

Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship: 2013 Application

Emotions as signals in prosocial behavior

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Requested Support:
\$ 3125.00

Description of Research Project

Emotions play a fundamental role in prosocial behavior. Although scholars debate the exact interpretation of them, there is little doubt that emotions provide a motivating force that explains when and for whom human beings care and help (Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Positive emotions are also a natural consequence of prosocial behavior. Helping others can lift people out of a negative mood (Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan, Arps, Fultz, & Beaman, 1987), sustain a positive mood (Forest, Clark, Mills, & Isen, 1979), and generally improve subjective well-being (Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, & Norton, 2011).

However, the fact that people feel good after helping calls into question the true motivation for their behavior. The logic of altruism suggests that a prosocial act becomes tainted by any benefits to the actor that come from it—be they material, social, or intrapsychic benefits. As such, the debate over whether people are truly altruistic focuses on the direction of emotion that someone feels when engaging in prosocial behavior. Are their feelings directed toward themselves or to those whom they are helping? While some argue that the emotions people feel can genuinely involve empathic concern (e.g. Batson 1987), others argue that emotion-driven prosocial behavior is at odds with altruism because emotional actors reap intrapsychic rewards, such as a boost in positive affect (Andreoni 1990), or a reduction in negative affect (Cialdini, Darby, and Vincent 1973).

While emotion has been depicted by scholars as both inherent to, as well as incongruous with altruism and distortive to it, little prior work has investigated how laypeople judge emotional versus dispassionate prosocial actors. What inferences do people make when they see that an individual is motivated by emotions or experiences emotional benefits from helping others? Do people believe emotions are at odds with altruism?

Deborah Small (Associate Professor of Marketing and Psychology) and I seek to understand the role of emotions in signaling authentic motivation in prosocial behavior. We propose that naïve theories about the relationship between emotion and altruism run counter to psychological, philosophical, and economic theories that decry emotions as selfish. Because emotions are perceived as spontaneous and natural (Tiedens 2001) and reflective of an actor's true motives (Ames and Johar 2009), expressing emotion in the context of prosocial behavior signals information about a consumer's true character.

In a series of preliminary studies, we have begun to test our hypothesis using a novel paradigm. In these studies, we ask participants to evaluate the survey responses of a fictitious donor who has supposedly given to charity and who either reports that he feels emotional or unemotional towards the cause. Our results repeatedly demonstrate that despite recognizing that emotional actors reap intrapsychic rewards, laypeople view emotional actors as truly altruistic, and are suspicious of a lack of emotion. This is the case even when an unemotional donor provides logical, reason-based explanations for why he gave, such as a utilitarian concern to help as many people as possible. In addition, we find that these effects are driven by how authentically motivated participants judge the donor to be, suggesting that emotional donors were given the most credit because they were seen as sincerely caring about the charity.

While our findings about emotional signals of prosocial behavior are extremely robust in the laboratory, we would like to extend our investigation into the field. Two domains in which we would like to examine the effects of displaying emotions on judgments of authenticity are with corporations and with politicians. Oftentimes, business executives make announcements about corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that will raise money or awareness for a needy organization, and politicians frequently make speeches announcing their support for charitable causes. Both executives and politicians would like to signal to the general public that they are authentic in their motivation and that they truly care about those in need, presumably because that will result in favorable impressions from consumers, which will translate into sales and votes. We propose that displaying emotions is one way that executives and politicians can signal their genuine passion for their causes, and that expressing unemotional, reason-based reasons for their initiatives will be punished by the general public.

To test our hypothesis, we propose collecting news articles that report on the prosocial activities of corporations and politicians and having research assistants code the articles for how much emotion they display (e.g., quotes from the company/politician expressing emotions, descriptions of emotional outreach, etc.). Then, we will have a separate set of research assistants code the reader comments (user-generated content) from the news articles for authenticity (i.e., how much did the readers believe that the corporation/politician was motivated by authentic concern for the cause), support (i.e., how much did the readers express their support for the prosocial activity), and behavioral intentions (i.e., whether they indicated that the initiative made them more or less likely to buy products from that company or vote for that politician). We predict that the more emotional the news article reports the campaign to be, the more authentic it will be judged by readers, the more support they will give to the cause, and the more likely they will be translate that support into actions (purchases and votes).

I hope the Ackoff Fellowship will give me the opportunity to build on our preliminary findings and explore the relationships between emotions and altruism in this new field setting. One persistent concern in establishing the value of laboratory findings is knowing how much influence they will exert in “noisy,” real-world settings (i.e., how externally valid they are). Showing that our results can be readily observed in the real-world is an important test that will underscore the importance of our contributions. We hope the research will not only contribute to a better understanding of how people determine what is authentic prosocial behavior, but also when actors gain credit for their good deeds and how that might translate into real attitudes and behavior. I am confident that the findings will be interesting and relevant for publication in top-tier marketing or psychology journals.

Budget of Anticipated Expenses

The financial support of \$3125 that I am requesting will be used for two purposes: to fund data collection and to share the results of my research at two conferences. First, data will be collected using the help of at least 4 research assistants, who will be paid by the hour. First, we will have the research assistants search news archives for articles that report on the prosocial initiatives of companies and politicians (we are hoping for a sample size of at least 200 articles). Then, we will have one set of 2 research assistants code the news articles for emotionality, and a different set of 2 research assistants code the reader comments for authenticity, support, and behavioral intentions. By using 2 different research assistants for each type of content, we ensure greater reliability. The budget below breaks down the number of hours the process is expected to take, and how much the research assistants will be paid. To support the university-sponsored work-study program, we will give priority to research assistants that are enrolled in this program, which will also save research funds.

In addition, we hope that this research will be of interest to psychology and consumer researchers, and I hope to present my results at two relevant conferences this year: the Association for Consumer Research North American conference in Chicago, and the Society for Judgment and Decision Making conference in Toronto. The budget outlined below reflects estimated costs of registration, lodging, and travel to and from the conferences. While the Marketing Department allocates some funding for research and travel, it is sufficient to cover only a small portion of the research I intend to conduct over the course of my studies, and no more than two conferences over this entire period. Any incurred expenses that the Wharton Risk Center does not cover will thus be paid out-of-pocket or by any funds remaining in my departmental research budget.

I am grateful for the research support provided to doctoral students by the Wharton Risk Center through the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have related to my research. Thank you for your consideration.

Item Description	Cost per Unit	Number of Units	Total Cost
Payment for Research Assistants			
News article search	\$10.00	20 hours	\$200.00
Coding	\$10.00	80 hours	\$800.00
Association for Consumer Research Conference (Chicago):			
Conference Registration	\$225.00	1	\$225.00
Conference Travel	\$400.00	1	\$400.00
Conference Hotels	\$150.00	3	\$450.00
Judgment and Decision Making Conference (Toronto):			
Conference Registration	\$200.00	1	\$200.00
Conference Travel	\$400.00	1	\$400.00
Conference Hotels	\$150.00	3	\$450.00
Total Costs			\$3,125.00

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