The Undercover Altruist: When Doing Good Is Socially Awkward.

Jan Willem Bolderdijk, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
Gert Cornelissen, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain

The presence of others is assumed to motivate people to advertise their moral selves. We argued that people sometimes hide their true moral inclinations from others to avoid socially awkward situations: observed participants reduced donations, avoided being associated with a human rights campaign, and were modest in their moral selfdescriptions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019990/volumes/v43/NA-43

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Undercover Altruist: When Doing Good Is Socially Awkward
Jan-Willem Bolderdijk, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
Gert Cornelissen, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
People try to be at their best when observed by others. We smile when our pictures are taken and dress up to go to social events. In a typical friendly interaction, we monitor and regulate our behavior to assure a smooth and pleasant social situation. We are even willing to tell white lies about how much we like the, in fact, horrible new hairstyle of the people we are conversing with. In this paper, we propose the counter-intuitive notion that avoiding sending signals of one’s moral inclinations may be part of this arsenal of techniques to smoothen social interactions.

This suggestion runs contrary to previous findings on the effect of social presence on moral behavior. People have various reasons to put their moral selves on display, such as reputation building (Roberts, 1998), or the avoidance of punishment (Fehr & Fischbacher). As a result, (even minimal) social presence typically assumed to promote pro-social behavior, such as making a contribution to an honesty box when getting coffee (Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006).

We argue that the opposite may occur in certain situations. Individuals like to think of themselves as good and decent people, and cultivating one’s moral self is an importance source of self-worth (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Consequently, individuals get upset by signals that suggest that they are not as moral as they would like to believe, such as being confronted to others who are more virtuous than us (‘moral do-gooders’; Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). The confrontation with a moral do-gooder may make an observer look bad by comparison and thus produce an awkward situation that feels uncomfortable for both. We argue that prospective do-gooders anticipate this. What’s more, they may take regulatory action: in order to avoid awkward situations, individuals may shy away from virtuous actions that they may privately endorse, but that carry the risk of making others look bad by comparison. Thus, we predict that the presence of others may discourage virtuous behaviors: people might hide their true moral inclinations in order to avoid socially awkward situations.

In Studies 1a-1c, we observed the likelihood to make a donation across three real-life settings. In Study 1a we observed consumers’ donations to a food drive, in the context of a grocery shopping trip, and in Study 1b and 1c, we observed donations to a beggar and a street musician, respectively. Across the three studies the findings suggest that, unless there is a clear social norm favoring donating, the presence of others discourages donating. In Study 2, participants showed less interest in campaign material of a human rights organization when their actions were visible (versus invisible) to a confederate. Participants in Study 3 were intercepted on a busy street, and prompted to verbally report on their moral behavior in comparison with others. Despite the fact that, privately, most people reported to think about themselves as more generous than average, the large majority of our participants did not admit this publicly.

Together, these studies run counter to the common wisdom that public situations promote instances of virtuous behavior. Instead, it seems people sometimes want to appear less virtuous than they actually are: they may reduce their observable levels of virtuousness as to avoid socially awkward situations. Thus, at times we may privately feel motivated to contribute to a greater good, but relinquish that possibility in order not to jeopardize social harmony. Importantly, our work adds to an increasing body of evidence suggesting that the current view of human nature may be overly pessimistic: low levels of observable moral behavior (e.g. the small market share of conspicuous but as yet uncommon green products) may not reflect consumers’ true preferences. Instead they may be the result of individuals’ choice not to exceed existing moral norms, in order to avoid causing a socially awkward situation.

Currently, we are setting up studies to provide more evidence for our claim that prospective do-gooders anticipate that going “beyond the norm” may produce socially awkward situations, when those actions are observed by others. Additionally, we are testing whether individuals who “get caught” being too nice search for alternative ways to reduce the awkwardness of the social setting, for example by coming up with non-moral justifications for their behavior.

REFERENCES