The Power of Emotional Benefits: How Outcome Focus Affects Donation Behavior

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Little research has examined how focusing on benefits motivates helping. We demonstrate that when appeals focus on providing positive emotional benefits for recipients, donors are more willing to help many (vs. one) individuals. We also show increased impact perceptions drive the motivation to help groups in this context.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019391/volumes/v43/NA-43

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Emotional Benefits or Basic Needs: How Benefit Focus Affects Donation Behavior
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While it is important to understand what motivates helping behavior, little research investigates how focusing on the benefits of helping influences giving. Moreover, in previous research, requests ask donors to provide basic needs (e.g. medicine), although appeals can also focus on emotional benefits (e.g. providing hope or joy to beneficiaries). Here, we focus on understanding how donors react to appeals emphasizing emotional benefits (vs. basic needs).

Previous work demonstrates that individuals feel increased empathy towards recipients who lack basic needs, which increases helping (Batson 1990). However, while a donor may feel they can help one beneficiary (e.g. provide 1 person with medicine), when the number increases (e.g. provide 8 people with medicine), they donate less. This has been termed the “identifiable victim effect” (Kogut and Ritov 2005a, 2005b; Small et al. 2007).

What would happen if appeals focused on emotional benefits? Would these effects replicate? Research suggests that hedonic benefits are easier to visualize (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000), making it easier to expect emotional benefits to materialize. Compared to basic needs, it could also feel easier to intuit how a positive outcome could be achieved for many, and individuals could then feel they make a more significant contribution with many (vs. one) recipients. Thus, while focusing on basic needs should increase giving to one individual (vs. many), focusing on emotional benefits should increase giving to many (vs. one).

In study 1, we test whether emotional appeals increase donations for many (vs. one) beneficiaries. Participants were randomly assigned using a 2 Beneficiary Size (Many/One) between subjects design, and read a charitable appeal. Those in the many (one) condition were told that they could support eight children (one child). Participants were told that an organization was running arts programs, and their support would provide the children (child) with “the opportunity to do something fun” that would “bring joy” to the children (child). Participants then learned about a lottery being offered, and could donate any part of the $10 winnings to this cause. We conducted a one way ANOVA with amount donated as the dependent variable. Individuals in the many condition donated more compared to the one condition.

In study 2, we test the robustness using a visual manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned using a 2 Beneficiary Size (Many/One) between subjects design. Participants had the opportunity to help support five children (one child) attend an educational center; the same emotional benefits used in study 1 were emphasized. In the many condition, one image of five children and five names were shown. In the one condition, a randomly selected image of one child (from the group picture) was shown with one name. Individuals were then asked if they could be contacted by email to make a donation (Yes/No). We submitted participants’ willingness to donate as the dependent variable with beneficiary size as predictor, revealing individuals were more willing to donate to five children versus one child.

In Study 3, we provide process support. Participants were randomly assigned using a 2 Beneficiary Size (Many/One) between subjects design. Participants were told they could help 12 (one) homeless children (child), using the same emotional benefits emphasized in study 1. Individuals indicated their willingness to donate and how much they were willing to donate. We then measured perceptions of impact, feelings of empathy, and positive affect. We conducted a one way MANOVA with willingness to donate and how much donated as the dependent variables. Individuals in the many condition were more willing to donate and likely to donate more. Moreover, impact perceptions were higher for many (vs. one), but empathy ratings and affect were not affected. As expected, impact perceptions mediated results.

In study 4, we compare how donations are affected when individuals are asked to provide emotional benefits (vs. basic needs). Individuals were randomly assigned using a 2 Beneficiary Size (Many/One) x 2 Benefit Focus (Emotional/Basic Needs) between subjects design. Individuals were told that an opportunity was available to help support sick children living in areas of poverty. Those in the many (one) condition were told donations would support eight children (one child); individuals in the emotional benefits (basic needs) condition were told that their support would help provide entertainment activities (medical treatments). Afterwards, participants were asked if they had $10 dollars, how much they would be willing to donate. We conducted a 2 x 2 ANOVA with the amount willing to donate as the dependent variable. In the emotion-focus condition, individuals were willing to give more to the many (vs. one) condition, but in basic needs condition, individuals were less willing to give to the many (vs. one) condition.

In study 5, we use the same activity in the appeal, with one type of benefit emphasized. Individuals were randomly assigned using a 2 (Many/One) x 2 (Emotional/Basic Needs) between subjects design. Participants viewed an appeal about an organization helping women by having them participate in a job training program. Individuals in the many (one) condition were told their contribution would benefit five (one) women. For the emotional focus condition, the appeal focused on emotional benefits (e.g. bringing hope to women). For basic needs, the appeal focused on basic benefits (e.g. gain necessary skills). We use the same lottery procedure used in Study 1.

A 2 x 2 ANOVA was run with amount donated as dependent variable. Individuals in the emotion-focus condition were more willing to donate when five women would benefit versus one. In contrast, while means are directionally in line with predictions, no differences emerged in the needs condition.

Thus, in five studies we demonstrate that when a charitable appeal focuses on providing positive emotional benefits, individuals are more likely to help many (vs. one) individuals. We also point to the potential usefulness of motivational frameworks to explain helping behaviors, highlighting the role of impact perceptions. This research also provides organizations with a practical tool to increase giving to groups, showing when emotional benefits can boost donations.

REFERENCES


