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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

The Braggart'S Dilemma: on the Social Rewards and Penalties of Advertising Prosocial Behavior

Alixandra Barasch, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Deborah Small, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Emma E. Levine, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Jonathan Berman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

People often advertise, or brag about, their good deeds to others in order to signal their generosity. We show when bragging about prosocial behavior succeeds or fails, and further demonstrate why bragging about prosocial behavior is different from bragging about personal achievements.

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Prosocial Choices and Consequences

Chair: Michal Herzenstein, University of Delaware, USA

Paper #1: Crowdfunding to Make a Difference: The Role of Choice in Funding Social Ventures

Scott Sonenshein, Rice University, USA
Michal Herzenstein, University of Delaware, USA
Utpal M. Dholakia, Rice University, USA

Paper #2: Giving to What We Want Instead of to What We Should

Cynthia Cryder, Washington University at St. Louis, USA
Simona Botti, London Business School, UK
Yveta Simonyan, University of Birmingham, UK

Paper #3: Leave Them Smiling: How Concretely Framing a Prosocial Goal Creates More Happiness

Melanie Rudd, University of Houston, USA
Jennifer Aaker, Stanford University, USA
Michael I. Norton, Harvard Business School, USA

Paper #4: The Braggart's Dilemma: On the Social Rewards and Penalties of Advertising Prosocial Behavior

Jonathan Z. Berman, University of Pennsylvania, USA
Emma E. Levine, University of Pennsylvania, USA
Alixandra Barasch, University of Pennsylvania, USA
Deborah A. Small, University of Pennsylvania, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

The objective of this session is to increase our understanding of prosocial behavior. About two thirds of all Americans engaged in prosocial behavior in 2012 by either giving money or volunteering their time to help others. However, this number might be a conservative estimate because a substantial number of prosocial behaviors are undocumented, such as giving money to homeless people or buying a particular brand from a company that donates some of the proceeds versus a company that does not. Opportunities to engage in prosocial behavior are ample but for most people resources are limited. In this session, the papers seek to address the following question: How do people choose among prosocial opportunities and how do they feel after the behavior was carried out?

Understanding prosocial behaviors and their consequences is important and can benefit both organizations and individuals in making better decisions. In a world where hunger, disease, and impoverishment are still prevalent, charities and other organizations should weave prosocial activities into their functioning and increase public appeal. Individuals, on the other hand, can engage in prosocial behavior with many charities and organizations, and therefore should learn how to best choose among these opportunities.

With four papers, this session addresses these issues as it integrates various research perspectives to identify factors affecting the entire decision making process, starting with how consumers choose where to give, through how consumers feel after they give, to how others perceive those who give. The papers complement each other in that they examine different aspects of prosocial behavior using different methodologies including analysis of archival data and laboratory studies with some innovative procedures.

Sonenshein, Herzenstein, and Dholakia show that social ventures posted on Kickstarter.com increase their likelihood of getting funded if they offer consumers very few or many donation choices, thus providing an alternative perspective to the "choice overload hypothesis". The authors show that backers of those ventures engage in intuitive, rather than rational, decision making. Cryder, Botti,

and Simonyan further examine donation choices and show that despite believing a cause to be low priority people prefer to give to that cause, over a more pressing cause, because the former is more appealing and personally satisfying to them. While the extent of a cause's neediness is valued as more important, actual donations reveal that the cause's attractiveness is actually more important. Rudd, Aaker, and Norton ask: How can we maximize the happiness experienced by people who engage in prosocial behaviors? These authors show that framing the goal of a prosocial act concretely rather than abstractly increases the giver's happiness because the giver focuses on the logistics of achieving the act versus the broader meaning of the act itself. Finally, Berman, Levine, Barasch, and Small show that when people engage in a prosocial behavior privately but then brag about it publicly (on Facebook), they are considered more generous, compared with those who do not brag. However when people engage in a prosocial behavior publicly and also brag about it, they are considered less generous, compared with those who do not brag.

