Reports

When others cross psychological distance to help: Highlighting prosocial actions toward outgroups encourages philanthropy

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has found several factors that affect people's willingness to participate in philanthropy. In the present article, we explore whether people feel more inspired to engage in philanthropy after learning about individuals who help targets who are socially close or distant from those individuals. Specifically, we propose that when people learn about others who help socially distant (vs. close) targets, such prosocial actions will be more salient because it violates people's lay belief about distance and helping; therefore, people will be more attracted to the idea of engaging in prosocial actions after learning that prosocial actions have been directed toward socially distant (vs. close) targets. We present four experiments in support of our hypotheses.

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"People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy."
Bruce Wayne (Batman Begins)

In the United States and abroad, there have been recent calls by public officials for citizens to engage in more philanthropy (Scott, 2009; Watt, 2010). Such an increase in prosocial behavior is likely to result in benefits at both a personal and social level, as donating and volunteering have been linked to better health (Pillemer, Fuller-Rowell, Reid, & Wells, 2010) as well as a better economy (Ball, 2010).

Several factors affect people's willingness to participate in philanthropy (e.g., personality, resource availability; for reviews see Andreoni, 2006; Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). Highlighting other individuals' prosocial actions is a particularly powerful way of encouraging more helping behavior (Croson & Shang, 2008; Fishbach et al., 2011; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). The media often highlights cases in which individuals engage in prosocial actions toward beneficiaries who are socially close to those individuals, such as donors who give to recipients who have the same academic affiliation (Eaton, 2011) or ethnicity (Associated Press, 2011). The media also frequently highlight cases in which individuals engage in prosocial actions toward beneficiaries who are socially distant from those individuals, such as people who sponsor foreign children (Kristof, 2009) or volunteer in foreign countries (Chen, 2009). In the present article, we examine whether people feel more inspired to help others after learning about individuals who help targets who are socially close or distant from those individuals.

Theoretical background

People are generally less willing to engage in prosocial actions toward targets who are socially distant from them (Rachlin & Jones, 2008). For example, people are less likely to help targets who are genetically unrelated to them (Kanekar, Pinto, & Nazareth, 1990) and outgroup members (Levine & Thompson, 2004). Given that people typically act more prosocially toward socially closer targets, people likely develop a lay belief that greater social distance between potential helpers and beneficiaries reduces the likelihood of help. Indirect evidence supports this claim, as people sometimes increase their physical distance, which is often taken as an indicator of social distance (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008), from targets in order to lower their obligation to help those targets (Pancer, 1988; Pancer, McMullen, Kabatoff, Johnson, & Pond, 1979). Such increased distance signals that people are aware of the negative relationship between distance and the likelihood of behaving in a prosocial manner.

We posit that when people learn about others who help socially distant (vs. close) targets, such prosocial action will be more salient to people because such actions violate their lay belief about distance and helping. Given that people are sometimes more attracted to uncommon, unique experiences over familiar, typical experiences (Ang, Lee, & Leong, 2007; Schwarz, 1972; Stamps, 1997; Wood, 2010), we predict that people will feel more motivated or inspired to engage in prosocial behavior after learning about others who act prosocially toward socially distant (vs. close) targets. Essentially, we propose that others' prosocial actions toward socially distant targets shake people out of apathy and inspire them to help others. That is, when others engage in prosocial behavior toward socially distant (vs. close) targets, such behavior should stand out more to people because it

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violates their expectations about how others typically behave and consequently should lead people to be more attracted to the idea of engaging in prosocial behavior.

Pilot study

Before examining whether exposure to others' prosocial actions toward socially distant (vs. close) targets inspires participants to engage in more prosocial behavior, we wanted to gather evidence that such actions are likely to be more salient to people. In this study, we presented participants with situations that might elicit prosocial behavior and assessed the salience of prosocial behavior directed towards outgroup and ingroup members via measures of the perceived frequency, baserate, and typicality of such behavior.

Method

We recruited 56 individuals (35 females, $M_{age} = 36.82, SD_{age} = 12.58$) in the US via Amazon's Mechanical Turk system (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). We presented participants with three scenarios, which we created based on real disasters.

