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The money will be well spent: Even uninformative arguments boost prosocial and prevent from antisocial behavior

Abstract: *Although the majority of people value the idea of helping others, they often take no particular action. In two field studies we investigated the impact of differently justified requests for spontaneous charity donations and for antisocial behavior like stealing. In the experiments, unwatched stands with cookies and money jars were placed on a crowded city square with one of three different notes: (1) detailed prosocial justification, (2) general justification or (3) no justification. After testing almost 500 participants, we show that mere general arguments can both increase prosocial behavior and decrease antisocial behavior. Additionally, detailed prosocial justification augments generosity, causing people voluntarily to pay more than required. We conclude that prosocial (compliance with request) and antisocial (stealing) behavior is guided by automatic processes that track that there is any reason for the request, while generosity is guided by reflective assessment of the justification of the request.*

Keywords: *compliance, cognitive control, automatic processing, Social Behavior*

Introduction

Helping others is a norm valued by society, therefore individuals declare a readiness to engage in such actions (Schwartz, 2010). Adherence to social norms is one psychological concept explaining prosocial behavior. Social psychologists emphasize the importance of social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976; Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012), which explains people's behavior in the context of social costs and social rewards. According to evolutionary psychology, prosocial behavior stems from either the notion of kin selection, where helping a genetic relative is favored by natural selection or by the reciprocity norm, which leads people to "repay" help received (Aronson, Wilson, & Sommers, 2015).

However, the above theories do not explain charitable prosocial behavior: the acts of giving money, food or other types of help to people in need. Beneficiaries of such charity are people, animals or organizations distant from the donor and, moreover, in many cases the donor remains anonymous. Thus, the motivation to act in such cases can differ from when helping kin-members (Maner & Gailliot, 2007). In addition to altruism, egoism constitutes a motive for prosocial acts, with research showing that engaging in prosocial behavior may increase one's self-esteem (Batson & Shaw, 1991).

Does prosocial mean automatic?

As stated previously, people's declarations of help may be connected with valued social norms. Greene and Haidt (2002) claimed that social norms are activated automatically, without people's detailed analysis of a particular situation. Psychologists also agreed that attitudes are usually coherent with behaviors (Kim & Hunter, 1993a; Kim & Hunter, 1993b, but see Aronson et al., 2015). Yet, sometimes there is a discrepancy between what individuals think they should do and what they actually do, especially in the context of morality (Francis et al., 2016). Given this, we were

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interested in boosting prosocial behavior coherent with broadly accepted social norms.

According to recently prominent dual-process models of cognition, the majority of human decisions are rigid, automatic and unreflective, and only a minority of them are deliberative (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Kahneman, 2011; Pennycook, Fugelsang, & Koehler, 2015). Initial intuitive responses are mostly cued by habits, beliefs or internalized social rules. These can be (but do not have to be) overridden by effortful rule-based processing at the cost of using working memory resources. People are unaware of the true sources of their decisions, typically assuming they are reflexive (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002).

An illustrative example of the automatic control of behavior is compliance to *placebic* arguments (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). Here, people who waited in a queue to a copying machine were willing to give-up their place when asked to do so by a person using the justification "*because I want to make copies*". This justification has the structure of an argument but does not give any real reasons. Nevertheless people comply with requests of this type, especially when the request is minor and the situation is routine (Białek, 2012). This suggests that decisions about engagement in a low cost situation are made automatically, without semantic analysis. However, because people often face repeated requests for help, they need to develop methods to avoid being exploited, and their automatic responses require revision. This is why many individuals do not consider any requests from strangers and refuse to help in advance.

Referring to automatic behaviors, taken ritually and habitually, Langer (1992) introduced the term mindlessness. This concept applies to rigid behavior that occurs with no or little conscious awareness, and results from specificity and context of the information provided. Therefore, in a charitable situation people may rely on the context of the situation or authority of the asking institution or person and automatically accept or reject the request.

Is prosocial behavior exclusively guided by external social norm?

Evidence for the innate and internalized character of prosocial behavior is provided by Rand, who showed that under time pressure people tend to cooperate more when based on their gut feelings, and tend to be more utility-maximizing and self-interested when they reflect (Rand, Greene, & Nowak, 2012). Rand proposes that people are intuitively altruistic, yet given a chance to reflect they tend to adjust their behavior towards the optimum for a given situation. So, for a one-shot contact with an unknown person they tend to cooperate less (i.e. be less pro-social) as they see no direct gain from behaving prosaically (Rand et al., 2014).

