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Selfishly benevolent or benevolently selfish: When self-interest undermines versus promotes prosocial behavior

Julian J. Zlatev *, Dale T. Miller

Stanford University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Existing research shows that appeals to self-interest sometimes increase and sometimes decrease prosocial behavior. We propose that this inconsistency is in part due to the framings of these appeals. Different framings generate different salient reference points, leading to different assessments of the appeal. Study 1 demonstrates that buying an item with the proceeds going to charity evokes a different set of alternative behaviors than donating and receiving an item in return. Studies 2 and 3a-g establish that people are more willing to act, and give more when they do, when reading the former framing than the latter. Study 4 establishes ecological validity by replicating the effect in a field experiment assessing participants' actual charitable contributions. Finally, Study 5 provides additional process evidence via moderation for the proposed mechanism. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of these findings and suggest avenues for future research.

1. Introduction

Imagine you are sitting in your car, listening to your favorite program on National Public Radio (NPR), when the host announces that the station is in the middle of a pledge drive. She mentions that you have the opportunity to *donate* to the station and receive one of a wide variety of items. Now imagine, in an alternative universe, you are listening to that same program. Once again, the host announces a pledge drive, only in this instance, she explains that you have the opportunity to *buy* a wide variety of products with all of the proceeds going to help the station. In which universe would you be more likely to pick up the phone and call?

We face hybrid decisions like these – opportunities that result in tangible benefits for both the giver and the receiver – on a regular basis. Nearly every charitable organization uses some sort of incentive program to increase donations. The aforementioned NPR showcases a number of products that donors can choose to receive during its annual pledge drive. Fundraisers, such as car washes and bake sales, provide goods and services in order to raise money for programs like little league baseball teams or Girl Scout troops. Recently, e-commerce company Amazon established its Amazon Smile program, which gives a portion of each sale from its website to a charity of the consumer's choice. Given how commonly organizations use these types of incentives to encourage charitable giving, it would seem that the case for their effectiveness must be a strong one. However, the existing literature is far from clear on whether offering material incentives to promote prosocial behavior is effective.

On the one hand, considerable research has shown that self-interest facilitates prosocial behavior. Indeed, many psychologists and economists have argued that pure altruism[1] does not exist and that some degree of self-interest underlies every human action, including seemingly prosocial ones. By these accounts, self-interest motivation is not restricted to the pursuit of material gain but can take other forms including the pursuit of increased positive emotions, such as a "warm glow" (Andreoni, 1989, 1990), or of decreased negative emotions, such as self-concept distress (Batson, 1987, 2011; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997). Even when self-interest is not motivating prosocial behavior, its presence may be necessary as there exists in Western cultures a norm of self-interest that suggests that people *should* and *do* act in accordance with their own interests (Miller, 1999). The existence of this norm means that people often prefer to hide their prosocial motivation behind a cloak of self-interest (Miller, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998) and often seek an excuse, or at least a rational (self-interested) account, for behaving prosocially (Holmes, Miller, & Lerner, 2002; Ratner & Miller, 2001). For all these reasons, one might reasonably

* Corresponding author at: Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, 655 Knight Way, Stanford, CA 94305, United States.
E-mail address: jjzlatev@stanford.edu (J.J. Zlatev).

[1] While "altruistic" and "prosocial" often are used interchangeably, here we use the term "altruistic" to refer to the motive and the term "prosocial" to refer to the outcome. Thus a prosocial behavior, such as giving to charity, may or may not spring from an altruistic motivation.

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conclude that offering material incentives for donations would be effective.

On the other hand, there is evidence that the presence of self-interest considerations can discredit or undermine prosocial actions (Chao, 2015; Lin-Healy & Small, 2012; Newman & Cain, 2014). Proponents of this view argue that people feel that self-interest taints what should otherwise be a purely altruistic act. A similar conclusion has been reached by scholars who believe that individuals categorize the social world into different spheres that are in turn associated with different norms and expectations (Durkheim, 1912; Fiske, 1992; Goffman, 1959). According to this perspective, social and economic interactions are associated with different spheres and interactions that are appropriate in one of these spheres can be inappropriate or downright offensive in the other. The most glaring instances of this occur with taboo tradeoffs that involve the mixing of the sacred and the secular (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997) such as providing a monetary value for human organs (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), selling one's birthday present (McGraw, Tetlock, & Kristel, 2003), or accepting money for completing household chores (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005). Moreover, within the domain of prosocial behavior, a *tainted altruism* effect has been found, wherein people are found to be uncomfortable with prosocial actions that simultaneously benefit the actor (Newman & Cain, 2014). For example, people are uncomfortable paying a large amount to a for-profit organization for the purpose of raising funds for charity.

