



Sidestepping the rock and the hard place: The private avoidance of prosocial requests



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HIGHLIGHTS

- People avoid prosocial requests, even in private contexts and at a personal cost.
- Both those who would comply or refuse when directly asked avoid prosocial requests.
- Results suggest that a desire to act selfishly sans self-reproach drives avoidance.

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ABSTRACT

For some, facing a prosocial request feels like being trapped between a rock and a hard place, requiring either a resource (e.g., money) or psychological (e.g., self-reproach) cost. Because both outcomes are dissatisfying, we propose that these people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests, even when they face these requests in private, anonymous contexts. In two experiments, in which participants' anonymity and privacy was assured, participants avoided facing prosocial requests and were willing to do so at a personal cost. This was true both for people who would have otherwise complied with the request and those who would have otherwise refused the request. This suggests that anticipatory self-reproach motivates people to avoid prosocial requests, regardless of whether or not this self-reproach would have been strong enough to cause them to comply with a direct request. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for prosocial behavior and the maintenance of moral self-regard.

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1. Introduction

While checking out at the grocery store, walking down the street, or shopping online, people frequently confront requests to donate to charitable causes. Given how important these requests are for raising money for charity, it is no surprise that researchers have examined people's responses to direct prosocial requests. Some people gladly comply because they have altruistic or other-oriented motivations to help (e.g., Batson & Shaw, 1991), and others easily refuse because prosocial behavior is unimportant to them (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002). Yet, there are people who do not belong to either of these camps and instead feel dissatisfied regardless of what they do. They may lament the resource costs that come with complying (e.g., time or money) or psychological costs (e.g., self-reproach) that come with refusing (Berman & Small, 2012). Given these anticipated costs, do these people

prefer to refuse or comply with the request? Researchers of prosocial behavior traditionally focus on these two options—to give or not. However, we suggest that some people prefer a third, often unobserved option—avoiding the request altogether.

1.1. Prosocial requests and self-reproach

People are motivated to maintain a sense that they are good and moral (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 2004; Miller & Monin, 2016). Social cognitive theory and self-discrepancy theory both contend that people maintain this positive moral self-regard by behaving in ways that adhere to internalized moral standards (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Higgins, 1997). Both theories define self-reproach¹ as aversive thoughts and feelings of self-condemnation or moral worthlessness that arise when people feel

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¹ We use the term "self-reproach" in this article, but previous researchers have used the terms self-censure, self-blame, and self-condemnation to refer to the same phenomenon (Bandura et al., 1996; Higgins, 1987).

that they have failed to act in accordance with personally accepted moral standards, which often manifests in agitation-related emotions such as guilt, remorsefulness, and uneasiness (Bandura et al., 1996; Higgins, 1997). These personal moral standards develop through socialization processes in which people witness and encode evaluative reactions to their own and others' conduct (Bandura et al., 1996). Once formed, these moral standards act as internalized guides that encourage moral or prosocial behavior because failing to do so ignites self-reproach (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001).

Thus, for those who have an internalized expectation of prosocial behavior, refusing a prosocial request creates a discrepancy between one's actions and one's desired self-image, inducing self-reproach (see Higgins, 1987). In order to avoid this self-reproach, people may comply with the prosocial request, even if they would otherwise prefer to refuse it (Lindsey, Yun, & Hill, 2007). Alternatively, people may refuse the request, but then suffer self-reproach for violating their internalized moral standards (Berman & Small, 2012; Dunn, Ashton-James, Hanson, & Aknin, 2010; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999). Therefore, although some of these people comply with the request to avoid self-reproach and some refuse the request and consequently feel self-reproach, both parties may experience facing a prosocial request as being trapped between a rock and a hard place; that is, they feel dissatisfied regardless of whether they comply or refuse.

To deal with this dissatisfying situation, social cognitive theory has pointed to various sociocognitive tactics people employ to minimize the self-reproach that comes from behaving self-interestedly (see Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996). For instance, people can justify their self-interested behavior by denying responsibility for their actions, construing them as serving a worthy end, or minimizing their magnitude or likelihood of causing harm (Bandura et al., 1996; Exley, *in press*). But there may be another tactic people employ before ever facing this dissatisfying decision. We propose that people are motivated to simply avoid prosocial requests, allowing them to sidestep prosocial behavior without suffering self-reproach. We further suggest that the motivation to avoid prosocial requests is strong enough for some people that they will endure a personal cost to do so.

