

Donate, Everybody's Doing It: Social Influences on Charitable Giving

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ABSTRACT. The present study examined social factors, specifically the bystander effect, social comparison, and dyadic sex similarity, on charitable giving. Using experimental methods, participants were told that they would be entered in a raffle where 10 participants would win \$20 each, and then asked if they would be interested in donating a portion of their \$20 award to the American Red Cross. Results showed a main effect of social comparison, with upward social comparisons increasing donations ($p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$). However, there was no main effect of bystander presence ($p = .28$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$). Additionally, no main effect of dyadic sex similarity was found ($p = .61$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$), but an interaction effect showed that social comparison increased donations only in different-sex dyads, not same-sex ones ($p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$). The findings of this study expanded the scope of research on prosocial behavior beyond traditional helping behavior and can inform nonprofit organizations as to which social variables can be harnessed and adapted to increase charitable donations.

From July 29, 2014, to August 29, 2014, \$100.9 million were raised for the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Association—a 3,504% increase from the \$2.8 million raised during the same time period in 2013 (Munk, 2014). There was not a massive increase in diagnosis of the disease, and donations from other charities did not increase at the same rate, if at all. The ALS Association managed to increase donations in a simple, yet brilliant way.

During the summer of 2013, Americans took to their Facebook pages to promote the viral Internet trend of donating money to the ALS Association. Upon receiving a “challenge,” participants were supposed to dump a bucket of freezing cold ice water over their heads and donate \$10 to the ALS Association. If they chose not to complete the ice bucket activity, they were supposed to donate \$100. The whole process was to be video recorded and shared on social media, accompanied by a challenge to three other people to complete the Ice Bucket Challenge or donate to the ALS Association.

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is just one of

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many examples of prosocial behavior, or behaviors that benefit other people. Although people often credit altruistic reasons for their own prosocial behavior, they acknowledge social factors such as peer pressure as an important motivation for others' prosocial behavior (Howard, Nelson, & Sleight, 2011). Research has indicated that contextual factors have an important impact on helping behavior, especially in emergency situations (Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995). Specifically, other people can influence whether (or how much) people choose to donate. Using experimental methods, the present study focused on two social factors that might influence charitable giving: the characteristics of other “bystanders” and a standard to which potential givers can compare themselves.

Prosocial Behavior

Broadly defined, *prosocial behavior* is an intentional and voluntary positive action, distinguished from the similar category of altruistic behavior in that motivation for prosocial behavior may be unspecified (Eisenberg, 1982). Prosocial behavior encompasses many positive actions including

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helping, cooperating, and altruism (Eisenberg, 1982; Schroeder et al., 1995). The present study focused on *helping* behavior, which is defined as “an action that has the consequences of providing some benefit to or improving the well-being of another person,” (Schroeder et al., 1995, p. 16). One type of helping behavior is charitable giving, the act of donating money to benefit the well-being of other people, often by donating to a community activism organization that works to improve the lives of less fortunate people (Ray, 1998).

In experimental laboratory studies using money, people share 20% of the money they are given (Camerer & Fehr, 2003). However, in the United States, people only share an average of 2% of their income with charitable organizations (Cryder & Loewenstein, 2012). This disparity suggests that context is an important factor in charitable giving. Specifically, Cryder and Loewenstein (2012) noted that, outside of the laboratory, the responsibility to donate is generally diffused among many people whereas, within the lab, the sole responsibility to share money is felt by the individual in the study. They suggested that this as a key reason why more money is shared in the lab. Although the current study occurred in a laboratory setting, it addressed the latter critique of previous research by considering how the presence of other people can influence charitable giving within a laboratory setting.