Another piece of evidence comes from the study of mortality salience that shows that increasing the salience of one's own core beliefs by reminding oneself of ones' mortality boosts prosocial behavior (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002) and amplifies the satisfaction gained from such behavior (Zaleskiewicz, Gasiorowska, & Kesebir, 2015). Considering the above research, prosocial behavior seems to have an automatic – rather than deliberative – character.

When the ability to reason is limited, people tend to act according to the moral rules. Specifically, under cognitive load or time pressure people tend to show deontological morality – a strict obedience to moral rules (Suter & Hertwig, 2011; Trémolière, Neys, & Bonnefon, 2012; Białek & De Neys, 2017). Acting to maximize a utility at the cost of breaking the moral rules, although rooted in human intuitions (Białek & De Neys, 2016), is correlated with greater working memory capacity (Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008) and cognitive reflection (Paxton, Ungar, & Greene, 2012). All of this suggests that the antisocial behavior requires one to override his moral intuitions and is not a result of failed control over his own impulses.

Kimbrough and Vostroknutov (2016) showed that prosocial behavior in experimental games (trust, dictator, and ultimatum) was driven by social norms. Individuals who were sensitive to social norms followed well--established written or informal rules when they decided or acted. Therefore, a particular behavior is judged by comparing it to the social convention. As a majority of norms are prosocial, people predominantly choose prosocial behavior. House (2018), confirmed that the effect of social norms on prosocial behavior occurs in adults as well as in children. Willingness to help is also claimed to be an important factor of shaping interpersonal relations (Kołodziej, 2016).

Summarizing, on a declarative level, people usually agree that they should help others, especially those in danger or difficult financial situations. However, a large number of daily help requests makes us more inclined to automatically refuse them rather than fulfill them.

In this context, the following question arises: how should a help request be formulated to increase the chances of its fulfillment. Two alternative prosocial arguments are considered: general (i.e., money will be "well spent") and detailed argument (i.e., money will be spent on a particular charity organization: Paluch Animal Shelter). A straightforward prediction is that the more prosocial the argument is, the more it can persuade individuals to make donations. A general justification, one that provides no valid justification for the request, can also increase compliance, if only people do not engage in deliberation, and rely on the fact that there is *some* argument provided. If, however, individuals reflect when facing request, they should act only when the justification is detailed.

Because our interest was mostly concerned with voluntary, freely made actions (rather than compliance to direct requests), we did not approach individuals directly with requests for donations. Instead, we arranged situations in which people had to be proactive and make a donation by themselves.

Pilot study

We tested the materials used in the experiment by asking 6 colleagues in the faculty of Economic

Table 1. Evaluation of the arguments to be used in study 1 and 2

	No justification	General justification	Detailed justification
Who will gain: (1) requester – (10) others	1.83	4.83	9.50
How prosocial is to fulfill the request: (1) Not at all – (10) Very much so	2.50	4.83	9.17
How well justified is the request: (1) Not at all – (10) Very much so	1.00	5.17	8.67

Psychology at Kozminski University about the degree to which the requests describe prosocial character of the requester. Specifically, we asked them about the beneficent of the request (requester vs. others), level of justification of the request, and directly, how prosocial it is to fulfill the request. Collected data is presented in table 1.

We compared the ratings with repeated-measures 3 (argument: no argument, general, and detailed justification) x 3 (item: gain, provinciality, justification) ANOVA. The results showed a significant effect of argument, $F(2,4) = 128.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .985$, but no effect of item $F(2,4) = 2.25$, $p = .222$, $\eta^2_p = .529$ nor its interaction ($F < 1$). As it is showed in the table, the mean rates of all three questions were the lowest with no justification, while they were highest when *detailed prosocial* justification was presented. The *general justification* gained rates in the middle of the scale.

Experiment 1

In this experiment we tested the impact of differently justified requests on spontaneous charity giving. We placed unwatched stands with cookies and money jars on crowded city squares. We expected a *general prosocial* argument to increase the amount collected in exchange for a particular number of cookies compared to a control condition, where no argument was provided. We also considered indicators of dishonesty, as cookies could be taken without paying or paying less than required.