Crowdfunding to Make a Difference: The Role of Choice in Funding Social Ventures

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Internet has allowed individuals across the globe to contribute to and even actively participate in ventures influencing pressing social issues. The growing prevalence of online venues that support social issues is due in part to so-called crowdfunding organizations that use the Internet to bring together geographically dispersed individuals to make small contributions to ventures. By widening the pool of potential contributors and matching entrepreneurs with potential backers across the globe with minimal transaction costs, crowdfunding has altered the process of obtaining resources. But this model of resource acquisition comes with some significant challenges. For example, ventures must compete with numerous others from all over the world for attention. There is also greater potential for fraud because of limited regulation, a fact that makes the decision making process more difficult for potential contributors (Herzenstein, Sonenshein, and Dholakia 2011; Sonenshein, Herzenstein, and Dholakia 2011).

Given limited regulation but wider participation, a key question is how potential contributors decide which ventures to support, especially when most are developed and pitched by unknown and unproven organizers. Early analyses of this question (Edwards 1954; Harbaugh 1998) applied a rational utility maximizing framework supporting more choices ad infinitum, but research over the past decade has convincingly placed boundary conditions on this economic argument. Based on individuals' limited cognitive abilities, this growing body of research has found that an overload of choices can lead to diminishing returns (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Schwartz 2005). Scholars embracing this "choice overload hypothesis" (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd 2010) have found that decision making tends to follow an inverted U-shaped relationship such that initially more choices lead to favorable processes and outcomes up to an inflection point beyond which additional options lead to diminished outcomes for the decision maker.

Although the choice overload perspective offers an important qualification to the economic decision making paradigm, both perspectives assume that individuals rationally process information, and differ only on the role of cognitive limitations in decision making.

But for social ventures, it is not clear whether economic assumptions about rational decision making best explain how contributors allocate financial resources. Indeed, some research suggests that individuals are less prone to follow a calculative, rational mindset when considering support for social issues (Ashford and Barton 2007; Sonenshein 2007, 2011). Individuals may instead adopt a prosocial motivation in which they desire to have a positive impact on other people, groups, or organizations (Grant 2007). We argue that this focus on “the other” fundamentally alters how contributors make decisions about funding social ventures, thereby requiring new theory development beyond economic models of choice and the choice overload hypothesis.

To that end we develop and test theory we label “the intuitive leader impact hypothesis”. This hypothesis posits that individuals abandon the deliberate information processing approach, instead relying on intuitive judgments about a venture’s leader. We suggest that contributors focus less on maximizing their own utility and more on making a difference for others. Since most people who wish to help others do it through donations to organizations, charities, or ventures, the competency of the organization and its leaders is of utmost important. We hypothesize that organizers of social ventures offering potential donors few or too many donation choices will be viewed as more competent because they either carefully designed the collection of choices they offer or they exerted significant effort to offer something for everyone, respectively. As a result, these ventures are more likely to get funded and be successful in the longer term when compared to those offering a medium number of choices. This pattern represents a flipping of the choice overload hypothesis. We test these predictions in three studies.

In study 1, we used data scraped from Kickstarter.com, currently the largest online crowdfunding organization. Our dataset includes over a thousand ventures posted on kickstarter.com during July and August 2011 that were coded by trained RAs for whether they have a social mission or not. Controlling for the funding goal and other financial measures we show that ventures with a social mission are more likely to fund when they offer few or many funding choices—a U-shaped relationship between the number of choices and decision making outcomes—thus reversing the choice overload hypothesis. Projects that do not have a social mission follow the choice overload hypothesis—an inverted U-shaped relationship between the number of choices and the likelihood of funding. In study 2, we replicated and extended our field-based findings using a controlled laboratory experiment. Building on a real venture from kickstarter.com we described a band that wishes to raise money to record a new album. We manipulated whether the venture has a social mission (donating some of the proceeds to poor children) or not and the number of donation choices it offers (2, 4, 6, 8, or 10 choices), and asked participants to split \$500 between this venture and future ventures. We further asked participants a series of measures aiming to assess the competency of the venture’s leader. We replicate the results from study 1 and show that participants made more intuitive (faster) decisions for the social venture, and that perceptions of the venture leader’s competency mediate the effect of the number of donation choices on funding. Finally, in study 3, we surveyed Kickstarter venture leaders whose ventures have a social mission to examine the relationship between the number of choices leaders offered potential contributors and the venture’s success one year after launch. We find that leaders of ventures with few or many donation choices described the status of their ventures as being more successful than leaders of ventures with average number of choices.

