Compassionate Conservatives and Loving Liberals?: Political Ideology, Moral Identity, and Donation Intentions

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Considering both the long-held belief that liberals are more generous and recent statistical evidence that conservatives are the compassionate ones, we examine factors influencing donation intentions. We propose that the effect of political ideology on donation intentions is moderated by moral identity. Across three studies, we demonstrate that political ideology influences charitable behavior only when the target recipient is consistent with political ideology and individuals have self-importance of moral identity. The effect of gender on the role of political ideology and moral identity on donation intentions is also examined.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Prosocial behavior is the label for a broad category of actions that are defined by society as generally beneficial to other people and to the ongoing political system. Past research in this area has sought to identify the characteristics of individuals who engage in prosocial actions, and has rightly noted that prosocial behavior is a joint product of the person and the characteristics of the situation. Despite 50 years of research on prosocial drivers, most of the findings regarding personality factors and prosocial actions are correlational in nature, and there is almost no empirical work on the relationship between important individual differences in personal values and prosocial tendencies (Dovidio et al. 2006). Gaining an understanding of individual and situational factors influencing prosocial behavior is important for charities such as United Way, for instance, which need to compete vigorously for donor dollars.

The proposed session includes three papers, each aiming to further understanding of the interplay between individual-level differences (moral identity; personal values; attachment style) and situational factors (congruity between ideology and cause; abstract/concrete mindset; relationship between donor and recipient), and their combined effects on prosocial behaviors. Taken together, the papers cover three major kinds of prosocial behavior (charitable donations, volunteering one’s time to close and far others, and environmental concern) and draw upon a variety of theoretical perspectives (attachment theory, construal-level theory, action identification theory, and multiple identities), to unite under a common theme of providing insights on the effects of dispositional and situational factors driving prosocial behavior.

The Winterich, Zhang, and Mittal paper (presented by Karen Page Winterich) builds upon past research on multiple identities and donations intentions. Their research provides a new perspective for understand the roles of moral identity and moral obligation, the latter of which is influenced by political ideology. They suggest that in the case of those for whom moral identity is important, alignment between political ideology and charity (e.g., characteristics of the recipient, such as pro-life/pro-choice or privately/government managed) will affect intentions to donate, and is mediated by moral obligation towards the recipient organization. Interestingly, the authors conclude that both Democrats and Republicans can be generous, depending on their moral identity and the characteristics of the donation recipient.

The Kaikati and Torelli paper (presented by Andrew Kaikati), builds upon past value-behavior research that has exhibited mixed findings on the relationship between personal values of benevolence and universalism and helping behavior. They suggest construal-level mindset as a moderating factor, such that personal values of benevolence and universalism are more likely to influence helping behaviors toward in-group members (helping a friend move), out-group members (volunteering one’s time), or the environment (recycling) when people are in an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset.

The Jeong and Liu paper (presented by Genevieve Jeong) builds on past research in the area of charitable giving. Their research focuses on the role of attachment or relationship style in influencing giving to charities that do or do not emphasize close relationships between donor and recipient. They suggest that consumers for whom attachment style is chronically (or primed as) insecure (vs. secure) are more sensitive to the nature of relationship with the receiver (e.g., ingroup; outgroup), and are more likely to give in both hypothetical and real donation situations when this relationship or potential relationship is perceived to be close vs. far.

The goal of this symposium is to foster an engaging discussion on the role of individual and situational factors in prosocial behavior by bringing together researchers who are currently approaching different aspects of the topic, from different theoretical perspectives. In particular, discussion leader Mikhail Strahilevitz, who is a well-accomplished researcher in this area, will attempt to involve the audience by tying these papers together and discussing future research directions.

References

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Compassionate Conservatives AND Loving Liberals?: Political Ideology, Moral Identity, and Donation Intentions”
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Political ideology represents a person’s beliefs related to the underlying goals and ideals of a political system (Grove, Remy, and Zeigler, 1974). Within the United States, the Republican party represents a more conservative political ideology and the Democratic party represents a more liberal ideology (Anderson et al. 2004; Cohrs et al. 2007; Farwell and Weiner 2000). There has been some debate as to which political ideology is the more giving and compassionate of the two (Brooks 2006; MacDonald 2004; Skitka and Tetlock 1993; Sidanius et al. 1996; Wilson and Di Julio 2004). When measured as the respondent’s support for government spending on social programs, liberals are more generous (Anderson et al., 2004; Brooks, 2006; Wilson and Di Julio, 2004). In contrast, when measured as the average dollar amount donated (Brooks 2006) or as the percentage of income given to charity (MacDonald, 2004) households headed by a conservative individual are more generous. Furthermore, some experimental evidence suggests no significant differences in giving based on the respondent’s political ideology (Anderson et al., 2004).

