

# Out of Sight, or Out of Mind?

An Experimental Study of Charitable Giving, Empathy, and Social Pressure

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# Motivation

- People face "the ask" online frequently, often from "normal" people
- Previous literature on the ask in the field shows:
  - 1 People give more when facing a verbal ask
  - 2 People often avoid being asked
- The literature offers two different psychological hypotheses to explain this
  - 1 Empathy
  - 2 Social Pressure

# Hypothesis 1: Empathy

- Andreoni et al (2017)



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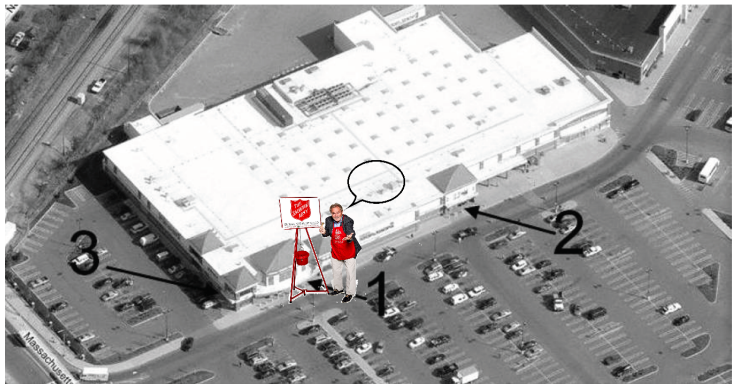
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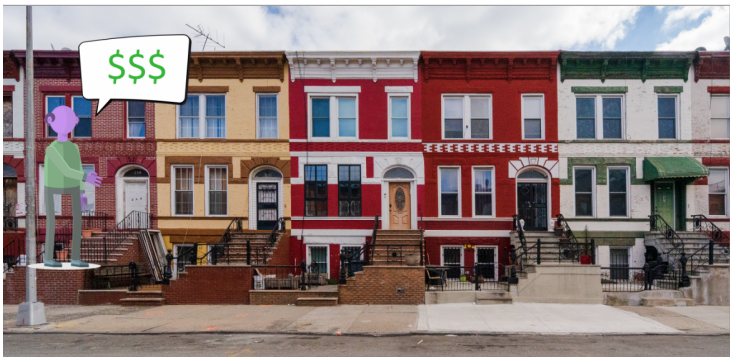
# Hypothesis 1: Empathy

- They claim the mechanism behind this behavior is “empathy”:

*Psychologists posit that giving is initiated by a stimulus that elevates sympathy or empathy in the mind of the potential giver, much as the smell of freshly baked bread can pique appetite. Resolving this feeling comes either by giving and feeling good or by not giving and feeling guilt. However, those with (implicit or explicit) knowledge of their vulnerability to such stimuli, by controlling the input of those stimuli, can control both their emotions and the actions that result.*