To summarize, our mixed methods approach helps ground a new perspective on choice theory by showing how intuitive processes

prompted by concerns for others challenge traditional economic theory and invert the choice overload hypothesis.

Giving to What We Want Instead of to What We Should

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is a puzzling phenomenon in charitable giving that people give a lot of money to seemingly low-priority causes (e.g., sports fundraisers) while other highly pressing causes remain severely underfunded (e.g., water sanitation in destitute countries). In this project, we hypothesize that a fundamental reason why needy causes are ignored is because of a need to self-enhance via others’ positive attributes. Therefore, despite a strong and widespread belief that the neediest causes should receive priority, causes that are attractive or appealing can triumph over more needy alternatives.

Study 1 investigated people’s explicit preferences about the importance of neediness in resource allocation decisions. Two-hundred and twenty-eight participants generated an open-ended answer to the question: “If multiple individuals needed help and you were deciding which one to donate to, what would be the single most important thing you would consider when deciding which person to donate to?” Forty-six percent of participants spontaneously answered that neediness was the most important criterion. The next most popular criterion was the impact of the donation, receiving only 8% of responses; all other possible answers received a lower percentage of endorsement.

Study 2 investigated preferences for needy versus attractive alternatives in real allocation decisions. Participants viewed pictures of four girls who had received successful cleft palate surgery from the charity Smile Train. A pre-test verified that one of the girls, Angelica, was judged to be significantly more attractive or “cute” ($p < .0001$) and significantly less needy ($p < .0005$) than the other three girls.

In the experiment, participants were informed that each of the girls needed financial support to move on with their lives post-surgery. Participants selected one of the girls to support and were told that the researchers would send \$1 on their behalf to support the girl that the participant chose. The experiment included 3 conditions: 1) a control condition in which participants were simply asked to choose a girl to support, 2) an “Attractiveness” condition in which participants were asked to explicitly rate the cuteness of each girl before making their allocation decision, and 3) a “Neediness” condition in which participants were asked to explicitly rate the perceived neediness of each girl before making the allocation decision.

Participants exhibited a significant preference for allocating to Angelica, the cutest and least needy girl, over all other girls in the Control condition ($p < .05$) and the Attractiveness condition ($p < .01$). Results were significantly different, however, in the Neediness condition; in this condition, participants chose Angelica at a rate equal to that at which the other girls were chosen ($p = .30$) and were significantly less likely to choose Angelica than in the Control condition ($p < .05$).

Study 3 tested how self-involvement influences preferences for appealing options. Participants either indicated which child they would choose to sponsor themselves (self condition) or indicated which child they would advise an anonymous donor to sponsor (advisor condition). When participants chose for themselves, they exhibited a significantly greater preference for Angelica than when they advised others ($p < 0.01$).

Study 4 manipulated the presence of choice to further investigate the idea that self-enhancement underlies the preference for appealing options. Research has shown that choice is often used as a means to

express one's own self (Iyengar 2010) and, at least in the Western world, can be seen as a way to define oneself as an individual (Markus and Schwartz 2010). In a 2x2 experimental design, participants viewed either post-surgery (attractive) or pre-surgery (unattractive) photos of a mixed-gender group of Smile Train children. Participants then chose to allocate to a particular child (choice condition) or were randomly assigned to allocate to a particular child (no-choice condition). Subsequently, participants were asked how much they would donate to Smile Train. We observed an interaction such that participants in the no-choice condition reported giving equivalent amounts to Smile Train regardless of whether the children they allocated to were attractive or unattractive. However, participants in the choice condition, who had an opportunity to boost positive self associations via their choices, gave more when the children were attractive compared to unattractive.