Social Influences on Prosocial Behavior

To understand the impact of social factors on charitable giving, two key social psychological topics should be considered: the *bystander effect* and social comparison. First, the bystander effect refers to how people are less likely to help when more people are present (Schroeder et al., 1995). Research on the bystander effect has suggested that participants in groups would donate less money than individual participants because the responsibility to help would be diffused among participants (Latané & Nida, 1981). Further, according to social impact theory, the effect of the researchers' donation request should be decreased when it is distributed among multiple targets (Latané, 1981). Research has also supported the *implicit bystander effect*, wherein the bystander effect can be found in nonemergency situations as well as psychologically distant situations such as a hypothetical donation request (Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, & Darley, 2002).

Another way that other people can influence

charitable giving is through *social comparison*, which is the act of comparing oneself to others (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011). Social comparison research has suggested that people are likely to imitate behaviors when the comparison standard is something to be emulated (i.e., an upward social comparison; Corcoran et al., 2011). Accordingly, if the perceived social norm is to donate a large portion of the prize, people will likely adhere to this norm and donate more (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Research has also demonstrated that social comparison effects are fewer among dyads when compared to single participants (Garcia, Tor, & Schiff, 2013). Research on the *N*-effect stipulates that social comparison concerns decrease when the number of people in the room increases (Garcia et al., 2013).

In addition to social comparison and the effect of bystanders, similarity between those in the dyads should be considered. Studies have found that, when bystanders share similar attitudes or group membership, people are more likely to conform to the helping behaviors of the other bystanders (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002; Smith, Smythe, & Lien, 1972). Further, research has found that similarity between individuals and their comparison standards increases the effect of social comparison (Corcoran et al., 2011). Although prior research has examined the effects of similarity between the donor and recipient of charity (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006), the impact of similarity among donors has not been studied as thoroughly. However, research on similarity and helping behaviors has indicated a potential influence of dyadic similarity on the helping behavior of charitable giving (Levine et al., 2002; Smith et al., 1972).

Current Study

Building from existing literature, the current experimental study tested the effect of bystander presence on participants individually and in dyads (i.e., with two people). This study had four hypotheses. First, a main effect of bystander presence was expected, with participants in dyads donating less money than individuals to charity. Second, we predicted a social comparison main effect; specifically, participants who were told that others would donate a substantial amount of money would then give more to charity than those who were not similarly primed. Third, an interaction effect was expected, with social comparison effects being less among dyads than single participants.

In this study, dyadic similarity was also considered. In the dyadic condition, the other participant in the room would serve as a comparison standard. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis predicted that an effect of dyadic similarity would only be found in the social comparison condition: Social comparison effects and subsequently, donation amounts, were expected to be greater for same-sex dyads than different-sex dyads.

Method

Participants

A sample of 126 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 years ($M = 19.00$, $SD = 1.03$) at a small midwestern college was used for this study. Of the participants, 83 (66%) were women, 40 (32%) were men, one participant (<1%) identified with both sexes, and two participants (1.6%) did not respond. Additionally, participants represented a variety of nationalities including 102 (81%) U.S. citizens and 20 (16%) participants of other nationalities including Chinese (3.28%), Croatian (<1%), Filipino (<1%), Iraqi (<1%), Indian (1.64%), Vietnamese (1.64%), Zambian (<1%), Singaporean (<1%), Nepali (<1%), Thai (<1%), Ethiopian (<1%), Canadian (<1%), Bhutanese (<1%), and Italian (<1%). Three participants (2.4%) could not be categorized because they did not answer the question with enough description (e.g., responded “multicultural”), or they answered with their race rather than nationality (e.g., responded “White”). One participant (<1%) did not report a nationality. Participants were students, recruited through the psychology department at the college. Some students received partial course credit for participation.

Procedure

Institutional review board approval (#2014/09/7) was received from the College of Wooster Human Subjects Research Committee prior to starting the experiment. First, participants read and signed an informed consent form. They then completed a demographic survey on a computer. After completing the survey, participants began a diversion task to disguise the fact that the charitable donation request at the end of the study was actually being used for the analysis. Participants completed the 5 *Love Languages* survey by Gary Chapman (n.d.), a survey to assess how individuals communicate their feelings toward other people in both romantic and platonic relationships. This distraction task was chosen because it addressed prosocial behavior

as the participant recruitment posting advertised, but differed from the specific focus of the study because it involved personality factors rather than situational factors. While participants completed the survey, the researcher played jazz music in the background to include an evident independent variable in case any participants were knowledgeable about experimental design.