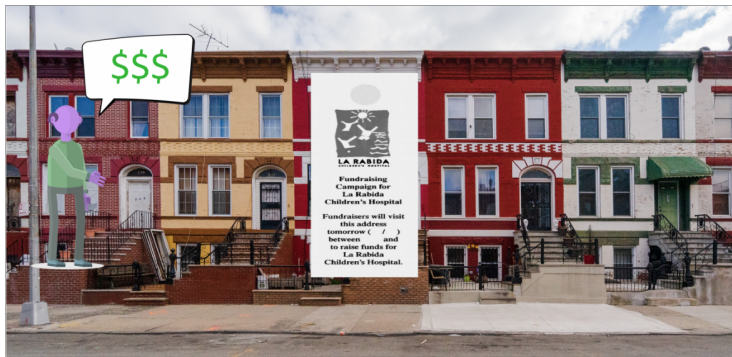
- Invisibility cloak thought experiment

## Hypothesis 2: Social Pressure



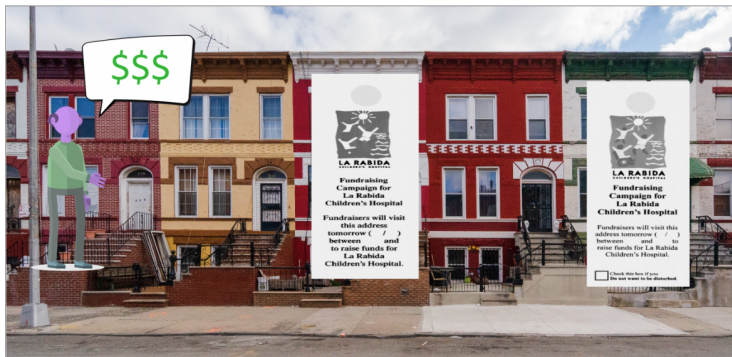
- DellaVigna et al (2012)
- Not empathy/temptation, but social pressure/“saying-no-aversion”
- Ice cream thought experiment (Vesterlund)

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# Empathy vs. Social Pressure

- Both studies show that people give more when asked, and avoid being asked
- But they use completely different theories to describe this!
  - Inconsistent preferences/temptation vs. social pressure/image concerns
- Neither study's goal is to separate these two hypotheses, and each hypothesis can explain the other's behavior
- While empathy and social pressure are often inseparable in the "real world", online they are completely distinct



# Research Questions

- 1 Are the findings from Andreoni et al and DellaVigna et al robust to online settings?
- 2 How much does empathy or social pressure drive giving behavior?
- 3 Do people seek to avoid either effect? If so, who?

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# Operationalizing Empathy and Social Pressure

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- Key Insight: There are two sides to an ask
  - 1 The askee hears the ask
    - Triggers **empathy**
  - 2 The asker hears the askee's response
    - Triggers **social pressure**
- Experiment will manipulate each of the above

# Experimental Design

- Subjects were NYU undergraduates, who participated online via Zoom (could not see each other, only the proctor)
- Paid via Amazon gift cards code through automated, anonymous system to allow for better control of social pressure in the environment

# Experimental Design

- Subjects are assigned role of Dictator or Solicitor
- 2 Rounds of modified dictator games, where D chooses how much money to give to S's charity
- Each round, a D and an S are randomly matched
- Solicitors are randomly assigned to one of two charities, both contributing to COVID-19 relief in NYC (United Way Covid-19 Community Fund, NYCT Emergency Fund)
- Solicitors write messages to each of their future partners, incentivized to make empathetic appeals

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- D's choice environment differs by the two aspects of the ask
- First aspect: Empathy
  - If EMP, shown solicitor's message
  - If No EMP, not shown solicitor's message
- Second aspect: Social Pressure
  - If SP, solicitor is shown  $g$  after the round
  - If No SP, solicitor not shown  $g$  after the round

# Experimental Design: Experiment Timeline

- Round 1: Subjects had No EMP and chose between options:

- 1 No SP
- 2 SP

With 60% probability, their choice is implemented, else the other choice is implemented

- Round 2: Subjects had No SP chose between options:

- 1 No EMP
- 2 EMP

With 60% probability, their choice is implemented, else the other choice is implemented

# Summary

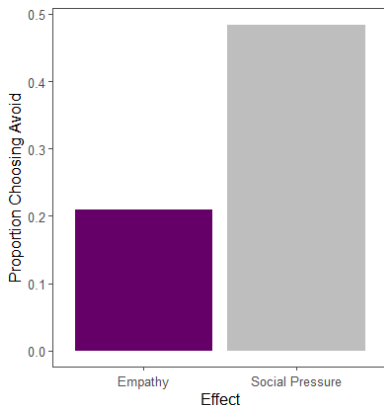
- 124 subjects across 13 sessions
- Sessions took place between January 29 and April 1 2021
- Sessions typically took 30-45 minutes
- Average payment was \$14 (including \$10 show-up fee)