Finally, because choices based on neediness may not satisfy donors' need for self-enhancement from their generous acts, we hypothesized in Study 5 that explicit reminders of neediness may have perverse consequences on generosity in the long run. Participants were randomly assigned to the Control and Neediness conditions from Study 2, and also completed a follow-up measure that asked participants how likely they would be to donate to the charity Smile Train in one year. We once again observed that while Angelica was preferred in the Control condition ($p < .0001$), this preference disappeared once participants explicitly considered neediness before the resource allocation choice ($p = .55$). When asked about donations in one year, however, participants indicated that they would donate significantly less if they had been in the Neediness condition compared to if they had been in the Control condition ($p < .05$). Considerations of neediness therefore appear to be a double edged sword—they increase evenhanded allocations in the short term but decrease overall kindness in response to future requests.

One of the most intense debates in the history of Social Psychology centered around the question of whether human generosity was altruistic or egoistic at its core (Batson, 1991; Cialdini et al., 1987). The current project sheds light on this issue. Although people carry with them an explicit belief that neediness *should* triumph all in resource allocation, actual judgments of resource allocation often are based on what we *want* to give to--appealing and attractive options. Although people can behave in a truly altruistic fashion, such as when focusing on others' neediness, doing so appears to squelch future generosity because it does not satisfy a primary motivation to self-enhance via appealing causes.

Leave Them Smiling: How Concretely Framing a Prosocial Goal Creates More Happiness

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has demonstrated that behaving prosocially creates a "helper's high" (Luks, 1988) and increases subjective well-being (Anik et al., 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2004; Post, 2005; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). But, do certain prosocial pursuits more effectively increase personal happiness? We explore this question, examining one factor linking prosocial acts and happiness: How the goal of the act is framed.

Goals can be framed at various abstraction levels (Emmons & Kaiser, 1996; Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001), and striving for concrete (versus abstract) goals has been correlated with less psychological distress and greater well-being (Carver et al., 1988; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Emmons, 1992). Building upon these results, we hypothesize that prosocial acts lead to greater giver happiness

when the act's goal is framed concretely (e.g., make someone smile) versus abstractly (e.g., make someone happy).

Why might a prosocial goal's abstraction level influence personal happiness? When a goal is concretely-framed (versus abstractly-framed), one's expectations of achieving the goal may be better calibrated (due to greater focus on the "how" and logistics versus the "why" and broader meaning of goal-directed actions; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, 1989). Moreover, the outcome of goal-directed actions may be perceived more favorably (due to concrete goals having clearer standards of success; Emmons, 1992; Locke & Latham, 1990). Importantly, these characteristics should enable concretely-framed (versus abstractly-framed) prosocial goals to shrink the gaps between people's expectations of success and reality (Kopalle & Lehmann, 2001; Ojasalo, 2001; Schwartz, 2005; Walker & Baker, 2000)—and smaller expectation-reality gaps are associated with greater satisfaction and well-being (Davis, 1981; Michalos, 1985; Schwartz, 2005; Thomas, 1981; Vermunt et al., 1989). Therefore, we predicted that concretely (versus abstractly) framing a prosocial goal increases personal happiness by reducing the gap between givers' expectations of accomplishing the goal and the actual outcome of their goal-directed acts. Because people routinely incorrectly predict how much happiness things in life will bring (Aknin et al., 2009; Brickman et al., 1978; Buehler & McFarland, 2001), including the hedonic benefits of performing prosocial acts (Dunn et al., 2008), we also predicted that people would not recognize that concretely-framed (versus abstractly-framed) prosocial goals cultivate more personal happiness.

Experiment 1 instructed participants to perform an act of kindness within 24 hours. Manipulating the abstraction of the prosocial goal of the act, participants randomly assigned to the concrete [abstract] condition were asked to do something to make someone else smile [happy]. Twenty-four hours later, in a follow-up survey, participants reported the extent their act created happiness in their own life, how well the outcome of their act met their expectations for accomplishing their assigned goal (i.e., their expectation-reality gap), and the specificity of the goal they had in mind when performing their act.

