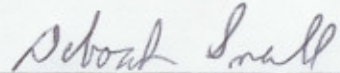


Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student
Fellowship for Research on Human
Decision Processes and Risk
Management: 2008 Application

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Requested Support:
\$ 2500.00

Project Title: Cross-Race Emotional Contagion and Helping Behaviors

Descriptive Summary of Project

Much of the work on human decision processes has focused on decisions for one's own well being, rather than on decisions which serve others' welfare. Burgeoning work on sympathy biases (Small and Loewenstein 2003) has demonstrated that the psychological process of allocating resources toward other people's consumption is prone to inefficiencies and biases just as is decision making for one's own consumption. Extending the research stream on helping behaviors, the work that would be supported by the Ackoff Fellowship builds both on work on emotional contagion as well as prejudice and in-group biases.

Prior work (Small and Verrochi, 2007) finds that when people view ads for a children's charity, and the child in the ad expresses sadness, people are more sympathetic than when the child expresses happiness or no emotional expression. Evidence for this effect suggests that emotional contagion, or the automatic transfer of emotion from the expresser to the viewer, mediates the effect of emotional expression on sympathy. This analysis suggests that viewers who have been induced to experience sadness are better emotionally equipped to empathize with the victim, as they are, presumably, suffering *with* the victim. This convergence of emotional experience facilitates feelings of sympathy, thereby increasing donations and other prosocial behavior.

Another stream of research on helping behaviors and prejudice has demonstrated that people are more helpful towards individuals who are part of their in-group, and that part of this bias results from the inability of participants to infer the emotional suffering of out-group victims (Cuddy, Rock and Norton, 2006). One such study manipulated the race of the victim via stereotypic names in a written description of a Hurricane Katrina victim. White study participants were less likely to infer that a black victim was experiencing emotions such as grief, and thus were less likely to offer help to that victim, as compared to a white victim. Similarly, black participants were less likely to help a white victim.

The project presented here hypothesizes that the ability to empathize with out-group members may be attenuated by showing a picture of an out-group victim expressing sadness. Not only will this research expand upon work in the emotional contagion and prejudice literature, it also presents an opportunity to further develop the work on prosocial decision making.