficiency as if resources were actually lost. That is, following acts of emptying people will engage in self-focused behaviors that benefit the self and disengage from other-focused behaviors that benefit others.

We provide support for our hypothesis by presenting the results of six studies showing that engaging or viewing different acts of emptying leads to self-focused behaviors that benefit the self and suppresses other-focused behaviors that benefit others. In so doing, this research makes the following contribution to the literature: first, it shows how accessible the threat of resource deficiency is such that even the most subtle cues of emptying can activate it without actual resource loss. Further, it demonstrates the profound effect of the concept of resource deficiency—once activated, it prompts self-focused behaviors and suppresses other-focused behaviors. Finally, our model provides a cogent explanation that accounts for a wide range of seemingly unrelated behaviors such as food consumption,

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shopping, monetary donations, volunteerism, and feedback seeking behaviors.

### Theoretical background

People strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster resources (Hobfoll, 2002). Resources may be tangible such as physical assets (e.g., house, automobiles) and materialistic goods (e.g., clothes, food), or intangible such as social status (e.g., CEO), personal characteristics (e.g., intelligence, self-esteem) or energies (e.g., time, self-regulatory resource). Not only are resources instrumental to goal pursuits, they also help people define who they are (Cooley, 1902; Erikson, 1968; Hobfoll, 1989; James, 1981). Essentially, resources are critical for survival.

#### *Resource deficiency and its consequences*

The potentially severe consequences of resource deficiency are so deep-rooted in our awareness that we are biologically and culturally programmed to avoid it. For example, warnings against the dangers and sorrows stemming from resource deficiency are readily found in the Bible and in folklore. One of the first stories in the Bible speaks about Man's exile from a haven that offered infinite resources and a worry-free existence: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground" (Genesis 3:19, *KJV*<sup>1</sup>), with the warning that humans will always have to work hard to gain resource. The importance of not ending up in a state of resource deficiency is also told in Aesop's Fables – people should work hard to accumulate resources, lest they end up like the grasshopper in winter, void of resource and in desperate need for help to survive (Gibbs, 2002).

The menacing effect of resource deficiency is well documented in different literatures streaming from biology, psychology and sociology. For example, populations with high rates of socio-economic deprivation are found to be at increased health risks and have greater need for mental healthcare (Saxena, Thornicroft, Knapp, & Whiteford, 2007; Sundquist, Malmstrom, & Johansson, 1999). Resource deficiency has also been shown to be associated with heightened depressive symptoms (Holahan, Moos, Holahan, & Cronkite, 1999) and feelings of vulnerability (Pitesa & Thau, 2014), while wealth and abundance of resources serve as buffer against negativity, unhappiness and depression in the face of new disabilities (Diener & Fujita, 1995; Holahan et al., 1999; Smith, Langa, Kabeto, & Ubel, 2005; Vohs & Baumeister, 2011).

Research across different disciplines consistently shows that people take pains, either consciously or nonconsciously, to conserve or to regain resources following the experience of resource deficiency (Hobfoll, 1989). For example, it has been documented that the body's metabolic rate declines to conserve energy following significant food restrictions (as when one adopts a very low calorie diet; Fricker, Rozen, Melchior, & Apfelbaum, 1991; Pereira, Swain, Goldfine, Rifai, & Ludwig, 2004). Further, people who experienced severe food deficiency (as with Holocaust survivors) demonstrated a tendency to store

excess food and an inability to throw food away even when it is spoiled (Sindler, Wellman, & Stier, 2004). Similar behavioral tendencies have been documented even in situations where resource deficiency is less severe: self-regulation research shows that people exert less effort in task performance not only when they are tired, but also when they expect to be expending resources in the future (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Ein-Gar & Steinhart, 2011; Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006; Tyler & Burns, 2009). These findings suggest that people go to great lengths to guard against not having enough resources, as driven by our basic Darwinist motivation for self-survival.

At the heart of Darwinism is the notion that organisms will do what it takes to survive and reproduce; and their self-interest focus is heightened when resources are limited (Darwin, 2009). In the animal kingdom, survival instinct has been may even trump maternal instincts. For example, white-tailed deer mothers take less risk in defending their fawns against predators in lean years (Smith, 1987), and feral sheep's maternal behaviors such as nursing, nuzzling and licking the lamb diminish when resources are scarce (Robertson, Hiraiwa-Hasegawa, Albon, & Clutton-Brock, 1992). More central to this research, recent research suggests that people engage more in self-interest behaviors when reminded that resources are scarce (Roux, Goldsmith, & Bonezzi, working paper). These findings suggest that when people experience resource deficiency, they will focus on the self (vs. others) as they seek ways to replenish and to prevent further depletion of their resources.

In the current research, we propose that the fear of resource deficiency is so profound that the focus on the self may be intensified even when resource loss is symbolic and not real. We posit that simple acts of emptying, either performed or observed, are sufficient to activate the cognitive metaphor of resource deficiency that prompts people to focus on the self, and in turn encourages behaviors that promote self-interest and suppresses behaviors that promote the interests of others.

#### *Activating the cognitive metaphor of resource deficiency*

Research in social cognition has provided ample evidence that concepts in memory can be temporarily made more accessible by priming (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1985; Srull & Wyer, 1979). For example, participants who had been exposed to synonyms of either "persistent" or "stubborn" subsequently judged an ambiguously described person as more persistent or more stubborn, depending on their ability to recall the prime and the time lapse between prime exposure and the judgment task (Lombardi et al., 1985). These results highlight the fact that concepts activated in memory can influence subsequent information processing and judgment regardless of whether or not people are consciously aware of the prime. More recent research by Fitzsimons and colleagues shows that exposures to brand logos may activate goals in memory (e.g., the Apple logo may activate one's creativity goal) and in turn trigger goal-directed behaviors (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008). Relatedly, the embodiment literature suggests that

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotation is taken from The Holy Bible, King James Version 2000.

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