Manipulation checks confirmed concrete (versus abstract) condition participants had a more specific goal in mind when performing their act. Two ANOVAs then revealed concrete (versus abstract) condition participants felt the outcome of their act better met their goal achievement expectations and felt their act created more personal happiness. Importantly, a mediation analysis demonstrated that these shrunken expectation-reality gaps are what increased the personal happiness of those in the concrete (versus abstract) condition.

Experiment 2 ruled out several alternative accounts and began investigating the accuracy of people's prosocial goal predictions. Participants were pairs of friends—one friend served as the "giver," the other the "receiver." Placed in separate rooms, the friends answered questions about their friendship and were then told they would get a three-minute-long break (in a room with their friend) before completing another survey (in separate rooms). At this time, givers randomly assigned to the concrete [abstract] condition were asked to do something to make their friend (i.e., the receiver) smile [happy] during this break. After the break, the givers reported their current happiness, their beliefs (before the break) about their assigned (i.e., how challenging it would be, their ability to accomplish it, and their expectations for succeeding at it), how well their act actually met their expectations for accomplishing their assigned goal, and their perceptions of the size and concreteness of their act. The

receivers reported their current happiness and their happiness (and smiling) during the break.

Manipulation checks confirmed givers in the concrete (versus abstract) condition viewed their prosocial goal as more concrete (versus abstract). ANOVAs then revealed concrete (versus abstract) condition givers felt happier after performing their act and that the outcome of their act better met their expectations. As in Experiment 1, a mediation analysis demonstrated that their increased personal happiness was driven by these smaller expectation-reality gaps. Additional ANOVAs showed these effects could not be explained by differences in the type of receiver (e.g., a friend), closeness of the giver-receiver relationships, givers' perceptions of their act's size, or receivers' actual happiness (or smiling) during and after the break—as these factors did not differ across conditions. Three final ANOVAs revealed givers in both conditions had (before the break) viewed their goal as equally challenging, their ability to accomplish it equally great, and their expectations for success equally high—initial indications that people would not recognize the hedonic advantage of pursuing concretely-framed (versus abstractly-framed) prosocial goals.

Experiment 3 directly tested whether people would correctly predict which prosocial goal was better for personal happiness. Participants, assigned to the concrete or abstract condition, imagined taking part in Experiment 1 and predicted their responses to the follow-up survey. Subsequently, the two prosocial goals from Experiment 1 were described, and participants rated each goal (from 1-100) on how much personal happiness it would create.

An ANOVA revealed concrete (versus abstract) condition participants did not correctly predict their act would create more personal happiness. Furthermore, repeated measures ANOVAs, with the goal ratings as the within-subjects factor, revealed participants (within and across conditions) incorrectly rated the goal of making someone happy (versus smile) as able to create more personal happiness.

Conclusion. We extend the prosociality literature, showing that, contrary to people's intuitions, an act of kindness with a concretely-framed (versus abstractly-framed) goal leads to greater personal happiness—an effect driven by shrunken expectation-reality gaps.

The Braggart's Dilemma: On the Social Rewards and Penalties of Advertising Prosocial Behavior

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Public displays of generosity are ubiquitous. People often signal their generosity to others by wearing t-shirts or announcing their good deeds to wide audiences on social networking sites. One reason it is surprising to see so many people advertise their good deeds is that there exists a strong norm to be modest about prosocial behavior. Further, individuals go to great lengths to communicate to that their good deeds are not motivated by self-interest (Ariely, Bracha & Meier, 2009). However, successfully demonstrating generosity has positive returns on reputation (Flynn, 2003), making it appealing to publicize one's good deeds to others.

We examine the role of bragging about prosocial behavior on attributions of generosity. We expect that bragging communicates that an actor has done a good deed, but also signals that the actor was motivated by selfish desires. Thus, an individual whose good deeds are unknown to others will be seen as more generous when he brags, because it informs others of his prosocial behavior. However, an individual whose good deeds are already known to others will be seen as less generous when he brags, because bragging no longer

provides new information about his behavior, and instead signals that his actions were motivated by reputation concerns.