The goal of the current research is to examine factors underlying the donation intentions of both conservatives and liberals. We propose that charitable donation decisions by members of either political ideology are a function of two moral dimensions inherent in a specific decision situation—moral obligation and moral identity (Creyer et al. 2004; Dunfee et al. 1999). The first of these, moral obligation, is the extent to which a person feels he or she should or ought to act in a particular manner in a particular situation (e.g., donate to a specific cause; Schwartz 1970; Zimmerman, 1996). The level of moral obligation is likely to be higher when the donation recipient, or charity, is aligned with one’s political ideology (e.g., pro-life charity for conservatives; pro-choice charity for liberals). However, we predict that this alignment alone is not sufficient to predict donation intentions. The second moral dimension we examine is a person’s moral identity, defined as the extent to which moral notions, such as being fair, just, and good, are central, important,
and essential to one’s self-understanding (Blasi 1984). Moral identity is a general “motivating force” such that placing a higher importance on moral identity results in moral actions such as greater donations (Aquino and Reed 2002). The higher the self-importance of moral identity, the more motivated one is to “do something” about a charity.

Thus, moral identity is expected to moderate the effect of political ideology on donation intentions. Amongst those for whom moral identity is important, the alignment between political ideology and charity will impact donation intentions. In contrast, amongst those for whom moral identity is less important, the alignment of political ideology and charity will not impact donation intentions. These ideas are tested in three studies.

Study 1 uses an experimental test to determine differences in donation intentions to victims of terrorist attacks in Iraq. In the current political milieu, we expect conservatives (Republicans) to have a higher moral obligation toward the Iraq war. However, we expect only those with high importance of moral identity to act on their moral obligation, resulting in donation intentions to terrorist victims in Iraq. Measuring moral identity (Aquino and Reed 2002) and political affiliation, we find that Republicans have significantly higher donation intentions than Democrats when moral identity is important. For those whom moral identity is less important, donation intentions do not differ between Democrats and Republicans.

Surveying a panel of U.S. adults in study 2, we expand results of study 1 by examining donation intentions to two charities with high levels of moral obligation for liberals (pro-choice charity) or for conservatives (pro-life charity; Langer 2001; Sussman 2003). Political ideology is measured with the 6-item scale by Mehrabian (1996). Supporting our theory, we find a significant three-way interaction of moral identity, political ideology, and charity type.

Specifically, among those for whom moral identity is important, conservatives have significantly higher donation intentions to pro-life than liberals, while liberals have higher donation intentions to pro-choice charities than conservatives. There is no effect of political ideology on donation intentions among those for whom moral identity is less important. Importantly, we find that amongst those high in moral identity, moral obligation toward pro-life and pro-choice organizations mediates the differential effect of political ideology on donation intentions. One alternative explanation thus far is that political ideology influenced perceptions of deservingness to the donation recipient (Farwell and Weiner 2000; Reyna et al. 2005). This is addressed in Study 3.

A third study manipulates the process by which a charity distributes its funds (i.e., privately or through government), holding perceptions of deservingness (i.e., feeding hungry children) constant across political ideology. Among those for whom moral identity is important, liberals have lower donation intentions than conservatives when the charity is privately managed whereas conservatives have lower donation intentions than liberals when the charity is managed by the government. For individuals to whom moral identity is less important, donation intentions do not differ between conservatives and liberals, regardless of how the charity is managed. Again, moral obligation fully mediated the effect of moral identity and political ideology on donation intentions.

While both public opinion surveys (Smiley 2004; Strom 2005) and academic studies (Farwell and Weiner 2000) show a widespread stereotype that liberals are more charitable than conservatives, our results take a situated perspective arguing that the question should no longer be who donates more, but rather under what conditions will one donate more to a specific charity. Examining donation intentions to various charities (terrorism victims in Iraq; pro-life/pro-choice; needy children), we find that the extent to which conservatives and liberals are generous depends on their moral identity, the donation recipient, and even fund management.