1.2. Motivated avoidance of prosocial requests

Previous research has demonstrated the appeal of avoidance of prosocial requests, but has suggested that it is not self-reproach, but fear of public censure that motivates this avoidance behavior (DellaVigna, List, & Malmendier, 2012; Flynn & Lake, 2008; Pancer, McMullen, Kabatoff, Johnson, & Pond, 1979). For instance, shoppers were found to avoid an entrance at a grocery store when a volunteer was asking for donations in front of it, resulting in lower donations than when volunteers were stationed at all entrances to the store (Andreoni, Rao, & Trachtman, 2011). However, people did not avoid the entrance when the volunteers were stationed in front of it, but did not explicitly ask for donations. Moreover, in the dictator game, in which participants must allocate \$10 between themselves and a recipient, many participants avoid the decision by exiting the game with \$9.00, leaving the recipient with nothing, so long as the recipient would never be informed about the game. However, if their decision is private (i.e., the recipient would not know the source of any money they received), people do not exit the game, many preferring to allocate all \$10.00 to themselves (Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006).

If it were only a desire not to appear selfish to others that motivates the avoidance of prosocial requests, then it would seem unlikely that people would be motivated to avoid these requests in private, anonymous contexts, in which prosocial requests are becoming increasingly common (e.g., online shopping). Indeed, the results from the Dana et al. (2006) have lead some to conclude as much (Cain, Dana, &

Newman, 2014). However, self-discrepancy theory would suggest otherwise because, in contrast to social reproach, the threat of self-reproach is not lower in private contexts. Indeed, this theory contends that people are the most vulnerable to self-reproach (e.g., guilt, self-condemnation) when they have transgressed a personally accepted moral standard (Higgins, 1987). Moreover, refusing to help a charitable organization may implicate one's internalized moral standard more than refusing to give to a peer in an economic game because charitable organizations are more "deserving" of assistance than peer recipients (Eckel & Grossman, 1996). Indeed, people face greater self-reproach when refusing requests made by prosocial organizations than by for-profit organizations, because prosocial organizations are regarded as deserving of help (Berman & Small, 2012; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999). Thus, if self-reproach underlies people's motivation to avoid prosocial requests then people should be motivated to avoid prosocial requests, even in private, anonymous contexts.

2. Overview of Studies

We conducted two studies to test the prediction that people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests in private contexts. We further assess whether people would incur a personal cost to avoid these requests. Finally, we assess whether both people who would otherwise comply and people who would otherwise refuse these requests when directly asked to give are similarly motivated to avoid these requests. To ensure decisions would be made in a private context, all responses were anonymized such that the participants' responses could not be linked to their identity. Moreover, the potential recipients of donations (i.e., charitable organizations) were unaware of the participants' decision to donate to them. Finally, participants completed studies from their own computers instead of in the physical presence of researchers (in contrast to Dana et al., 2006). For all studies we do not exclude any data, and we report how we determined the sample size and all the manipulations and measures we used.

3. Study 1

Study 1 tests whether Internet users would forgo a real, desirable opportunity to earn extra money to avoid confronting a direct prosocial request.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Given uncertainty about effect size, we adhered to the suggestion of using at least 50 participants per condition (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2013), and chose to collect 100 participants per condition. Data were not analyzed until data collection was complete, resulting in 200 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (65% male, $M_{age} = 32.14$, $SD_{age} = 11.68$). To ensure a private, anonymous context, participants took this study online using their own electronic devices and provided no information about their personal identity.

3.1.2. Procedure

Participants first participated in a two-minute unrelated study that involved viewing an article about electric bicycles in exchange for \$0.25. At the end of that study, they read that they had an opportunity to participate in an additional five-minute study in exchange for a bonus payment of \$0.50. All participants read the same, detailed description of the study. They learned that this additional study would involve answering a few questions about Thanksgiving and writing a paragraph about whether and how they celebrated it or what they did instead. We chose this topic because the study happened to be conducted on Thanksgiving morning. Moreover, we sought a task that everyone

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