Afterward, the researcher asked participants if they were familiar with the music and made note of the answer. No analysis was conducted on this answer because none of the participants were familiar with the music. Then, the researcher said to the participants,

Thank you very much for participating in this study. All participants in this study will be entered in a raffle for the chance to win \$20. There will be about 100 participants, and there will be 10 winners. The drawing will happen sometime next semester after all participants have finished. With that, we are also collecting donations for the American Red Cross. Here’s a flyer that summarizes the Red Cross’s charity involvement and the work that they do both internationally and domestically. If you’re interested, you can donate a portion of your prize to the charity if you win. Please write down your desired donation commitment, if any, on this sheet, sign it, and it will be deducted from your prize if you should win.

In the not-primed condition, the researcher did not make any statements regarding the average amount of money committed for donation. However, in the primed condition, the researcher concluded the aforementioned quotation by saying, “The average donation commitment is \$15.”

Next, participants completed the donation commitment form and signed it. This experimental design was based on experimental methodology from the behavioral economics dictator game (Eckel & Grossman, 1996; Hoffman, McCabe, Shachat, & Smith, 1994; Hoffman, McCabe, & Smith, 1996). After participants made their donation commitments, the researcher gave them a debriefing form that described the experiment including the deception used in the experiment. The researcher also explained that, due to a lack of funding, there would not actually be a raffle, but offered candy to thank them for participating.

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Conditions

Bystander presence condition. Bystander presence was operationalized as whether a participant completed the study alongside another participant (dyad group) or alone (single group). Participants in the dyads were also asked whether they knew the other participant in order to control for personal connections outside of the laboratory.

Dyadic similarity condition. The independent variable of dyadic similarity was operationalized as sex similarity between the individuals in each dyad. Participants were assigned to same-sex or different-sex dyads based on the experiment timeslot they signed up for. This condition was only applicable for the dyad group.

Social comparison condition. Social comparison was operationalized as whether participants were given an average donation amount with which to compare their own donation amount. Participants in both the single and dyad groups were randomly assigned to either the primed or not-primed group. The primed group was told

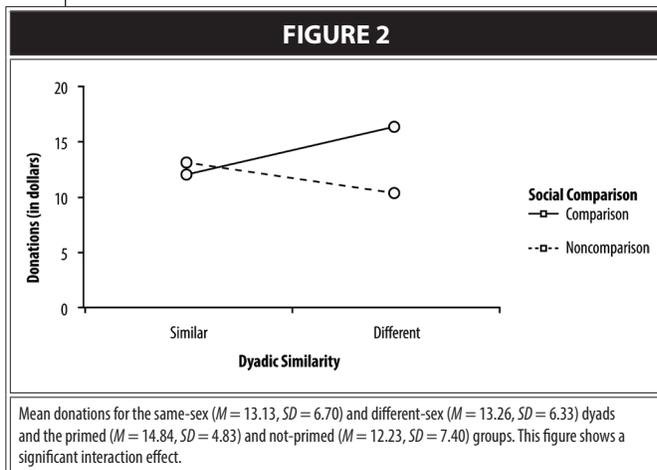
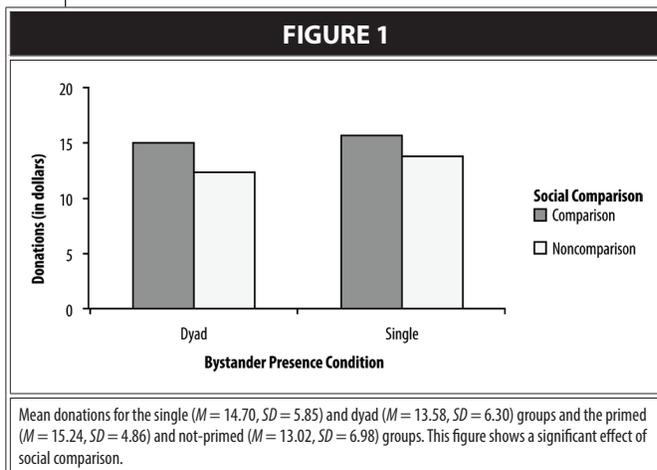
that the average donation commitment was \$15; the not-primed group was not told anything about the average donation commitment.

