

INTERACTIVE EFFECTS OF APPEAL TYPE AND SOCIAL DISTANCE ON HELPING INTENTION

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We examined the interplay of appeal type and social distance in prosocial behavior in 3 studies. Results of Study 1, which was a single-factor design, showed that participants ($n = 85$) were more likely to evaluate the impact of their help on recipients when they were socially distant than when they were socially close. Results of Study 2 ($n = 250$) and Study 3 ($n = 162$), each of which was a 2 (appeal type: significance appeal vs. control appeal) \times 2 (social distance: high vs. low) between-subjects design, showed that when the helper and recipient were socially distant, appeals that emphasized the significance of the help to the recipient increased helping intention, because there was a greater likelihood that the favor would be returned. However, such effect was mitigated when the social distance was small. Results suggest that the principles that are applied in interaction with others vary according to social distance. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: prosocial impact, prosocial decision making, prosocial behavior, social distance, helping intention, significance appeal.

In 2013, a television advertisement by the nongovernmental organization, Save the Children UK, ignited controversy (Hilary, 2014). The advertisement depicted starving children and was condemned because it used degrading images of children to evoke sympathy. However, it is common practice to use heartbreaking images as leverage in fundraising campaigns (Olejnik & LaRue, 1980; Small & Verrochi, 2009), and the use of emotions such as sympathy (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Small & Verrochi, 2009), empathy (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981), and love (Fischer-Lokou, Lamy, & Guéguen, 2009; Lamy,

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Fischer-Lokou, & Guéguen, 2012) has long been established as being influential in generating prosocial behavior.

Such an approach has some weaknesses. The pervasive use of emotions in appeals may result in negative consequences, such as people becoming immune to sympathy appeals. Further, the effectiveness of sympathy appeals is based on *empathy*, which is defined as people's capacity to share, and to be affected by, the emotional state of others (Burks, Youll, & Durtschi, 2012). Schumann, Zaki, and Dweck (2014) suggested in a recent examination of American college students that self-reported empathy has declined over the past 30 years, raising concerns about a future empathy deficit.

Recent researchers have suggested that in addition to affect-based drivers, perceived prosocial impact is an important factor that people take into account in prosocial decision making (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltman, 2013; Erlandsson, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2015). Cryder, Loewenstein, and Seltman (2013) found a goal-gradient tendency, whereby people were more willing to give as charitable campaigns more closely approached their goals, because goal proximity enabled people to feel that their deeds had more impact on the recipients. In a similar vein, Grant and Gino (2010) found that students who received a thank-you note from a recipient were more likely to offer additional help to this recipient and to others. Researchers of prosocial satisfaction suggest that givers are happier when they are aware of the positive impact of their giving (Aknin, Dunn, Sandstrom, & Norton, 2013; Aknin, Dunn, Whillans, Grant, & Norton, 2013).

We therefore examined whether or not an appeal that makes prosocial significance salient (hereafter referred to as a *significance appeal*) increases helping intention and, if so, in which situations this effect exists.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Social distance influences the principles that people apply to their social treatment of others (Chen & Li, 2009). The norm of reciprocity is essential between familiar people, when interpersonal favors are provided with the expectation that they will be reciprocated (Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Hwang, 1987). Maner and Gailliot (2007) found that factors that motivate prosocial action in close relationships may be different from those that motivate help between strangers, and they proposed that empathic concern was linked to willingness to help a kin member but not a stranger.

Thus, we speculated that social distance is an important determinant of the effectiveness of a significance appeal, that is, an appeal that emphasizes the significance of the help to the recipient. When a recipient is socially close, namely, genetically related or a very close friend, people are not concerned about

whether or not their favor will be returned. Moreover, as individuals can mentally share the experience of the recipient, this further increases helping intention.

Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) supported this speculation with their finding that interpersonal closeness blurred the self–other distinction. In their examination of brain activity using electroencephalography, Gutsell and Inzlicht (2010) found that individuals were able to spontaneously simulate the state of close others without active effort, but such simulation was constrained and unavailable for distant others. Thus, we expected that an impact appeal would not increase helping intention when the helper and recipient were socially close, but when the recipient was socially distant, people would expect reciprocity.