We also note that religion was measured in all studies, but did not influence the pattern of results. This research not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of the role of multiple identities on decisions such as charitable giving, but it also has substantive implications for fundraising and for public policies regarding the role of political affiliation in charitable behavior.

References


“When Do Personal Values Predict Helping Behaviors? It’s All in the Mindset”
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Personal values are motivational constructs involving the beliefs that people hold about desirable goals that can be applied across contexts and time (Bardi and Schwartz 2003). For instance, benevolent values are associated with the abstract goal of enhancing the welfare of in-group members with whom one is in frequent personal contact, such as friends, and universalism values are associated with protecting the welfare of out-group members or protecting the environment.

There are inconsistencies in the current literature about whether and when values guide behaviors. The main objective of the current research is to try to identify a factor that affects in the strength of the value-behavior relationship. Building upon the tenets of action identification theory (Vallacher and Wegner 1987), we argue that mindsets that facilitate defining a situation in terms of one’s relevant values will affect whether behavior reflects one’s values. We predict that an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset should facilitate defining a subsequent, unrelated action in terms of one’s relevant values, because values are high-level constructs that are associated with abstract goals. This will consequently affect whether intentions to engage in actions are a reflection of values. Thus, we expect that the level of abstraction at which events are construed is an important moderator of the value-behavior relationship.

Across three studies, we measured the importance of values (either benevolence or universalism) at the individual level (using Schwartz’s Value Survey, Schwartz 1992), where participants rate the importance of values as guiding principles in their lives (-1=opposed to my principles; 7=of extreme importance). Then following several filler tasks, we primed either an abstract or concrete mindset using manipulations in which participants were instructed to think of the “why” (abstract) or the “how” (concrete) aspects of a situation. Finally, we presented participants with real or hypothetical situations and collected measures of helping intentions or behaviors towards ingroups, outgroups, and the environment, to examine the effect of mindset on the strength of the value-behavior relation.

Study 1 tests the relationship between measured benevolence values (i.e., preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact) and the intention to help an in-group member, a friend. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves in a situation commonly faced by students, helping a friend move to a new apartment, and then to report their intention to help the friend move. Results indicated that participants primed to think abstractly reported intentions to help a friend move that were consistent with their benevolence values, but participants primed to think concretely and those in a control condition did not.

In Study 2, we extend these findings to a different value type (universalism instead of benevolence) and measure actual behavior instead of behavioral intentions. Study 2 tests the relationship between measured universalism values (i.e., understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and of nature) and signing-up to volunteer to help out-group members. At the end of the session, the experimenter introduced participants to an unrelated volunteer program involving assistance to refugee immigrants from East Africa with their reading and writing skills in English. The total number of minutes signed up to volunteer was the measure of behavior. Results confirmed our predictions that participants primed to think abstractly behaved in accordance with their universalism values in signing up to help the out-group, whereas participants primed to think concretely did not.

Study 3 explores the mechanism underlying the effect of mindset activation on the value-behavior relationship, in the context of the environmentally-friendly behavior of recycling a battery. We propose that a concrete mindset interferes with value expression by directing attention to contextual details and away from the relevant values in the situation. We expect that values will predict behavioral intentions regardless of the mindset prime when only a broad overview of the situation as related to relevant values is provided. Participants read a description of a hypothetical situation regarding the recycling of an old cell phone battery, which either included a lot of contextual information (e.g., contained several specific details) or simply described an overview of the situation as related to values. Participants rated their intention to perform the recycling behavior. Results indicate that participants primed to think abstractly reported recycling intentions that were consistent with their universalism values; however, participants in the concrete mindset condition reported intentions dissociated from their universalism values only when they were given the opportunity to construe the situation on factors other than relevant values (e.g., contextual details). These findings support our predictions that a concrete mindset interferes with defining a situation in terms of relevant values, and consequently with the expression of these values, by directing attention to contextual aspects of the situation.