Results

Participant donations ranged from \$0 to \$20, with only three participants not donating at all. On average, participants donated \$14.15 ($N = 126$, $M = 14.15$, $SD = 6.08$, range: \$0–20). Men donated more money on average ($n = 40$, $M = 15.08$, $SD = 5.90$, range: \$0–20) than women ($n = 83$, $M = 13.91$, $SD = 6.15$, range: \$0–20). Regarding class year, there was little difference between the means. Mean donations were highest for juniors ($n = 18$, $M = 16.22$, $SD = 6.03$, range: \$2–20). First-years ($n = 67$, $M = 13.96$, $SD = 5.96$, range: \$0–20), sophomores ($n = 37$, $M = 13.51$, $SD = 6.22$, range: 0–20), and seniors ($n = 4$, $M = 13.75$, $SD = 7.50$, range: \$5–20) donated similar amounts. U.S. citizens donated more money on average ($n = 102$, $M = 14.85$, $SD = 7.25$, range: \$0–20) than non-U.S. citizens ($n = 20$, $M = 9.44$, $SD = 5.63$, range: \$0–20).

It was predicted that participants who were alone would donate more than participants in dyads (H1), and that participants would donate more when given a high standard with which to make a social comparison (H2). On average, single participants donated more money ($n = 64$, $M = 14.70$, $SD = 5.85$, range: \$2.5–20) than participants in the dyad group ($n = 62$, $M = 13.58$, $SD = 6.30$, range: \$0–20). Additionally, participants in the primed group donated more money ($n = 64$, $M = 15.24$, $SD = 4.86$, range: \$2.5–20) than participants in the not-primed group ($n = 62$, $M = 13.02$, $SD = 6.98$, range: \$0–20). The results of a 2 x 2 between-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated no main effect of bystander presence, $F(1, 125) = 1.16$, $p = .28$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. However, there was a significant main effect of social comparison with a small effect size, $F(1, 125) = 4.41$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. No interaction effect between bystander presence and social comparison was found, $F(1, 125) = .11$, $p = .74$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. The results are summarized in Figure 1.

Additionally, the effect of dyadic sex similarity was examined, but there was not a large difference between same-sex ($n = 31$, $M = 13.13$, $SD = 6.70$, range: \$0–20) and different-sex ($n = 31$, $M = 13.26$, $SD = 6.33$, range: \$0–20) dyads. It was predicted that, among the social comparison group, same-sex dyads would donate more than different-sex dyads (H3). The interaction between social comparison and dyadic similarity was examined using a 2 x 2



between-subjects ANOVA. No main effects were found for social comparison, $F(1, 61) = 2.16$, $p = .11$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, nor dyadic similarity, $F(1, 61) = .26$, $p = .61$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$. However, a significant interaction with a medium effect size was found, $F(1, 61) = 4.73$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, showing that individuals in different-sex dyads donated more when given a comparison standard (see Figure 2).