Materials and methods

We erected specially designed experimental stands containing individually packaged cookies. Next to the cookies we displayed one of three notes informing people that they were self-service stands and that the cookies were for sale for .20 PLN (equal to $.07). Additionally the notes included one of three justifications: (1) a detailed prosocial justification (*money will be spent for charity*), (2) a general prosocial justification (*money will be well spent*) or (3) no justification at all (control condition). Four incognito experimenters monitored the number of cookies taken without paying and the amount paid by passers-by, if any. This observation was possible, because very crowded places were chosen, thus four additional people could stay there without looking suspicious. The money container had a display showing the amount of money inside, therefore one of the four experimenters was always able to check the amount recently inserted by participants, and assess the extent of dishonest or generous donations via a small display next to the slot. The display was also visible for the respondents.

The experimental stands were positioned in two different crowded places in Warsaw (areas close to the main train-station, metro station, and end station of major bus lines). Each time a stand was supplied with 25 cookies and one of the notes. When all cookies were sold or stolen (in about 20 minutes regardless of the justification), the experimenter supplied 25 new cookies and changed the note.

Participants

$N = 150$ individuals participated in the study. They were people passing by the experimental points during evening rush hours (16:00–18:00). Ages and genders of participants were not ascertained.

Results

Number of cookies taken without paying, average amount paid per cookie, and number of generous individuals (people paying more than .20 PLN) are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Indices of prosocial and antisocial behavior in Experiment 1

	No. of cookies taken without paying	Mean amount paid [95%CI] *	No. of people who paid > .20 PLN
Control condition ($n = 50$)	6 (12%)	16.02 [11.77–20.27]	8 (16%)
General justification ($n = 50$)	6 (12%)	23.52 [15.94–31.11]	16 (32%)
Detailed justification ($n = 50$)	3 (6%)	30.09 [22.45–37.72]	24 (48%)

* Excluding stolen cookies.

Several between-groups ANOVAs tested the impact of justification on prosocial and antisocial behavior. Because very few cookies were taken without paying, no significant effect of justification on stealing was found ($p > .250$). However, there was a significant effect of justification on amount paid per cookie, $F\ (2,132) = 4.477$, $p = .013$ $\eta^2_p = .064$, showing that the better the justification, the greater the payment. To have more insight on the impact of justification on amount paid we used Scheffe post-hoc tests, which showed significant differences between all experimental conditions. Because – to our surprise – many people paid more than requested, we tested the relationship between excess payment and justification. We found a significant effect of justification, $\chi^2(2) = 11.77$, $p = .003$, showing an increased number of excessive donations in the detailed prosocial justification condition.

Study 1 summary

As expected, merely providing a detailed prosocial argument structure positively influenced prosocial behavior (buying a cookie for .20 PLN). We also observed spontaneous generosity where the detailed prosocial justification was provided: people paid more than requested (the mean price paid was higher by almost 50% compared to the requested price), and this generosity was a general observation (expressed by half of the individuals who decided to buy a cookie).

We found no effect of justification on the number of cookies taken without paying. However, the mean price paid for a cookie in the control condition was below the requested price, suggesting that people took a cookie and paid less than required. This would be consistent with the Personal Fudge Factor hypothesis proposed by Dan Ariely, who suggested that people engage in cheating only to the extent it does not affect their overall self-concept as fair and trustworthy individuals (Ariely & Jones, 2012). Hence, some people with higher levels of fudge factor could have stolen the cookie, and others with lower levels of this factor could have simply underpaid for the cookie.

As it was stated above, in experiment 1, we observed spontaneous generosity. We wanted to investigate it more deeply, checking whether the manner of giving information about the price could be another factor influencing helping behavior. Specifically, we could have (unintendedly) prevented generosity by limiting the price of a cookie to .20 PLN. We decided to avoid this in experiment 2, now asking individuals to pay "not less than .20 PLN".

Experiment 2

Material and methods

We replicated Experiment 1 with one small change: this time price information was stated as "not less than .20 PLN" rather than directly stating a price of .20 PLN as previously. The notes were changed every 20 minutes, twice in each location, along with filling the cookie container. This time, stands were positioned in three different places in Warsaw. As in the experiment 1, stands were placed near bus, metro or tram stations in the city centre. Notes' order of display was randomized for each stand.

As previously, the experimenters observed events incognito, registering number of cookies paid for, cookies taken without paying, and the amount paid for each.

Participants

$N = 334$ individuals participated in the study. No demographic data was collected.

