

# Public charity offer as a proximate factor of evolved reputation-building strategy: an experimental analysis of a real-life situation

Tamas Bereczkei\*, Bela Birkas, Zsuzsanna Kerekes

*University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary*

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## Abstract

Although theoretical considerations suggest that a considerable portion of human altruism is driven by concerns about reputation, few experimental studies have examined the psychological correlates of individual decisions in real-life situations. Here we demonstrate that more subjects were willing to give assistance to unfamiliar people in need if they could make their charity offers in the presence of their group mates than in a situation where the offers remained concealed from others. In return, those who were willing to participate in a particular charitable activity received significantly higher scores than others on scales measuring sympathy and trustworthiness. Finally, a multiple regression analysis revealed that while several personality and behavior traits (cooperative ability, Machiavellianism, sensitivity to norms, and sex) play a role in the development of prosocial behavior, the possibility of gaining reputation within the group remains a measurable determinant of charitable behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the key questions in evolutionary biology and psychology is why individuals help strangers without the possibility of return (Batson, van Lange, Ahmad, & Lishner, 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 2004; Fehr & Rockenbach, 2004; Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2003). Several scholars have proposed that humans evolved in small groups with frequently repeated interactions and reputation-building mechanisms (cf., Fehr & Rockenbach, 2004; Johnson, Stopka, & Knights, 2003). Individual selection can favor cooperative strategies directed towards recipients who have helped others in the past. Nowak and Sigmund (1998) state that cooperation pays because it presents the cooperating individual as a valuable community member. Subsequent repayment is channeled towards these members of the group in various ways, but, ultimately, it frequently involves individuals' privileges or their access to resources (Alexander, 1987). This means that altruistic acts may

enhance the altruist's status and reputation in his/her social group and yield a long-term benefit, in spite of the obvious short-term cost (Wedekind & Braithwaite, 2002).

The effect of reputation building on cooperation with group members has recently been explored using computer simulations and experimental games (Barclay, 2004; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Milinski, Semmann, & Krambeck, 2002a; Wedekind & Milinski, 2000). In reciprocity, trust, and public goods games, players showed a strong preference to give to those who had proven to be generous in previous transactions. It is also well documented that humans are often altruistic to nonreciprocators, even to strangers (e.g., they donate to charities) (Milinski, Semmann, & Krambeck, 2002b; Roberts, 1998; Semmann, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2005). Donations may be given to people outside the social group, but they deeply influence the social attitude of in-group members towards the altruist. For example, a donation to charity organizations that is made in public may function as a conspicuous signal of an individual's propensity to cooperate with group mates (Milinski et al., 2002a).

Experimental games can provide "naturalistic" conditions for examining the impact of the costs and benefits of an altruistic act on decision making, including opportunities for

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\* Corresponding author. Institute of Psychology, University of Pécs, Ifjúság u. 6, H-7624 Pécs, Hungary.

E-mail address: [btamas@btk.pte.hu](mailto:btamas@btk.pte.hu) (T. Bereczkei).

reputation formation, the role of punishment in enforcing cooperation, and so on. Such games simulate relatively simple interpersonal relationships, where the behavioral outputs of individuals' decisions can be measured quite well. However, while experimental games potentially reveal key aspects of the "logic" of cooperative transactions, they nevertheless suffer from certain limitations. First, in laboratory experiments, interacting individuals are forced to stay together for periods of various lengths. In contrast, in real interpersonal interactions, individuals frequently have the ability to choose their cooperating partners (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). Second, experimenters intentionally recruit subjects who are completely unfamiliar with each other. Unfamiliarity and anonymity, however, are often rare in human groups, where individuals possess knowledge about others' attitudes, behaviors, and personalities. This knowledge deeply influences their decisions to cooperate (Johnson et al., 2003). Third, experimental games sometimes create artificial circumstances that people do not encounter in real situations. For example, players are sometimes allowed to trust only one person, which is different from real-life circumstances where people can form multiple partnerships (Barclay, 2004). Methods different from experimental games and computer simulations are therefore needed to examine real-life situations associated with altruistic acts and to obtain more direct behavioral data regarding altruism.

We designed an experiment around a real-life opportunity for altruistic behavior, incorporated into participants' everyday lives. A representative of an actual charity organization provided an opportunity for students in university seminars to volunteer to assist people in need (elderly or homeless or mentally handicapped people). In one condition, participants' decisions were public, made in the presence of their seminar mates; in the other condition, decisions were private, so others in the group were not aware of them. Hence, rather than performance in a structured game or artificial experiment, participants' natural behavior was observed in their own environment, in the system of social relationships in which they were living at the time. Participants made decisions which they had good reason to believe could influence their classmates' opinions of them.

One of the main objectives of our research was to examine reputation building as an ultimate strategy in a naturalistic real-life context. However, because our experiment is embedded in the everyday lives of subjects, it also provides an excellent opportunity to study proximate factors. We are interested in exploring what environmental and psychological factors evoke altruism towards strangers. Specifically, while reputation enhancement can be pursued consciously, it could also be an indirect result of behavior stemming from norm adherence and/or prosocial personality traits; it is an open question as to how much such factors exercise influence independent of opportunities available for reputation formation.

The social psychological literature classifies the direct motivational causes of charity acts into two comprehensive

groups: situational factors and personality characteristics (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). One situational factor is publicity itself: the environment in which participants can gain information about their group mates' willingness to support people in need. One of the most important conditions for reputation building is social information, whereby group mates gain information about an altruistic individual. In experimental games, this is nothing but the direct observation of contributions in previous transactions. This hardly ever takes place in real-life situations. In real life, we usually gain indirect information about the generosity of others through personal accounts and gossip. A charity offer made in public is a situation in which others become aware of the intentions and attitude of the altruistic individual. This, in itself, can evoke altruistic behavior, since it can earn the approval of group mates. In such a case, the expectation that others should respect an altruistic act can directly motivate the altruistic individual.

However, it is possible that altruism towards strangers is mediated by proximate factors other than publicity (Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Support for organized charity may be primarily motivated by social responsibility norms and prosocial values (Berkowitz, 1972; Eisenberg-Berg, 1979; Forsyth, 2006). In this case, strong aspirations to adapt to prevailing norms and expectations concerning altruism and cooperation may provide, in themselves, an explanation as to why people offer help to strangers. Adherence to prosocial norms may be expressed very powerfully when altruists declare their intention to offer charity support in the presence of their group mates.

Beyond situational factors, the social psychological literature lists various personality and character traits that may represent direct motivations (as proximate factors) underlying altruism towards strangers. First, the capacity and attitude for helpfulness were found to be strongly associated with contribution to the welfare of other people (Batson et al., 2003; Hogg & Vaughan, 2005; Oswald, 2002; Preston & deWaal, 2002). Cooperative and generous individuals may have personality factors that motivate them to help others, independent of any wish to enhance their popularity in the group. Second, Machiavellianism has a negative impact on generosity, since people with a high level of Machiavellianism have the capacity to manipulate others, to lie about their cooperativeness, and to make lies believable (Byrne & Whiten, 1988; Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002; McIllwain, 2003; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Third, evidence from evolutionary psychology, social psychology, experimental economics, and cultural anthropology suggests that women are more cooperative, empathic, and caring than men (Geary, 1998; Mealey, 2000).

In order to clarify the role of various situational factors and personal characteristics as proximate mediators in the process of prosocial behavior that yields reputational benefits, we employed a number of instruments in our real-life experiment. While we assume that adherence to social norms and prosocial personality traits each plays a role in

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