Discussion

With the increasingly public nature of charity in the form of donations, this study examined the effect of social comparison and the bystander effect on charitable giving. Additionally, this study considered the similarity of participants to see if donations varied as a function of how similar individuals were to another person in the room. First, the results of the present study did not support the hypothesis that bystander presence would impact charitable giving. Although the means indicated that participants in the single group donated more than those in the dyad group, the analysis did not reach significance. This finding suggests that diffusion of responsibility may not manifest the same way in instances of charitable giving as it does for helping in emergency situations, which is the focus of many studies on this topic (Darley & Batson, 1973; Latané, & Nida, 1981; Smith et al., 1972). In emergency situations, only one bystander needs to take action in order to get help (e.g. an individual calls the police). However, in a charitable giving situation, people who are asked to donate likely understand that the more money donated to charity, the better for the cause or organization. Therefore, people may be equally likely to donate if they are alone or with others because, unlike in an emergency situation, the individual still feels responsible to help even if others are helping due to the persistent and expansive monetary needs of charitable organizations.

Moreover, existing research on the bystander effect has strongly supported that the presence of another person leads to diffusion of responsibility to help, even in implicit cases and situations involving donating money (Garcia et al., 2002; Latané & Nida, 1981). Consequently, methodological issues may explain the lack of statistical significance. Specifically, telling participants that there would be 10 raffle winners might have disrupted the bystander effect because the participants were under the impression that 10 people would be donating, regardless of how many people were in

the room. Additionally, although the researcher did not watch participants complete the form, they were still aware of her presence in the room, therefore making none of the participants actually alone while they made their donations.

As with past research, the findings of this study supported the hypothesis that participants would donate more money when given a high standard of donations with which to make a social comparison. This finding was consistent with existing literature, including both empirical research findings (Shang & Croson, 2009) and social comparison theory (Corcoran et al., 2011). However, the results of the study did not support the *N*-effect hypothesis that social comparison effects would be greater in the single group than the dyad group (Garcia et al., 2013). The lack of statistical significance could be explained by how group size only increased by one person in the present study, and a greater increase may be necessary for the *N*-effect to occur.

This study also examined the effect of dyadic sex similarity on charitable giving. As expected, there was minimal difference between the means of same-sex dyads and different-sex dyads, and no main effect was found. However, research on social comparison has indicated that the effect of social comparison would be stronger for same-sex dyads than different-sex dyads because similarity to the comparison standard increases assimilation (Corcoran et al., 2011). Although the results of the present study did find a significant interaction effect between social comparison and sex similarity, the finding was contrary to the existing literature on social comparison (Corcoran et al., 2011) because social comparison only increased donations in the case of different-sex dyads, not same-sex dyads as predicted.

The surprising results on similarity may be due in part to how similarity was operationalized as sex similarity. Due to the nature of the distraction task, it is possible that participants were primed to think of love and, therefore, felt more social pressure when paired with a member of the opposite sex. However, because the researcher did not note participants' sexual orientation, there is not enough evidence to support that explanation. Future research should determine if individuals are more susceptible to social comparison in the presence of a person whose sex they are attracted to.

Another possible explanation for the results regarding similarity is that the experiment was conducted on the campus of a liberal arts college and all participants were students at the college. In this

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environment, sex may not be as salient an identity marker as in other environments. For example, the college has gender-neutral housing options and all single stall bathrooms have recently been changed to gender-neutral. Further, as previous research has shown, people often value relationships more than social categories, so the personal group of being a student at the college may be more important to participants than the broad category of sex (Wong-Rieger & Taylor, 1981). Thus, despite being asked to identify their sex on a survey at the beginning of the study, participants might not have thought of themselves as similar or different from the other participant based on sex.

Although the previous explanation addresses why dyadic similarity did not increase the effects of social comparison, it does not address why same-sex dyads actually showed diminished effects of social comparison. If sex was not salient enough for the similarity effect to be significant, perhaps there were other traits in the same-sex and different-sex dyad groups that impacted the effect of social comparison. A closer examination of the data revealed that the same-sex dyad group was predominantly women, although the different-sex dyad group had a more even sex distribution. For the same-sex dyads, one participant did not report sex, 24 participants were women, and only four were men.