As the foregoing review shows, the empirical and theoretical literature is inconsistent with respect to whether introducing the prospect of material gain promotes or undermines prosocial action. The present paper proposes and tests a resolution to this seemingly inconsistent picture of the relationship between self-interest and prosocial motivation.

2. Differing reference points: Integrating self-interested and prosocial motives

We contend that the impact the prospect of material gain has on people's willingness to give to charity depends on which of two categories the request evokes (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). The request to make a donation in return for a product evokes a different set of behaviors than the request to buy a product with the proceeds going to charity. Specifically, the category evoked in the first case will feature other instances of donations, or prosocial behavior, and the category evoked in the second case will feature other instances of product purchases, or economic behavior.

These categories, in turn, provide different reference points against which to compare the current request (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). When the focal situation evokes instances of other more "normal" donations, it seems tainted by comparison. This is because the category evoked here involves donations unaccompanied by material gain. However, when the focal situation evokes other instances of more "normal" economic transactions, it seems righteous by comparison. This is because the category evoked here involves economic transactions unaccompanied by charitable behavior. In short, the reference point made salient by the donate frame leads the current charitable opportunity to seem like a bad version of an altruistic act whereas the reference point made salient by the buy frame leads it to seem like a good version of an economic transaction.

As another example of the process we describe, consider the old joke in which a religious authority reacts negatively to a neophyte's query about the acceptability of his smoking while praying but positively to the acceptability of his praying while smoking. That the two requests evoke different reference points is what makes the joke work. The prospect of smoking while praying evokes other instances of praying to which the smoking version compares negatively. In contrast, the prospect of praying while smoking evokes other instances of smoking to which the praying version compares positively.

The claim that people evaluate economic exchanges that yield prosocial benefits more positively than prosocial exchanges that yield economic benefits is supported by a closer examination of the relevant literature. Consider Holmes et al.'s (2002) finding that people give more to charity when offered an item in exchange for their donation than when no *quid pro quo* is involved. Although consistent with the claim that the prospect of material gain increases prosocial behavior, note that the charitable request in this study highlighted the *selling* of the item as well as the *profit* that would be going to the charity, a clear instance of an economic situation with added prosociality. The framing of the situation is very different in Newman and Cain's (2014) demonstration of tainted altruism. In this case, the individual engaging in the hybrid behavior was described as *donating* money to charity and receiving a personal benefit from that donation, making this an example of an altruistic situation with added self-interest (see Table 1 for a side-by-side comparison of sample stimuli used in these studies). In conclusion, what looks like contradictory findings may actually represent consistent responses to different framings of charity appeals.

3. Overview of current research

This paper reports the results of eleven studies. Study 1 demonstrates that people spontaneously think of different possible alternative actions when presented with a charitable interaction framed as an economic transaction that also benefits the charity compared to one framed as an altruistic act that also benefits the giver. Study 2 provides initial evidence that people prefer to engage in the former compared to the latter framing. Studies 3a-g consist of a meta-analysis of seven studies that all use the same paradigm. Together, they demonstrate that the framing effect is robust across a wide variety of items offered and amounts requested. Study 4 utilizes an experimental field design to show that the effect replicates in a real-world charitable giving setting. Finally, Study 5 further examines the proposed mechanism – that these different framings generate different reference points – by demonstrating that making either an economic or an altruistic reference point explicit moderates the effect of framing on prosocial behavior.

4. Study 1

Study 1 provided an initial test of whether different framings of the same charitable opportunity would elicit different reference points. Specifically, we gave participants the opportunity to directly describe the category that was salient to them in their decision-making process. We predicted that participants who experienced the different framings should spontaneously think of different alternative ways that they could use their money. Specifically, economic opportunities (i.e., purchasing items) should be more salient for people who read about buying an item with the money going to charity (i.e., the *Buy Frame*), whereas altruistic opportunities (i.e., giving to charity) should be more salient for people who read about donating and receiving an item in return (i.e., the *Donate Frame*).

4.1. Method

Three hundred and one participants were recruited from an online subject pool (213 females, M_{age} = 29.76 years old). We excluded fourteen participants because they failed the attention check, leaving two hundred and eighty-seven participants in the