Increased perceived significance makes helpers believe that their help is important, and valued by, the recipient (Grant, 2008; Grant & Gino, 2010). Given that individuals tend to avoid the state of indebtedness, helpers are more likely, with a significance appeal, to believe that the recipient will return the helper's assistance. On the other hand, if the impact is not emphasized, social distance makes it difficult for the helper to automatically share the misfortune of the recipient. Students reported stronger empathy toward a student from the same university than toward one from another university, both of whom described a distressful experience (Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom, 2009). Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Social distance will moderate the effect of a significance appeal on helping intention. When the helper and recipient are socially distant, a significance appeal will increase helping intention relative to a control appeal. In contrast, when the helper and recipient are socially close, a significance appeal will not increase helping intention.

This hypothesis was tested in three studies. In Study 1, we examined if, when people are socially distant from the recipient, they are more concerned with the impact that their help will have, than they are by how much sympathy they feel toward the recipient. In Study 2 and 3, we further examined whether or not, when people are socially distant from the recipient, an impact appeal results in increased helping intention more than an appeal in which the conditions that the recipient is experiencing are depicted, and if an impact appeal also results in increased helping intention when the helper and recipient are socially close.

Study 1

Method

Participants. We recruited 85 participants (45 men and 40 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.14$ years, $SD = 10.28$) from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a small payment of US\$0.35. MTurk is a crowdsourcing internet marketplace that enables individuals and businesses to coordinate the use of human intelligence to

perform tasks that computers are currently unable to do. It has been widely used to conduct online experiments (Chandler & Kapelner, 2013). Participants signed a form giving their informed consent. Only responses that were fully completed and submitted by the participants were considered valid.

Procedure and measures. Participants were randomly assigned to a simple, one-factor (social distance: high vs. low) between-subjects design, which we adapted from Erlandsson et al. (2015). The situation that was depicted was a girl who was in need of a kidney transplant and thus required a large amount of money. In the low-social-distance condition, participants were told that the girl was the daughter of their brother with whom they had sporadic contact. In the high-social-distance condition, participants were told that the girl was the daughter of a former classmate with whom they had no contact. Participants were asked to choose which of two options best described their thoughts: “I feel sympathetic towards the sick girl and would see what I could do to help” or “I would evaluate how much impact my help would have on the sick girl.” (The order of the two options was balanced across conditions.)

Results

A chi-square distribution test revealed a strong effect of social distance on the responses. In the low-social-distance condition, 11 of 46 (23.91%) participants selected “I would evaluate how much impact my help would have on the sick girl” as the response that best described their thoughts. In contrast, in the high-social-distance condition, 18 of 39 (46.15%) participants selected this response ($\chi^2 = 4.645, p < .05$, odds ratio = 2.73). We used Study 1 as an initial test of our basic proposition that the focus of individuals differs according to whether or not the potential recipient is socially distant or close.

Study 2

Method

Participants. We recruited 250 participants from MTurk (153 men and 97 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 39$ years, $SD = 13.68$) who took part in Study 2 for a small payment of US\$0.20. Participants signed a form giving their informed consent. Only responses that were fully completed and submitted by the participants were considered valid.

Procedure and measures. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions following a 2 (appeal type: significance appeal vs. control appeal) \times 2 (social distance: high vs. low) between-subjects design. The helping situation was the same as in Study 1. Social distance was manipulated by introducing the girl as the daughter of their brother with whom they had sporadic contact (low social distance) versus the daughter of a former classmate with whom they had

no contact (high social distance). We then manipulated the appeal type. In the significance appeal condition, participants were told that their help mattered to the family and could make a difference in the girl's life. In the control appeal condition, participants were told about the distressful situation of the girl and her family.

To assess prosocial intention, participants were given the following instruction: "Imagine you have US\$100 at your disposal. Please indicate the amount from this US\$100 that you are willing to donate to the family." Participants reported the amount that they would donate to the girl on a scale from 1 = *no donation* to 2 = *\$1-\$10*, and then in \$10 increments to 11 = *\$91-\$100*.

