



Reports

Mixed reasons, missed givings: The costs of blending egoistic and altruistic reasons in donation requests[☆]Daniel C. Feiler^{a,*}, Leigh P. Tost^b, Adam M. Grant^c^a Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College, USA^b Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, USA^c The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, USA

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ABSTRACT

Do people give more when benefits to others and oneself are emphasized? We propose that mixing egoistic and altruistic reasons reduces the likelihood of giving by increasing individuals' awareness that a persuasion attempt is occurring, which elicits psychological reactance. In Experiment 1, university alumni were less likely to give money to their alma mater when an electronic donation request emphasized both egoistic and altruistic reasons, compared to either reason alone. In Experiment 2, undergraduates reported lower giving intentions when a donation request emphasized an altruistic and an egoistic reason, compared to either altruistic or egoistic reasons alone. In Experiment 3, undergraduates reported lower intentions to give to the Make-A-Wish Foundation when the donation request featured both egoistic and altruistic reasons; this effect was mediated in two stages by increased persuasion awareness and heightened psychological reactance. This research sheds light on when messages that purport to align self-interest and other-interest can backfire.

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Introduction

Psychologists have a longstanding interest in prosocial behaviors—actions that benefit other people and groups through giving time or money (Latané & Darley, 1970; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Research suggests that the vast majority of prosocial behaviors occur in response to direct requests for help or assistance. In emergency situations, direct requests are known to encourage helping by reducing pluralistic ignorance and diffusion of responsibility, enabling bystanders to define the situation as an emergency and feel personally responsible for helping (Cialdini, 2001; Shaffer, Rogel, & Hendrick, 1975). At work, as much as 75–90% of help exchanged is initiated by a direct request from a coworker, supervisor, or subordinate (Anderson & Williams, 1996). In volunteering, direct requests are the most commonly cited reason for becoming involved: over 43% of American volunteers report that they started volunteering in response to a request from an organization, boss or employer, coworker, relative, or friend (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Direct requests are especially common in the context of charitable giving, which is an important contributor to the economic, social, psychological, and physical well-being of modern

societies (Brooks, 2006; Liu & Aaker, 2008). However, many direct requests still fall short of motivating people to give (Schwarzwald, Bizman, & Raz, 1983; Weyant, 1996).

As such, it is theoretically and practically important to understand how the characteristics of requests affect the likelihood of giving. Studies have shown that people are more likely to comply with requests when they are given a reason (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978), but little research has addressed how the content of these reasons matter. Psychologists have long argued that people give for two basic reasons: egoistic and altruistic (Batson, 1998; Boice & Goldman, 1981; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Paulhus, Shaffer, & Downing, 1976; White & Peloza, 2009). Egoistic giving is based on the primary goal of protecting and enhancing one's identity, image, and emotions, while altruistic giving is based on the primary goal of protecting and enhancing the well-being of others. Indeed, research reveals that in addition to benefiting others, the act of giving offers the egoistic benefits of promoting happiness and reducing negative emotions for the giver (e.g., Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Harbaugh, Mayr, & Burghart, 2007; Penner et al., 2005). Importantly, egoistic and altruistic reasons are independent: people can give because they are seeking to benefit themselves, to benefit others, or a combination of the two (De Dreu, 2006; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Since individuals can be motivated to give for both egoistic and altruistic reasons, one might predict that giving is increased when both types of reasons are presented. A single action that can fulfill multiple motives may be particularly attractive: having more good reasons for engaging in a behavior should make one more likely to do it (Schwartz, 2011; Thompson, Hamilton, & Rust, 2005). Consistent with this notion, studies

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have shown that increasing the sheer number of arguments in a message can enhance its persuasiveness (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). For audiences who are not invested in an issue, the number of arguments serves as a heuristic cue for the quality of the argument, such that more reasons are more persuasive because argument quantity is used as a signal of argument strength (Ranganath, Spellman, & Joy-Gaba, 2010). For audiences who are invested in an issue, as long as the arguments are strong, more reasons are more persuasive because they present a more compelling rationale (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Therefore, one might expect that highlighting both egoistic and altruistic reasons may result in higher giving than highlighting only one of these reasons.

However, we predict the opposite: emphasizing both egoistic and altruistic reasons for giving reduces the likelihood of giving. As Schwartz (2011, p. 17) stated, “reasons don’t always add; sometimes they compete.” We base this prediction on theories of persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). Together, these two theoretical perspectives suggest that presenting both egoistic and altruistic reasons will enhance the salience of the persuasive intent of the message, leading individuals to resist social influence by choosing not to give. On these grounds, we predict that simultaneously emphasizing both egoistic and altruistic reasons reduces the likelihood of giving relative to either type of reasoning alone.

