

Out of Sight or Out of Mind? An Experimental Study of Empathy and Social Pressure

Eric Spurlino*

New York University

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Extended Abstract

Charitable solicitation campaigns have become ubiquitous on social media. For example, on their birthday, many Facebook users choose to solicit donations for charities from their friends. Previous literature on charitable giving in the field has shown that (1) people give substantially more when asked and (2) people tend to avoid the ask if possible. There have been two proposed hypotheses for why this behavior occurs. The hypothesis of social pressure (DellaVigna et al 2012) states that in the face of an ask, one feels socially pressured to give despite not wanting to give themselves. The hypothesis of empathy (Andreoni et al 2017) states that an ask causes one to care more about the recipient, and due to this change in utility they give the recipient more. I formulate empathy as an effect triggered by the giver seeing the ask itself, and social pressure as triggered by the recipient seeing how the giver responds. Because previous studies utilized offline field experiments, the two hypotheses could not be separated from one another. In online environments, however, the two forces are often separate.

The present paper utilizes an online lab experiment to separate the two theories and test each directly. I do this through a novel design in which half of the subjects are assigned to be solicitors for an NYC COVID-19 relief fund, and half of the subjects (donors) are given a \$10 endowment. The solicitors then write anonymous online messages to encourage future partners to donate to the cause. I then test the two hypotheses by either allowing or not allowing donors to read their partner's message,

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and either allowing or not allowing the solicitors to see how much their partners chose to donate. In addition, I allow donors to attempt to avoid either effect through a probabilistic device that allows us to observe (1) the subjects' desires to avoid each effect, and (2) the counterfactual donation choices of those who attempted to avoid an effect but were forced to face the effect regardless.

Subjects chose to avoid social pressure at a much higher rate than they chose to avoid empathy (48% vs 21%, $p=0.0015$). When looking at the effects of social pressure and empathy on the size of individual donations, subjects give more when exposed to either. Social pressure caused a \$1.08 increase ($p=.09$) in donations, while empathy caused a \$1.35 ($p=.05$) increase. When comparing the above effects across those who attempted to avoid them versus those who did not attempt to avoid them, I find key differences—mainly concerning social pressure. Those who did not attempt to avoid social pressure gave more when faced with social pressure (\$6.13 vs \$4.30, $p=.07$), whereas those who did attempt to avoid social pressure gave similarly whether they faced social pressure or not (\$2.82 vs \$3.06, $p=.60$). My interpretation is that, in on-line environments, there are social image seekers and social pressure avoiders. Those who seek to be seen enjoy showing their generosity, and those who avoid it would not necessarily give either way, but likely incur psychological costs of being seen as not giving. Further, despite most people being “vulnerable” to empathetic stimulation, it is not something that people wish to avoid as hypothesized in the previous literature. Overall, the results point towards a more nuanced and heterogeneous view of social pressure, social image, and empathy in online solicitation environments.

References

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