Participants then answered items to assess whether or not our manipulations of social distance and appeal type were effective. We assessed the effectiveness of appeal type manipulation with the request, "Please indicate the extent to which the blog expressed the significance of your donation to the girl" with ratings on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much* (Grant & Gino, 2010). Two questions were used to assess the effectiveness of the social distance manipulation: "How far away do you perceive you are from the girl?" and "How close is your relationship with the girl?" Responses were rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very distant* to 9 = *very close*.

Results

We undertook manipulation checks for social distance, appeal type, and willingness to donate. We averaged the questions for social distance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$), and as expected, a 2 (appeal type) \times 2 (social distance) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on social distance revealed a significant main effect of social distance manipulation only. The participants reported greater perceived distance when the girl was depicted as the daughter of a former schoolmate ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.41$) than when she was the daughter of their brother, $M = 5.48$, $SD = 2.28$; $F(1, 246) = 11.45$, $p < .001$. No other effects were significant ($F_s < 1$).

As expected, a 2 (appeal type) \times 2 (social distance) ANOVA on the perceived significance of the appeal revealed a significant main effect of appeal type manipulation only. The participants in the significance appeal condition reported a perception of greater significance of the appeal ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 1.70$) than those in the control condition did, $M = 6.68$, $SD = 2.33$; $F(1, 246) = 9.38$, $p < .01$. No other effects were significant ($F_s < 1$).

A two-way ANOVA on participants' willingness to donate revealed the main effects of social distance. On average, participants who felt socially close to the recipient were willing to donate more money, $M_{\text{close}} = 6.91$ versus $M_{\text{distant}} = 6.01$; $F(1, 246) = 5.21$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Appeal type did not affect donation amount, $M_{\text{control}} = 6.42$, $M_{\text{significance}} = 6.46$; $F(1, 246) = 0.07$, $p > .1$. As predicted, however, a significant interaction emerged, $F(1, 246) = 8.188$, $p < .05$, partial

$\eta^2 = .03$. Simple effects analyses revealed that although a significance appeal marginally decreased willingness to donate when the recipient was socially close, $M_{\text{control}} = 7.49$, $M_{\text{significance}} = 6.31$; $F(1, 246) = 3.31$, $p = .07$, it increased willingness to donate when the recipient was socially distant, $M_{\text{control}} = 5.14$, $M_{\text{significance}} = 6.56$; $F(1, 246) = 4.98$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1).

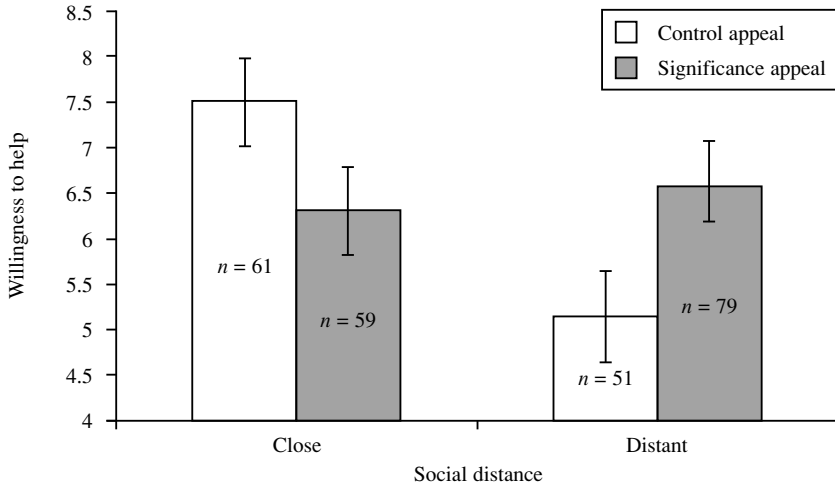


Figure 1. *The interactive effects of appeal type and social distance on helping intention.*

Study 3

Our aim in Study 3 was to replicate the interactive effect of appeal type and social distance established in the previous two studies by using a different operationalization of social distance: in-group versus out-group members.

Method

Participants and design. In this study 162 students (108 men and 54 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.44$ years, $SD = 3.45$) from a major Chinese university took part. The experimenter approached the students in a library and invited them to participate in an experiment for a small gift worth US\$0.15. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university.