## Messages



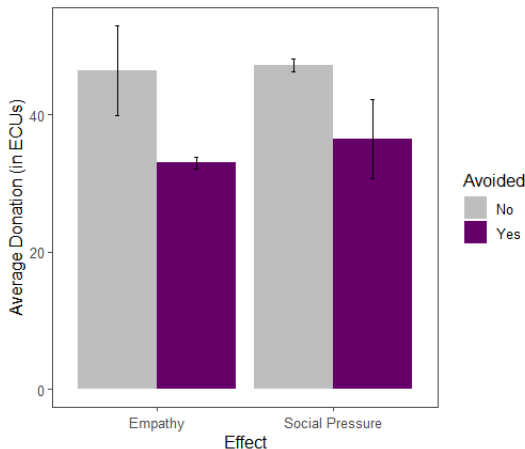
- Average message length 93 words
- Ranges from 33 to 280 words
- Prolific workers categorized messages as "Empathetic Appeal", "Social Pressure Appeal", and "Empty Talk": 41 out of 62 had most popular categorization of Empathetic Appeal

# Avoidance of Social Pressure and Empathy



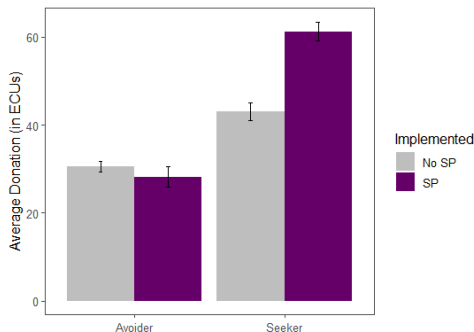
- Much higher proportion avoid SP
- 48% vs 21% ( $p=0.0015$ )

# Overall Effects of Social Pressure and Empathy



- Both had similar effects on donations
- SP: 47 ECU vs 37 ECU ( $p=0.09$ )
- EMP: 46 ECU vs 33 ECU ( $p=0.06$ )

# Social Pressure Avoiders and Seekers



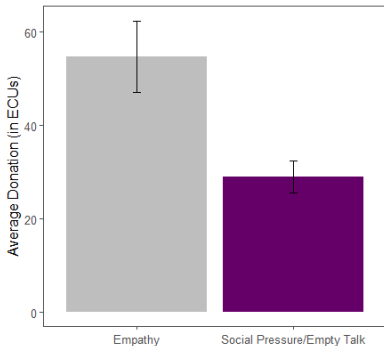
- Social pressure effect driven by social image *seekers*
- Similar low levels of giving ( $\sim 30$  ECU) from Avoiders, regardless of whether avoidance was successful
- Significantly higher level of giving (61 ECU vs 43 ECU,  $p=0.06$ ) from Seekers who were successfully seen versus those who were not



# Messages and Empathy

- Had Prolific subjects categorize messages as: (1) Empathetic Appeal, (2) Social Pressure Appeal, (3) Empty Talk
- Paid a bonus for categorizing a randomly chosen message with the most popular categorization (Houser and Xiao 2011)
- Of the 62 messages, 39 were categorized as Empathetic Appeal, 15 as Social Pressure Appeal, and 5 as Empty Talk (3 no majority winner)

# Messages and Empathy



- Messages with empathetic appeals yielded far higher donations (55 ECU vs 29 ECU,  $p=0.03$ )
- Suggests empathetic appeals were the driving force behind message effect

# Discussion

- Many more people avoid social pressure than avoid empathy (supporting the DellaVigna et al hypothesis)
- However, both empathy and social pressure are similarly effective at increasing donations

# Discussion

- Who avoids social pressure in our experiment?
  - Those who wouldn't give much anyways
- Who doesn't avoid social pressure in our experiment?
  - Those who want to be seen as generous
- Who avoids empathetic stimulation?
  - Almost nobody! Even though it causes us to give significantly more.
  - Suggests either (1) unawareness of the above, or (2) that people enjoy giving (contrary to Andreoni story)