In combination, results from the three experiments provide evidence for the moderating role of abstract and concrete mindsets on the strength of the value-behavior relationship. We find that personally important values predict helping behaviors and intentions after individuals are primed with an abstract (and not a concrete) mindset. We tested this in the context of multiple values and helping behaviors. These included benevolence values (context: helping a friend move) and universalism values (contexts: volunteering to help outgroup members; recycling).
Charitable giving is one of the fastest growing industries in the United States. As a result of the growth of the giving industry, consumers are exposed to an ever wider variety of charitable giving opportunities and ways to give. Among the numerous ways of giving, one of the fastest-growing methods is a charity program that emphasizes close relationships between the donor and the recipient (e.g., sponsoring one particular child in need throughout his/her development, giving to one’s alma matter or church). Such emphasis on closer relationships contrasts with the other end of the relationship spectrum whereby the donor has scant ties to the recipient, in effect giving to a complete stranger (who will remain a stranger). An interesting question thus arises: Does proposing a close relationship with the recipient help to raise money for a non-profit organization? This research sheds light on when people engage in charitable giving by examining the social motivation underlying giving. In particular, we focus on giving as a form of social relationship. Drawing on attachment theory, we find that people with secure (low avoidance and low anxiety) vs. insecure (high avoidance and anxiety) relationship styles engage in giving behavior differently. Specifically, insecure individuals give more when the relationship between them and the receiver of help is close, whereas secure individuals are less sensitive to the nature of relationship with the receiver. Three studies demonstrate this effect using both chronic measures of individual relationship style and situational priming of security, and with hypothetical as well as real dollar decisions.

Attachment theory (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005) suggests that people with insecure attachment styles (high anxiety and high avoidance) have a desire for intimate interpersonal relationships. However, they are chronically concerned about acceptance and rejection from others. Therefore, we propose that insecure people would see giving as a means to establish a secure social relationship, and the promise of such a relationship motivates giving. Thus insecure individuals are more likely to donate when they perceive an interpersonal relationship with the beneficiary, than when the donation does not imply a relationship. On the other hand, people with secure attachment styles are not motivated by relationships when deciding whether to give. Therefore, they give with equal likelihood whether they have close or aloof relationship ties to the receiver.

Among the variety of ways of giving to people in need, one of the fastest growing methods is a sponsorship program (Giving USA Foundation 2007) which links a sponsor with a specific person in need on a relatively long-term basis. In Study 1 and 2, we examine the implication of such a sponsorship relationship.

Study 1 studies the basic effect of attachment style on charitable donation. All participants read a charity request letter. In the relationship condition, the charity request describes the sponsorship program which provides the continuous interpersonal interaction between the sponsor and a beneficiary. In the control condition, there is no interpersonal interaction with the receiver of help. The results show that people with insecure attachment donate more when the charity included the interpersonal relationship compared to when it did not (40% vs. 8.7%, p<.002). However, those with secure attachment do not show this differentiation (19.2% vs. 24.1%, p>.5).

Study 2 primes attachment security vs. insecurity situationally. In the attachment security priming condition, participants are told to imagine the situation of being loved by their romantic partner. In the attachment insecurity priming condition, participants are asked to imagine being abandoned by their romantic partner. Female participants in the insecurity condition donate more when the charity involved interpersonal relationship, compared to when it did not (70% vs. 35%, p<.04). Female participants in the secure condition, and male participants, do not show this pattern. (Presumably males react differently to romantic abandonment; e.g., rather than insecurity, they may feel anger.)

Study 3 attempts to generalize the results to real donations, and to a different operationalization of relationship. UCLA undergraduate students receive $2 as compensation for completing a survey. However, during the survey, they are also informed the opportunity to donate their compensation to a children’s hospital. The key manipulation is whether there is a relationship tie with the beneficiary (in-group: UCLA Children’s Hospital vs. out-group: University of Michigan Children’s Hospital). It is found that insecure people donate to the ingroup but not the outgroup (56.3% vs. 28.2%, p<.04), whereas secure people make no distinction between ingroup and outgroup (54.8% vs. 48.6%, p>.5).

Although individual giving is always the largest single source of donation to charitable organizations (Giving USA Foundation 2007), previous studies have not extensively researched the individual differences in charitable giving behavior. Our findings contribute to the understanding of why different people donate to different causes, and have important implications for studies of charity decisions and helping behavior. The current study has also important practical implication which consumers like which types of donations. Charitable support by individual is critical to the functioning of many non-profit organizations. Thus, if marketers know certain types of consumers like specific types of donations, they can focus on target market. Our results suggest that insecure consumers donate more when there is a relationship between donor and beneficiary, while secure consumers do not care the relationship with beneficiary. Therefore, fundraising by charity organizations may be improved by allowing for a personal relationship between donor and beneficiary. Moreover, based on study 2 in which attachment security was primed, marketers may also apply relationship priming techniques to their advertisement or charity request letters in an effort to increase giving.