The Effects of Self-Identity Activation and Emotions on Donation Decisions

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Three experiments demonstrate that activating self-identity by asking individuals to sign their name for an innocuous purpose influences their donation decisions. This influence can be either positive or negative, depending on the affective reactions that the victims elicit (i.e. empathic distress for the victims vs. anticipatory guilt for not helping).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Sensitizing people to their self-identity at the time they receive an appeal for help can influence their compliance with this request (Hung and Wyer 2014; Langer and Abelson 1972). There are contingencies in this effect. Hung and Wyer (2014), for example, found that calling individuals’ attention to themselves increased their willingness to help in-group members but decreased their willingness to help out-group members. This effect could simply reflect the use of similarity as a heuristic for decisions when the criterion is salient. However, it could also affect the subset of self-relevant knowledge that is salient to them at the time a donation decision is made and is used to interpret the situation at hand. This interpretation, and the emotional reactions it elicits, could mediate helping decisions.

The present research investigated the effects of activating self-identity on the use of these criteria and the emotions they elicit. We showed that when individuals are conscious of their self-identity at the time they receive an appeal, their donation decisions can be mediated by both empathy-induced distress and feelings of anticipated guilt. However, the effects of these reactions differ, depending on both characteristics of the victims and the perspective from which the situation is viewed.

IDENTITY ACTIVATION AND THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL REACTIONS
At least two types of emotions can mediate the impact of a donation appeal. First, people who feel socially close to victims may empathize with them and their donation decisions might be based on the feelings of distress resulting from this empathy (e.g., Aron and Aron, 1986). Second, these decisions can be influenced by perceptions of responsibility (e.g., Lowenstein and Small 2007) and the anticipation of feeling guilty if individuals do not fulfill their responsibility (Carlson and Miller 1987).

However, the effects of both empathy and obligation perceptions on donation decisions can depend on both (a) characteristics of the victims and the situation confronting them and (b) the accessibility of the self-knowledge used to interpret these characteristics. People’s empathy, for example, may depend on their perceived connectedness to the beneficiaries. This, in turn, could be influenced by their interpretation of the beneficiaries as valued in their society at large. To this extent, empathy is likely to depend on the accessibility of self-knowledge that is relevant to the assessment of this connectedness. The assessment of one’s personal obligation may likewise depend on the nature of these persons. However, it also depends on whether concepts associated with this normative obligation are called to one’s attention at the time a donation decision is made.

Relatedly, Kettle and Häubl (2011) found that merely signing one’s name was sufficient to activate people’s self-identity and to increase the accessibility of self-knowledge. However, which aspects of this knowledge are likely to be applied in making judgments also depend on features of the situation at hand. When aspects of self-identity have implications for their behavior in a situation, priming their identity is likely to call attention to these implications. If their identity is not activated, however, concepts associated with these roles may not be applied.

EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS
In Experiment 1 (N = 110), (Chinese) participants received an appeal for donations to help victims of child-trafficking. In this case, the victims were either Chinese (in-group members) or African (out-group members). Results yielded a significant interaction of self-identity priming and victim ethnicity (F(1, 106) = 4.95, p = .028), suggesting that activating their self-identity increased participants’ donations to Chinese victims (from HK$111 to HK$164) but decreased their donations to African victims (from HK$135 to HK$61). These findings were accompanied by a similar interaction on disposition to empathize (F(1, 106) = 4.87, p = .029). Thus, this study provided evidence that the effects of identity activation depend on contextual factors that exist in the situation at hand.

Experiment 2 (N = 109) examined the specific emotions that mediate donation decisions and the impact of self-identity activation on the elicitation of these emotions. In this case, the victims to be helped were endangered species that were culturally desirable, undesirable, or irrelevant to (Asian) participants (sharks vs. whales vs. dolphins, respectively). Results indicated that priming self-identity increased participants’ disposition to preserve sharks (from HK$67 to HK$74; F(1, 98) = 3.31, p = .072), decreased their disposition to preserve whales (from HK$46 to HK$26; F(1, 98) = 3.25, p = .075) and had little impact on their disposition to preserve dolphins (F < 1).

Results of bootstrapping showed that empathic distress mediated the effect of self-identity priming on the donations to snakes (95% CI: -2.0778 to -2.2874; based on 5000 samples) but not sharks (95% CI: -.0657 to 1.9921). In contrast, guilt mediated the effect on the donations to sharks (95% CI: -1.4441 to -0.213) but not snakes (95% CI: -3.189 to .449).

In Experiment 3 (N = 73), we conducted a 2 (signature: signing own name vs. signing another’s name) x 2 (perspective: situation vs. donor) experiment. After the handwriting task, participants received an appeal to help victims of child trafficking. Some described either how they should help (donor condition) or how others described either how they should help (donor condition). Activating self-identity increased donations when participants took the perspective of a donor (from HK$72 to HK$133; F(1, 69) = 14.19, p < .001) but had no impact on donations when they focused on the victims confronting the victims (HK$82 vs. HK$73; F < 1). Results of bootstrapping indicated two significant mediation pathways: (a) self-identity priming → perceptions of obligations → guilt → donations (95% CI: .0014 to .5552) and (b) self-identity priming → disposition to empathize → empathic distress → donations (95% CI: .0927 to 1.0145).

In summary, unobtrusively activating people’s self-identity can have a significant impact on their responses to a donation appeal. These effects are mediated by different emotional reactions that depend on both (a) whether the potential beneficiaries are personally relevant and (b) whether recipients consider themselves as a donor at the time they encounter the appeal or focus on the situation confronting the victims.

REFERENCES


