

2012 Russel Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal

Theresa F. Kelly, 2nd Year Doctoral Student

Berkeley Dietvorst, 1st Year Doctoral Student

Operations and Information Management Department.

Subjective Anonymity:

The Influence of Identity on Prosocial Behavior in Anonymous Settings

Within the last decade there has been a sharp increase in the amount of social interaction taking place in anonymous online communities (AOCs). AOCs are a specific type of social networking site where the majority of users are identified only by their pseudonyms (i.e. they are anonymous) and the majority of communications occur between people who have never met in person. This is in contrast to other social networking sites, such as Facebook, where the majority of users are identified by their real names and interact with people who they know in real life.

One might think that a community composed of anonymous members would be a recipe for egotism and anarchy. Indeed, behind the mask of anonymity people often behave in ways they would never behave in the real world. However, despite anonymity, members of AOCs frequently engage in prosocial actions by assisting other users and contributing to the welfare of the community.

The research proposed here is motivated by two questions. First, why do people behave prosocially in anonymous online settings? There is already a wealth of literature that takes various approaches to answering this question. For example, there is very strong evidence that reputation and reciprocity concerns (Aronson et al., 2007; Bravo, 2010; Cialdini, 2009; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; de Waal, 1996; Trivers, 1971) contribute to prosocial behaviors in anonymous settings.

However, we do not believe a reputation- or reciprocity-only explanation is sufficient to describe the processes taking place in these communities. We believe that a significant contributor to prosocial behavior in AOCs is the fact that members of these communities simply do not *feel* anonymous. That is, these community members form strong identity associations with their pseudonyms (i.e. usernames) and so behave as if they were using their real identities.

To test this “subjective anonymity” theory, we propose a series of studies to address the following three questions:

- 1) Do people behave more prosocially when others are aware of their identities?
- 2) How much does identity contribute to prosocial behavior relative to reputation?
- 3) Can people be influenced by their online pseudonyms similarly to how they are influenced by their real identities?

The second question that motivated this proposal is the following: How can we get people to behave more prosocially in anonymous settings? We hope that our findings on the role of identity in prosocial behavior can help us address this question and potentially design a practical intervention.

Preliminary Research Program

Study 1: Identifiable Dictator Game

Objective: Demonstrate that people are more likely to behave prosocially when others are aware of their identity, even if the identifying information is trivial. We also aim to rule out the alternative explanation that priming identity drives the effect.

Description: Subjects will be paired for a one-shot dictator game. Dictators will be asked to either state their first name and send it to the recipient (identified), state their first name but not send it (anonymous/primed), or they will not be asked to state their first name (anonymous/not-primed).

Hypothesis: We predict that dictators will allocate significantly more money to the recipient when they are in the identified condition than when they are in the anonymous/primed or anonymous/not-primed conditions.

Study 2: Identity versus Reputation

Objective: Tease apart the influence of identity and reputation on prosocial behavior in anonymous settings.

Design: Participants will engage in a two-stage dictator game where players take turns being dictators. In the first stage, the first dictator either sends her name (identified) or does not (anonymous). First dictators are also informed whether their allocations will be revealed (reputation) or not (no reputation) to their recipients before they assume the role of dictator. In the second stage, the second dictator makes a return allocation.

Hypotheses: We expect that the first dictator will be most generous in the identified/reputation condition, and that the first dictator to be more generous in the anonymous/reputation condition than in the anonymous/no-reputation condition. Most importantly, we expect the first dictator to be more generous in the identified/no-reputation condition than in the anonymous/no-reputation condition.

Study 3: Pseudonym Importance Scale Development

Objective: Develop a scale to determine how strongly people identify with their pseudonyms for use in future studies. The scale will contain both objective and subjective measures to determine how strongly a person identifies with her pseudonym.

Studies 4 & 5: Pseudonym-Identified Dictator Games

Objective: Replicate the findings of studies 1 and 2 with pseudonyms.

Design: High-pseudonym-association participants will be identified using the pseudonym importance scale. We will then repeat the designs of studies 1 and 2 with pseudonyms instead of first names. We will also add a condition to each study where we manipulate pseudonym association by either scrambling their pseudonym or replacing it with a fabricated one.

Hypotheses: We expect the pattern of results for pseudonyms to be similar to the results found with first names, and the pattern of results for scrambled/fabricated pseudonyms to be similar to the results found with anonymity.

Additional Goals

For future studies, we would like to examine different types of interactions and behavioral outcomes, especially the kinds of exchanges and behaviors commonly observed in anonymous online communities. For example, we would like to examine repeated interactions between participants as well as different forms of prosocial behavior such as information sharing. We would also like to attempt to identify robust methods of manipulating pseudonym association.

Sponsoring Faculty member:

Judd B. Kessler, Business Economics and Public Policy Department

Budget:

This is a joint proposal between two students in the Operations and Information Management Department. Because of this, we are requesting funding beyond \$4,000 to cover conference travel expenses for two people.

Expense	Amount	Details
Participant Payment	\$ 3,000.00	\$5*600 participants; 100-200 per study
Conference Travel (2 students)	\$ 2,000.00	\$500 per student per conference; Behavioral Decision Research in Management 2012, Academy of Management 2012
Total	\$ 5,000.00	

Current Resources:

There is no grant or departmental funding for this project. The Operations and Information Management Department gives its students \$800 each academic year for conference travel, but this money has already been used for the Society for Judgment and Decision Making conference in November 2011.

Advisor Signature:

Judd Kessler

References:

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- de Waal, F. B. M. (1996). *Good natured: The origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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