Results

Analysis conducted on data summarized in Table 3 showed that the type of justification had a significant impact on all three dependent variables: number of cookies taken without paying, $\chi^2(2) = 7.50$, $p = .024$; mean amount paid for a cookie, $F\ (2,302) = 14.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .090$; number of people who paid more than required, $\chi(2)^2 = 40.34$, $p < .001$. Scheffe post-hoc tests for the impact of justification on amount paid showed significant differences between control condition and both justifications ($p = .009$ for general argument and $p < .001$ for detailed prosocial justification). The difference between experimental conditions was close to significance ($p = .068$). The difference between general and detailed justification – despite being significant in experiment 1 and non-significant in the experiment 2 – has the same direction and similar effect size ($r = .25$ and $r = .29$ for first and second study respectively). Because a difference in significance does not mean a significant difference (Nieuwenhuis, Forstman, & Wagenmakers, 2011), results of the 2nd experiment does not undermine our general conclusion, that detailed justification promotes greater donations than general justification does.

Moreover, we found no evidence of arguments on the number of cookies taken without pay in experiment 1, but a significant difference in experiment 2. Also, here the effect sizes seem to be consistent ($r = -.08$ and $r = -.15$ for first and second study respectively), and again we

Table 3. Indices of prosocial and antisocial behavior in Experiment 2

	No. of cookies taken without pay	Mean amount paid [95%CI] *	No. of people who paid > .20 PLN
Control condition ($n = 109$)	15 (13.8%)	12.45 [8.33–16.56]	8 (7.3%)
General justification ($n = 110$)	10 (9.1%)	21.45 [17.46–25.44]	33 (30%)
Detailed justification ($n = 115$)	4 (3.5%)	27.96 [24.18–31.75]	52 (45.2%)

* Excluding stolen cookies.

conclude that the effect is replicable and consistent across experiments and conditions.

More specifically, the stand with no justification led to the greatest number of steals, the least amount paid per cookie (far below the requested .20 PLN) and the lowest level of generosity. With a mere general prosocial justification, antisocial behavior was reduced and prosocial behavior was boosted. The request with detailed prosocial justification resulted in almost no antisocial behavior and an excessive display of prosocial behavior: almost half of the individuals involved showed spontaneous generosity.

Summary of experiments 1 and 2

This experiments showed that general prosocial arguments can both increase prosocial behavior and decrease antisocial behavior. While the general prosocial argument evoked compliance to the request (people paid the sum they were requested to pay), the detailed prosocial argument increased generosity, causing people voluntarily to pay more than required. A further finding was that the number of cookies stolen decreased as the quality of justification increased. Surprisingly, showing a positive effect of a mere general prosocial argument. In other words, it was enough to give a general, unspecific argument to increase the compliance and decrease the number of theft.

General Discussion

Presented studies show how general prosocial arguments (as compared to detailed arguments and no arguments at all) affect prosocial behavior. We have shown that even an argument with no semantic content (money will be well spent) increased the amount collected and decreased the number of acts of stealing. Although some people stole our goods or paid less than required, it is noteworthy that nobody attempted to take the money jar which was standing next to the cookies. The jar was unattended and unsecured (however passers-by might have assumed otherwise).

Our conclusion is that any argument – also the one having relatively little merit – can be helpful in promoting prosocial behavior. Specifically, money will be well spent can (but does not have to) mean that the money will be spent on others rather than to benefit the individuals who sell the goods. Yet, individuals who read the argument used it as a cue to behave in socially desired way.

For practical application it is worth considering using such arguments in public places to boost more desirable behavior of individuals. For example, a shopkeeper could inform his customers that "our family well-being is supported by the income of this shop", speculatively increasing that way the amount spent in the shop by customers, and decreasing the level of shoplifting.

The presented studies had two major advantages: they were field studies with relatively large samples, and investigated testing people in a natural environment; and the reported effect replicated with a six-month delay. We also acknowledge some limitations, e.g., participants' gender and age were not controlled. Also, the use of a very small price might have boosted the impact of general prosocial arguments, because people often do not invest their cognitive resources to investigate the quality of arguments for small requests (Langer et al., 1978). Another limitation was the formulation of the general prosocial argument: "well spent" does not necessarily mean "spent on a charity's goals". This would explain why people only paid what they were required to pay when faced with general arguments (it was simply a buying transaction) and why they showed greater generosity in response to detailed prosocial justification (money will be spent on a particular charity organization), which was clearly a charitable goal.

To sum up, though shared by people, social norms involving the helping of others are not sufficient to induce action. The frequency of requests for help addressed to people results in denial being the most common reaction and a reluctance to engage in voluntary charity. We have shown that, in the case of a small request, simple arguments are the key to making people engage in voluntary helping actions, and that they can also result in increased generosity. Moreover, such arguments prevent individuals to engage in antisocial behavior such as cheating or stealing.

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