In Study 1a, participants (N = 201) were asked to imagine running into a coworker named Jeff around town. During their walk, they passed by a group taking donations for a local children's hospital. We then manipulated (a) whether the participant saw Jeff donate to the charity and (a) whether Jeff later publicized his donation on Facebook. Participants then rated Jeff on a 12-item charitable credit measure, which included items such as how moral, nice, and altruistic is Jeff. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant Donation Visibility X Facebook Post crossover interaction ($p < .001$). Participants in the Unknown condition gave Jeff more charitable credit when he bragged ($M = 5.38$) than when he did not brag ($M = 4.63$, $t(99) = 4.65$, $p < .001$). However, when the donation was Known to others, participants gave Jeff less credit when he bragged ($M = 5.24$) versus when he did not brag ($M = 5.72$, $t(98) = -2.66$, $p = .009$).

Study 1b tests the robustness of these results using a more subtle form of bragging. Specifically, we manipulated whether Jeff wore a button that advertised his donation to charity or one that supported his college basketball team. We replicate all results.

Studies 2 and 3 show why bragging about prosocial behavior is different from other forms of bragging. When prosocial behavior is already known, bragging becomes self-defeating: by telling others of their good deeds, a braggart is seen as having selfish motives which undermines the perception that he is generous. However, bragging about personal achievements and gains for the self do not undermine perceptions of motivation; for self-interested pursuits, image concerns are not directly at odds with perceptions about personal qualities. Thus, we expect that—unlike prosocial behavior—bragging about self-interested pursuits will have no effect on perceptions of the trait conveyed in a brag.

In Study 2, participants (N = 203) imagined running into a colleague named Jeff. We manipulated (a) whether Jeff just finished volunteering for charity or running a 10k race and (b) whether he bragged about his achievement on Facebook. Participants then rated (a) Jeff's intrinsic motivation for helping others [running in the race] and (b) how much charitable [athletic] credit Jeff deserved for his accomplishment. In order to compare credit across conditions, we first standardized our credit measure across the two activity types. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant Activity Type X Facebook Post interaction, $p = .011$. In the Prosocial condition participants rated Jeff as being less charitable when he bragged ($M = -0.31$) than when he did not brag ($M = 0.33$), $t(100) = -3.38$, $p = .001$. However, in the Athletic condition, participants did not evaluate Jeff's athleticism differently when he bragged ($M = 0.04$) versus when he did not brag ($M = -0.04$), $t(96) = 0.72$, $p = .72$.

We also ran a moderated mediation analysis using the bootstrap procedure to test the process by which bragging affects credit. We predicted that in the Prosocial condition, a braggart will be seen as less intrinsically motivated to help which will reduce the credit he receives. However, in the Athletic condition, there will be no such mediation. Consistent with our hypothesis, we find a significant indirect effect for the Prosocial condition (Indirect Effect = -0.66 , $SE = 0.15$; 95% C.I. = $[-0.97, -0.39]$), but not for the Athletic condition (Indirect Effect = 0.00 , $SE = 0.14$; 95% C.I. = $[-0.26, 0.27]$).

It is possible that participants felt that running a 10k required more effort than volunteering, and bragging is more acceptable for high effort behaviors. In Study 3, (N = 203) we hold effort constant by comparing bragging about spending money on oneself versus bragging about spending money on the self. Specifically, we manipulated (a) whether Jeff donated \$60 to charity or purchased a \$60 tennis racket and (b) whether he bragged about it on Facebook.

We then proceeded in the same manner as in Study 2, and replicate our previous findings. Specifically, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant Expenditure x Facebook Post interaction, $p = .041$. In the Spending on Others condition, participants rated Jeff as being less charitable when he bragged ($M = -0.23$) than when he did not brag ($M = 0.23$), $t(99) = -2.37$, $p = .02$. However, in the Spending on Self condition, participants did not evaluate Jeff's athleticism differently when he bragged ($M = 0.05$) versus when he did not brag ($M = -0.05$), $t(101) = 0.55$, $p = .59$. Additionally, we replicate the moderated mediation results from Study 2.

In sum, bragging communicates that an individual has acted generously, but also signals that the braggart was not motivated by pure intentions. For any prosocial behavior, this illuminates the fundamental tension between doing good and appearing good.

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