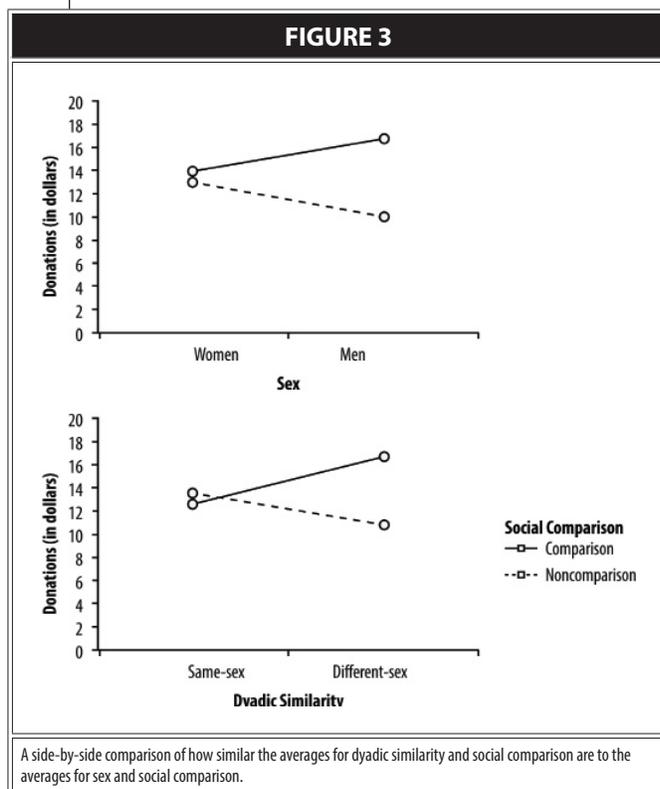
On the contrary, the different-sex dyad group was composed of 15 women and 16 men. Thus, perhaps sex itself increased social comparison effects within the dyad rather than sex similarity between participants. Dyadic similarity and sex had comparable interactions with social comparison because the average donation for different-sex dyads in the primed condition was \$16.67 and, in the not-primed condition, \$10.66, almost the exact same as the average donations for men in the dyadic primed or not-primed conditions, respectively (see Figure 3).

With a higher average donation for male than female participants in the primed condition, the data suggests that perhaps social comparison effects could be greater for men than women. Charitable giving requires a certain level of individual agency and power, and both agency and power are stereotypically masculine traits (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, male participants might have felt more pressure to donate money in order to conform to masculine stereotypes through agency and power. On the other hand, female participants might have felt stronger effects of social comparison if the task was a different kind of prosocial behavior (e.g. volunteering) because the feminine gender stereotype assumes communion and care (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Future research should examine whether the nature of a prosocial task and the gender norms associated with that task impact the strength of social comparison on different sexes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study had a few limitations including the aforementioned limitation regarding the similarity condition based on sex. Another important limitation was that the researcher was unable to actually pay participants the \$20 for participating in the study. Thus, the experimental scenario was hypothetical. Rewarding participants with money might make future research on this topic more realistic for participants so as to more fully capture their desire to donate. The presence of the researcher in the room during the donation task was also a limitation because the researcher might have served as a bystander and made it so that participants in the single group did not feel entirely alone.

Finally, future research should ensure an even gender and nationality distribution among participants in order to examine how these demographic factors relate to social influences on charitable



giving. On average, U.S. citizens donated more to the American Red Cross than non-U.S. citizens, suggesting that U.S. citizens might have had a stronger desire to donate due to their ingroup connection to the charity. However, the distribution was too uneven to conduct a robust statistical analysis on this relationship. Therefore, future research should examine how group membership and similarity to the recipient influences charitable giving.

Conclusion

The findings from the present study provided exciting opportunities to increase prosocial behavior toward those in need. Future research in both scientific and applied settings should expand on the conclusions from the present study to see if similar principles can be used in different prosocial behaviors. Although the focus of this research was on charitable giving, the findings have implications for all kinds of prosocial behaviors, from helping in an emergency to volunteering to douse oneself in ice water to raise awareness and funds for a serious, but underrepresented disease.

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