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The Effects of Status Similarity and Expectation of Reciprocation upon Altruistic Behavior

Daniel Romer, Michael Bontemps, Michael Flynn, Thomas McGuire
Illinois Benedictine College
Charles L. Gruder
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

Abstract. The "wrong-number technique" for eliciting aid was used to test the hypothesis that similarity between benefactor and recipient only increases helping when future reciprocation and interaction is likely. When helping is altruistic, reciprocity is not expected and dissimilarity need not inhibit helping. The results supported the hypothesis. Implications of altruistic as opposed to reciprocated helping were discussed.

Altruism is distinguished from helping in that future reciprocation is not anticipated by the altruist (Berkowitz, 1972). A most extreme example of such behavior is Durkheim's (1951) "altruistic suicide," in which the altruist sacrifices his life for the benefit of others. Thus, the motivation underlying altruism resides largely in the benefactor's ability to derive satisfaction from the knowledge that his action will help others.

Given this assumption, variables that might ordinarily increase the tendency to interact with and to help others may not be operative in the case of altruism. For example, one might expect similarity between the potential benefactor and his recipient to augment liking (Byrne, 1971) and thus to increase the likelihood of aid (Emswiller, Deaux & Willits, 1971). The results of a recent study (Kriss, Indenbaum & Tesch, 1974) employing Gaertner and Bickman's (1971) "wrong number technique" did not support this expectation, however. In this study subjects of high or low status received telephone calls during which they were asked for help by callers of high, ambiguous or low status. Contrary to predictions based on the similarity-attraction hypothesis, subjects were less willing to help similar callers when the request was either a simple appeal for aid or an emotionally positive one; and subjects gave nearly equal help to both types of caller when the request was negative in tone. These results suggest that when an altruistic response (such as calling a garage for an unknown and never to be seen person) is possible, similarity of the help seeker to the benefactor may not augment the incidence of such help.

One implication of the Kriss et al. results is that the satisfaction derived from altruism is not reduced, and may actually be enhanced, by possible differences between benefactor and recipient. Such differences may have a detrimental effect, however, when future interaction of a more personal nature is likely. Under such conditions, dissimilarity could reduce the potential rewards of interaction (Byrne, 1971) or increase the potential costs (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and, thus, decrease helping. Although the rewards derived from the satisfaction of the altruistic motive may still be a determinant of such helping, the expectation of rewards and costs associated with future reciprocation may also affect such helping and produce an overall similarity-helping effect.

To test this notion, the status conditions of Kriss et al. were recreated in combination with a manipulation of likelihood of future reciprocation. The manipulation consisted of the requestor either offering to

return the favor or not doing so. The favor condition was designed to create the expectation that the subject's help giving might be reciprocated and thus would not be exclusively altruistic. According to the distinction between altruistic and reciprocated helping, dissimilar status should produce less helping than other conditions when reciprocation is expected. That is, a variable that ordinarily inhibits interaction should influence the decision to offer assistance. When no offer to reciprocate is made, dissimilar status conditions may, as observed by Kriss et al., elicit more helping than other conditions. These predictions were of particular concern in the present design.

Method

Subjects. Names were arbitrarily selected from the telephone book of persons living in either upper or lower middle-class suburbs of Chicago. One hundred eighty-five such residences were contacted with approximately equal numbers assigned to one of two conditions of caller status (high vs. low) and one of two types of appeal (favor vs. no favor). Twenty-three subjects ended the phone conversation before the caller could complete the request and were excluded from further analysis.

Procedure. Three male undergraduate experimenters made the telephone calls. The format of the caller's request was similar to the simple appeal of Kriss et al. Under low status, the caller claimed to have a disabled 1964 Rambler; whereas, in the high status condition, the car was a 1974 Imperial. In the favor condition, the appeal for assistance was concluded with "I'd be more than glad to return the favor, I'm on the East-West Tollway about a mile west of Highland Avenue." In the no-favor condition, just the location was given.

Those subjects who offered to help were then given the telephone number of "Ralph's Garage." A second experimenter answered the calls, recorded the information given by the subject, and thanked the subject for his/her assistance.