First, we predict that the perceived persuasive intent of a request will be higher when egoistic and altruistic reasons are presented together, relative to when either reason is presented alone. Research shows that egoistic values emphasizing pleasure, power and achievement tend to be negatively correlated with altruistic values emphasizing concern for others (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). In addition, recent research suggests that self-focused and other-focused traits are often perceived as being conceptually opposed to one another (Suitner & Maass, 2008). If indeed individuals believe that people differ in their relative prioritizations of egoistic vs. altruistic values, then a message that highlights both egoistic and altruistic reasons for giving will appear to be designed to simultaneously appeal to multiple audiences, which can be a critical cue that draws attention to the persuasive intent of the message.

Further, a single individual may hold both egoistic values (e.g., improve one’s own well-being, maximize outcomes to the self) and altruistic values (e.g., help others, contribute to the social good). These personal goals are conceptually distinct and often have incompatible means for attainment (Riediger & Freund, 2004), as is the case when an individual must divide resources between oneself and others (Eckel & Grossman, 1996), such as in social dilemmas (Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004). When egoistic and altruistic reasons for an action are presented together, individuals are likely to shift to a more deliberative and comparative mode of thinking (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007) because of the distinct nature of these motives. As a consequence, rather than focusing on the benefits of giving (Zhong, 2011), individuals are more likely both to identify flaws in the reasons and to consider the motivation behind the construction of the message, thereby heightening persuasion awareness.

Thus, we expect that mixing egoistic and altruistic messages increases persuasion awareness. According to psychological reactance theory, individuals are motivated to resist having their behavior controlled by others (Brehm, 1966). As a result, research suggests that social influence attempts are more effective when recipients are not aware that a message has persuasive intent (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Indeed, studies indicate that when recipients are made aware of the persuasive intent underlying a message, they find the message less persuasive and are more likely to resist (Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004). Persuasion awareness triggers a change of meaning in which recipients disengage from processing the content of a message and focus their attention on protecting themselves against social influence (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

We therefore expect that by appearing to appeal to multiple audiences and multiple distinct goals, mixing egoistic and altruistic reasons for giving will raise persuasion awareness and motivate individuals to resist persuasion. On the other hand, highlighting only one type of reason (altruistic or egoistic) is less likely to make salient the persuasive intent of a message and trigger reactance, because a consistent line of argument is used. Therefore, we expect that highlighting both egoistic and altruistic reasons reduces the likelihood of giving relative to presenting either type of reason alone. In our studies, we explore how messages that highlight both egoistic and altruistic reasons to give can backfire.

Overview of experiments

We test these hypotheses in three experiments focusing on the prosocial behavior of giving money (Liu & Aaker, 2008). Experiment 1 is a field experiment with university alumni. We randomly assigned alumni to receive email messages highlighting egoistic, altruistic, or mixed reasons for giving, and then tracked their actual donation behavior. Experiment 2 is a laboratory experiment with undergraduates designed to constructively replicate the findings of Experiment 1 and rule out alternative explanations by teasing apart the number and content of reasons: are individuals less willing to donate when egoistic and altruistic reasons are mixed, but not when two egoistic or two altruistic reasons are presented? Experiment 3 is a laboratory experiment to test the mechanisms that explain why mixing egoistic and altruistic reasons reduces the willingness to donate: are the effects of mixed reasons mediated by increased persuasion awareness and heightened psychological reactance?

Experiment 1

Method

We conducted a randomized, controlled field experiment at a large public U.S. university. A development officer sent emails to alumni who had never donated to the university, who were assigned by a random number generator to one of four conditions. In two of the conditions, the request highlighted a single reason for giving (egoistic or altruistic). In the other two conditions, the request highlighted both egoistic and altruistic reasons for giving. We counterbalanced the order of the two reasons: one message presented the egoistic reason before the altruistic reason, and the other message did the opposite.

In all conditions, the message featured a paragraph about recent events at the university, after which the manipulations were introduced. In the egoistic condition, the request described how giving is beneficial to the self: “Alumni report that giving makes them feel good.” In the altruistic reason condition, the request described how giving is beneficial to others: “Giving is your chance to make a difference in the lives of students, faculty, and staff.” In the combined conditions, the request featured both pieces of information. The manipulations were followed by a one-sentence request for a donation and a link to the university’s donation webpage.

The emails were initially sent to 2000 alumni in each of the four conditions. The development officer tracked the rates at which each message was actually received and opened (as opposed to rejected by the email server before participants could open the message), which ranged between 10.8% and 14.2%, yielding a sample size of 994 alumni who accessed the donation requests. Over the following three months, the development officer tracked alumni donations in direct response to these email solicitations.

Results and discussion

Donation rates were higher in the altruistic-only condition (6.56%) and the egoistic-only condition (6.48%) than in the two

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