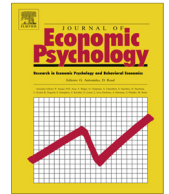


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## Using descriptive social norms to increase charitable giving: The power of local norms



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### ABSTRACT

In a field experiment, we examined whether conveying descriptive social norms (e.g., “this is what most people do”) increases charitable giving. Additionally, we examined whether people are more likely to conform to the local norms of one’s immediate environment than to more global norms extending beyond one’s local environment. University students received a charity organization’s information brochure and were asked for a monetary contribution. An experimental descriptive norm manipulation was embedded in the brochure. We found that providing people with descriptive norms increased charitable giving substantially compared with industry standard altruistic appeals (control condition). Moreover, conveying local norms were more effective in increasing charitable giving than conveying global norms. Practical implications for charity organizations and marketing are proposed.

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### 1. Introduction

Imagine that a representative of a charity organization asks you for a small monetary donation, noting that your contribution will make a difference to people in need. Would you make a donation? Further, imagine that you learn that a majority of those who have been asked to donate to this particular charity have done so. Does this additional information make you more likely to donate? What if you learn that most others in your close vicinity had actually donated to the charity? There are good reasons for suspecting that you would be more likely to donate if you also learn that others have donated, as social norms have been found to influence a wide range of behaviors, such as exercising (Okun, Karoly, & Lutz, 2002), drinking behavior (Walters & Neighbors, 2005), and environmental conservation (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2009). Surprisingly, to what extent social norms can be specifically used to increase charitable giving is a research question that has not received much attention in the literature.

Two classes of social norms may underlie people’s donation decisions. *Injunctive social norms* may produce charitable giving as such norms tell people that this is what they ought to be doing. Injunctive norms tend to be effective because noncompliance

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often elicits social disapproval (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Indeed, research suggests that injunctive norms can have a positive effect on giving behavior. For example, when it is suggested to players in a Dictator Game that sharing money is what players should do, they share more money compared with when no such injunctive norm is signaled (Raihani & McAuliffe, 2014). People may also be influenced by *descriptive norms* which refer to how most individuals behave in a certain situation. If a potential donor learns that most other people engage in charitable giving, he or she may follow suit because he or she automatically assumes that this is likely to be an effective and appropriate course of action in that situation (Cialdini et al., 1990).

To date, the evidence showing that descriptive norms can be used to increase charitable giving is relatively weak. Raihani and McAuliffe (2014) examined the impact of descriptive norms on sharing behavior in a Dictator Game. They signaled descriptive norms by informing the players that most other players had shared their money. Contrary to expectation, players who learned that most other players had shared money (either \$.20, or \$.50) did not give more generously compared to a control condition that did not signal an altruistic norm. In another study, Shang and Croson (2009) examined whether descriptive norms could be used to increase donation behavior to a radio station during the station's on-air fund drive. In that study, donors who called the radio station received information from the experimenters about how much money a previous donor had contributed. They found some evidence that conveying descriptive norms could increase donation behavior. Relative to a control condition where the callers did not learn about the amount that previous donors had contributed, letting the callers know that previous callers had donated money increased donations. However, descriptive norms only increased donations for those callers who were new (as opposed to renewing) donors and who had learned that the previous caller had donated a very large sum of money (90th percentile). Learning that previous callers had donated a sum that was in the 85th or 50th percentile (as determined by past contributions to the channel) was not sufficient to enhance contributions.

Highly relevant to the current study is another strand of research that has examined the utility of signaling descriptive norms in a different prosocial context: environmental behavior. In a pioneering field experiment, conducted in the United States, Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008) examined the impact of normative appeals on hotel guests' towel reuse behavior. By systematically altering the type of information provided in a towel reuse sign, the authors demonstrated that signs signaling descriptive norms ("e.g., 75% of hotel guests have reused their towels") produced significantly higher towel reuse rates compared to signs that contained a (industry) standard environmental appeal ("HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT"). Furthermore, Goldstein et al. showed that signaling what they labeled as provincial norms (norms of one's local settings and circumstances) were more effective than more global norms (norms that apply more generally, beyond one's local settings and circumstances). For example, hotel guests who learned that 75% of the previous guests who had stayed in *the same room* had reused their towel more than once (provincial norms) were more likely to reuse their towels compared to hotel guests who learned, more generally, that 75% of the previous hotel guests had reused their towel more than once (global norms). Interestingly, provincial norms prevailed even though an independent sample of participants reported that the category of hotel guest in a particular room was less important to people's identities than the broader category of hotel guests. These intriguing findings suggest that sometimes people conform to the norms of reference groups that are relatively unimportant to their identities, as long as these reference groups are perceived to have situational similarities.

However, recent replication studies conducted in Europe have failed to reproduce the original findings obtained by Goldstein et al. (2008). In a German study, Bohner and Schlüter (2014) found no evidence of a provincial norm superiority effect. Perhaps even more disappointingly, they found that descriptive norms per se did not result in higher towel reuse rates compared to a standard message appealing to environmental concerns. Similarly, an Austrian replication study failed to reproduce the descriptive norms effect (Reese, Loew, & Steffgen, 2014). In an attempt to make sense of these discrepant findings, the authors of these replication studies note that because environmental attitudes tend to be stronger and towel reuse base rates higher in Europe, it is possible that a descriptive norm of 75% may constitute a less potent norm manipulation for European than for American hotel guests.

### 1.1. The current research

Based on the previous research on environmental conservation and charitable giving reviewed above, the practical utility of signaling descriptive norms for prosocial purposes appears inconclusive at this point, warranting further study. Thus, we conducted a field experiment with the overall goal of examining whether descriptive norms can be reliably used to increase charitable giving. Furthermore, inspired by Goldstein et al.'s (2008) pioneering work on provincial norms, we more specifically examined whether descriptive norms that are tied to a more specific, spatially proximal reference group would be more effective in producing charitable giving compared to descriptive norms that are tied to a more global reference group that also includes people of one's more distal environment. Our hypotheses can be stated more formally as:

**H1.** Charitable giving increases when descriptive social norms are provided compared to when only standard altruistic appeals are made ("industry standard").

**H2.** Local norms produce more charitable giving than global norms ("local norm superiority hypothesis")

We are not aware of any previous research that has specifically examined the effectiveness of local versus global norm for charitable giving. We believe that the impact of descriptive norms on charitable giving may have been underappreciated in previous research due to its focus on the size of the other people' contributions rather than on the norm reference group itself (e.g., its spatial proximity).

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