The calls were made between 6 and 9 p.m. on Monday through Thursday evenings. When a child answered the phone, the text was discontinued, and the caller simply apologized for having the wrong number.

Results

Table 1 contains the numbers of subjects who complied with the request for help in each experimental condition. The proportion of helping (73%) was comparable to previously reported results with the wrong-number technique (Gaertner & Bickman, 1971).

Table 1
Frequency of help as a function of caller and subject status and offer to return the favor

	Caller Status							
	Low				High			
	Subject Status				Subject Status			
	Low		High		Low		High	
	Favor		Favor		Favor		Favor	
Help	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yes	12	16	11	24	12	15	16	13
No	7	3	8	5	7	4	3	6

No effects of caller's status, subject's status, or presence of a favor were observed, and the effect of status similarity was insignificant.

As seen in Table 2, the prediction that when reciprocation is likely helping would be reduced by status dissimilarity was confirmed. That is, less helping was observed when status was dissimilar and a favor was offered than in all other conditions combined, χ^2 (1) = 4.25, $p < .05$. The expectation derived from Kriss et al., however, that helping would be greater (than all other conditions combined) when status is dissimilar and no favor is offered was not confirmed (77% vs. 70%), χ^2 (1) = 2.05.[1]

Table 2
Frequency of help for dissimilar status-favor offered conditions versus all other conditions

	Condition	
Help	Dissimilar Favor	Other
Yes	23 (61%)	96 (77%)
No	15 (39%)	28 (23%)

Discussion

The results indicate that, if help is requested with the offer to reciprocate (favor condition), a factor that typically inhibits attraction and affiliation (i.e., dissimilarity of status) reduces the incidence of helping. When no favor is offered, however, status dissimilarity does not reduce helping. Thus, the results support the hypothesis that dissimilarity only reduces helping when the assistance is likely to lead to reciprocation and further interaction.

Although other interpretations of the offer to return the favor are possible (e.g., an attempt to ingratiate or persuade), the present hypothesis appears best able to encompass the results. Even if the subject does interpret the offer as an attempt to ingratiate or persuade him or her, its content implies the possibility of further interaction to enable the caller to obtain the subject's telephone number or address. Thus, other explanations of the favor effect appear to derive their meaning from the noxiousness of future interaction when the caller is dissimilar. This is also the basis of the interpretation, of course, of the difference between altruistic and reciprocated helping in the present study.

The present favor manipulation contains two components that may have different effects upon helping behavior. One, expectation of future interaction, and the other, expectation of reciprocation, are, of course, distinct variables. Whether only one or both of these components produced the similarity-helping effect cannot be concluded from the present results alone. However, if it were possible to expect reciprocation without direct interaction, a similarity-helping effect would be predicted only if the benefits of the reciprocation were greater when the requestor is similar. Although future research is needed to settle this issue, the present results indicate that the satisfaction of altruistic motives has potentially different effects upon helping behavior from the satisfaction of motives derived from the expectation of future rewards and costs that are associated with reciprocity.

The results do not replicate Kriss et al.'s finding that dissimilar callers receive more help when the appeal is simple (favor absent). Although many differences between experiments might be responsible, it is possible that the simple appeal in the present experiment was not as positive in emotional tone as that of Kriss et al. Their negative appeal eliminated

the dissimilarity effect; whereas, their simple appeal did not differ from an emotionally positive one.

Kriss et al. did not attempt to explain their dissimilarity effect. In keeping with the present hypothesis, however, altruism might be more rewarding to the benefactor when the recipient is different. To the extent that helping is counternormative, the benefactor can perceive his act as more praiseworthy. Thus, self-esteem may be enhanced more by helping a dissimilar other. The conditions under which the dissimilarity-helping effect is elicited merit further investigation. If the present approach is valid, the effect should occur when the appeal is affectively positive (as in Kriss et al.) and when the aid is determined primarily by altruistic intentions.

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Footnote

[1]Inasmuch as this effect is correlated with the previous significant comparison, the failure of the effect to reach significance can only increase confidence in the acceptance of the null hypothesis.

Requests for reprints may be addressed to D. Romer, Department of Psychology, Illinois Benedictine College, Lisle, Illinois 60532.