Procedures and measures. The study had a 2 (appeal type: significance appeal vs. control appeal) \times 2 (social distance: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants read a scenario in which there was a description of how an increasing number of children were being left behind in rural China by parents moving to cities to find work. Participants in the in-group condition read that there were children left behind in their hometown or nearby areas. Staff of a

charitable organization invited them to give their time to help these children by making phone calls to them from time to time. Participants in the out-group condition read that there were children left behind in the vast rural area of China. Staff of a charitable organization invited them to give their time to help these children by making phone calls to them from time to time.

We manipulated the type of appeal by using different wording at the end of the appeal. Participants in the significance appeal condition read, "A short period of time will make a difference to their lives." Participants in the control appeal condition read, "Please imagine their lonely and distressful life." The wording was kept at approximately the same length to eliminate confounding effects.

To assess helping intention, participants then reported their willingness to donate time, namely, the number of hours that they would be willing to donate monthly, rated on a 5-point scale of *0 hours*, *0.1–2 hours*, *2.1–5 hours*, *5.1–10 hours*, and *more than 10 hours*.

Results

We conducted a 2 (appeal type) \times 2 (social distance) ANOVA with participants' willingness to donate time as a dependent variable. No main effects of appeal type and social distance were significant. However, as we expected, their interactions were significant, $F(1, 158) = 3.966$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

Simple effects analyses revealed that participants in the high-social-distance condition were willing to donate more of their time in the significance appeal ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.15$) than in the control appeal condition, $M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.14$; $F(1, 158) = 5.76$, $p < .02$. However, participants in the low-social-distance manipulation showed a comparable willingness to donate their time in the control appeal condition ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.15$) and in the significance appeal condition, $M = 3.05$, $SD = .14$; $F(1, 158) = .153$, $p > .1$.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated how appeal type and social distance interactively influenced helping intention. We found that people paid more attention to the impact that their help would have on the recipient when the social distance between them and the recipient was high than when the social distance was low (Study 1). We further demonstrated that an appeal that emphasized the significance of the help effectively increased helping intention when the helper and recipient were socially distant (Study 2 and 3).

The results supported our hypothesis and are consistent with previous findings, which show that the principles that are applied in interaction with others are influenced by social distance, and that interaction between socially distant individuals is guided by reciprocity (Tsui & Farh, 1997). A significance appeal

makes helpers feel that the recipient values their help (Grant, 2008), and that there is a greater likelihood that the favor will be returned. In contrast, a significance appeal did not increase helping intention for socially close recipients, because the helpers could spontaneously feel the recipient's suffering and gave unconditionally.

Most previous researchers have focused on the importance of emotions in generating helping behavior, and have only recently examined the role of perceived impact on prosocial decision making. As argued by Loewenstein and Small (2007), the ideal altruistic situation is one in which people's sympathies and their rational side align, that is, when both their heart and head tell them to support the same cause to the same degree. Our results, which show that social distance moderates the effect of a significance appeal on helping intention, demonstrate in which situations rationality becomes more important than emotionality, and, therefore, when a significance appeal works.

There are implications in this study for individuals who are seeking help from socially distant others. Owing to self-categorization, people cannot feel the misfortune of socially distant others, and thus it is hard to elicit people's help (Tarrant et al., 2009). Our findings suggest that when help is asked from socially distant people, an emphasis on the significance of the help may be an effective strategy. Instead of using emotional appeals excessively, fundraisers designing charity appeals can increase the donation amount by highlighting the significance to the recipients of the donation.

There are limitations in this study in terms of experimental design. In a procedure similar to that used by many other prosocial behavior researchers, we measured participants' helping intention at the time of reading a message, and the actual helping behavior was not observed. Future researchers can observe actual behavioral measures, such as donation amount or volunteering time. Second, we postulated that the differential effect of a significance appeal on socially distant versus socially close recipients may be attributable to reciprocity. However, we have not formally tested this. Future researchers can conduct mediation tests to establish the mechanism for the interplay between appeal type and social distance.

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