Manipulation

We randomly told some participants that the disasters affected people in the US (ingroup) or a foreign country (outgroup). Specifically, some participants read:

Imagine that a major collapse occurred in a coalmine in the United States, leaving 33 miners trapped 2300 feet from the surface.

Imagine that a massive neighborhood fire broke out in the United States, leaving 1732 people homeless.

Imagine that an earthquake occurred in the United States, killing 317 people and injuring 4970 people.

Other participants read:

Imagine that a major collapse occurred in a coalmine overseas (e.g., in Germany or China), leaving 33 miners trapped 2300 feet from the surface.

Imagine that a massive neighborhood fire broke out overseas (e.g., in Brazil or Turkey), leaving 1732 people homeless.

Imagine that an earthquake occurred overseas (e.g., France or South Africa), killing 317 people and injuring 4970 people.

Measures

After presenting the scenarios, we asked participants how common, unusual (revere-scored), and typical it would be for most people living in the US to pray for the mining victims, donate money to help the fire victims, and donate clothes and food to help the earthquake victims, respectively. We indexed how common each type of action seemed by averaging across items for each scenario ($\alpha s \geq .84$); higher numbers indicated that the prosocial behavior was thought to be more common and thus less likely to stand out to participants.

Results and discussion

Participants indicated that they believed it was less common for people in the US to pray, donate money, and donate clothes and food to victims in a foreign country rather than their own country ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.35$, N = 24 vs. $M = 5.80, SD = 1.37$, N = 32, $t(54) =$ 2.59, $p = .01$, $d = .70$; $M = 4.15, SD = 1.00$, N = 24 vs. $M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.49$, N = 32, $t(54) = 2.02$, $p = .05$, $d = .55$; $M = 4.80, SD = 1.20$, N = 23 vs. $M = 5.64, SD = 1.37$, N = 32, $t(53) = 2.36$, $p = .02$, $d = .65$). Therefore, we feel confident that prosocial actions towards socially distant targets are generally more salient to people. Next, we begin to explore the effects of others' prosocial actions toward close vs. distant targets on participants' own prosocial behavior.

Experiment 1

We notified participants that individuals were participating in a civic program that benefited targets who were either socially close to those individuals (same nationality) or socially distant from those individuals (different nationality). We then assessed participants' willingness to volunteer their time with the program. We predicted that participants would volunteer more of their time after we highlighted how others were helping socially distant (vs. close) targets.

Method

We recruited 222 University of Texas students (131 females; $M_{age} = 20.63, SD_{age} = 2.30$). After participants completed an unrelated research study, we directed participants to a website that notified them of a supposedly real civic program that benefited disadvantaged children.

Manipulations

We randomly told participants that other students (i.e., helpers) were already participating in the program and manipulated the amount of social distance between these helpers and the beneficiaries (disadvantaged children). That is, we told some participants that helpers and the disadvantaged children that they were helping had the same nationality, and told other participants that helpers and disadvantaged children had different nationalities. We also explored the impact of participants' own social distance from the helpers by manipulating the amount of social distance between participants and these helpers. That is, we told some participants that helpers attended the same university as the participants, and told other participants that helpers attended a different university as the participants. Specifically, participants in the *small distance from helpers, small distance between helpers and beneficiaries condition* read:

A group of students from UT-Austin are organizing a "Schools, Mentoring and Resource Team (SMART)" program that provides middle school scholarships for disadvantaged children in Austin, Texas. The SMART program offers not only funding for education, but also social support including summer camps and high school placement assistance.

Participants in the *small distance from helpers, large distance between helpers and beneficiaries condition* read:

A group of students from UT-Austin are currently in a study abroad program in Beijing, China. These students are organizing a "Schools, Mentoring and Resource Team (SMART)" program that provides middle school scholarships for disadvantaged children in Beijing, China. The SMART program offers not only funding for education, but also social support including summer camps and high school placement assistance.

Participants in the *large distance from helpers, small distance between helpers and beneficiaries condition* read:

A group of students from Peking University in Beijing, China are organizing a "Schools, Mentoring and Resource Team (SMART)" program that provides middle school scholarships for disadvan-