

Does a “Norm of Self-Interest” Discourage Prosocial Behavior? Rationality and Quid Pro Quo in Charitable Giving

BRENT SIMPSON

KYLE IRWIN

PETER LAWRENCE

University of South Carolina

Previous studies by Holmes, Miller, and Lerner (2002) support the norm of self-interest and exchange fiction hypotheses. Together these arguments state that people want to act on compassionate feelings (e.g., by donating to charities) but are reluctant to do so if they cannot justify their behavior as being in line with their own self-interest. Thus a person will be more likely to contribute to a charity when he or she receives a product in exchange for the contribution. This exchange fiction gives the person egoistic cover for the compassionate act. In this paper we critically evaluate the evidence for this line of reasoning and offer an alternative explanation for that evidence based on cognitive dissonance theory. We report the results of a new field experiment designed to tease apart the exchange fiction argument and the alternative approach. Results of the study support our application of dissonance theory over the exchange fiction account.

One of the most actively debated issues in the literature on prosocial behavior is whether action is ever motivated by anything other than enlightened self-interest (Batson 1987; Cialdini et al. 1997; Gintis et al. 2003; Piliavin and Charng 1990). Social scientists have pointed to two reasons why the self-interest assumption is so important in the literature. First, this assumption has long been central to neoclassical economics and rational choice approaches to economics. As rational choice theory made its way into other social sciences, those disciplines also adopted the “typical value assumption” of economics, namely, self-interest (Miller 1999).

Second, there is little systematic evidence for prosocial behavior that is not explicable in terms of enlightened egoism (Batson 1987).¹ Because scholars invoke the

self-interest assumption to explain so many other aspects of human behavior, parsimony dictates that they also will employ this assumption in theories of prosocial behavior until they obtain evidence that directly contradicts the assumption. Thus explanations based on self-interest are ubiquitous in Western social science and are likely to prevail for some time.

In an exciting new line of research, scholars address how the enormous power granted to the self-interest motive in social scientists’ descriptions of human behavior has led to a prescription for self-interested action outside academe. Holmes, Miller, and colleagues (Holmes, Miller, and Lerner 2002; Miller 1999) have suggested that the ubiquity of the self-interest assumption in social theories has led to a “norm of self-interest” among laypeople.²

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¹ Egoistic or self-interest-based explanations assume that actors are motivated to increase their own welfare. In contrast, following Batson (1998),

altruistic explanations assume that actors are motivated to increase another’s welfare.

² A thorough review of the various ways in which assumptions of self-interest in social scientific theories could generate a norm of self-interest is beyond the scope of this report. Miller (1999) offers a detailed explanation of this process, as well as anecdotal evidence for the norm of self-interest hypothesis. Because of space constraints we do not address the anecdotal evidence, but contend that it can be explained straightforwardly without invoking the

The norm of self-interest prescribes that people pursue their self-interest, but more than this, it prescribes that they pursue their self-interest narrowly defined. To satisfy the strictures of the self-interest norm, people's actions must conform to, at least crudely, the strictures of neoclassical economic theory. Acting so as to maximize positive emotions (e.g., pride) or minimize negative emotions (e.g., guilt) . . . does not meet the . . . self-interest norm. [The norm] requires that the interests motivating people be material ones (e.g., economic profit). (Miller 1999:1053–54)

The norm of self-interest is predicted to govern not only financial and economic decisions, but also behaviors associated with compassion and prosociality. For example, the norm is expected to make people “uncomfortable donating to charity in the absence of a tangible quid pro quo” (Miller 1999:1054). This discomfort, Miller suggests, may underlie the tendency of charities to offer products in exchange for donations. According to the norm of self-interest reasoning, such products create an “exchange fiction” that allows benefactors to justify their contributions as consistent with their own self-interest. As Holmes et al. (2002:145–46) explain, “[T]he exchange fiction provides the mask under which the altruist can express her compassion. . . without having to reveal, or even recognize her motives—after all, she is merely engaging in an economic transaction.”

One of the most interesting—and counterintuitive—implications of this argument by Holmes and colleagues is that the need to justify one's actions through an exchange fiction is related *positively* to the level of compassion the act entails.

[W]hen victim need is high; people should most wish to disguise their compassion, thereby rendering especially great the increment in financial yield produced by the offer of an exchange. (Holmes et al. 2002:146)

The results of experiments reported by Holmes et al., discussed below, seem to unequivocally support the exchange fiction hypothesis, including the prediction that

actors are more apt to need an exchange fiction to provide egoistic cover for more compassionate acts. We believe, however, that a more intuitive explanation, based on cognitive dissonance theory, can account for their findings. After describing the procedures and results reported by Holmes et al., we outline this alternative explanation. We then report the results of a new field experiment designed to tease apart our application of dissonance theory from norm of self-interest and exchange fiction reasoning.

EXCHANGE FICTION AND THE NORM OF SELF INTEREST

Holmes, Miller, and Lerner (2002), hereafter HML, report the results of two experiments, both of which they suggest support the exchange fiction hypothesis. In this section we outline their second experiment. We do not discuss their first study in any detail because, as discussed below, it contains a confound that was resolved in the second study. Thus the second study is the most appropriate test of the norm of self-interest/exchange fiction hypothesis. In any case, our comments on the second study apply equally well to the first.

In Study 2 of HML, research assistants approached undergraduate students as volunteers for one of two charities, one for “low-need” victims, and the other for “high-need” victims. The low-need charity was a recreational society seeking help to purchase new equipment for a children's softball team; the high-need charity was a society for emotionally disturbed children.³

In addition to victims' need level, HML manipulated whether an “exchange” was offered in return for contributions and, if so, how the exchange was framed. In each of three exchange conditions, participants were offered a candle in exchange for a three-dollar contribution. In addition, participants in each condition were told that the (alleged) profit to the charity, after the costs of the candle were covered, was one dollar. The three

hypothesis. The question for this report is whether experiments designed explicitly to test these arguments are amenable to an alternative explanation. We show that they are.

³ See HML (2002:146) and below for specific scripts. Except for the charities' names and locations, the new field experiment we introduce below replicates the HML charity scripts.

conditions differed by the type of sales pitch delivered to potential contributors: “fair price,” “bargain price,” or “altruist price.” The scripts were as follows:

Fair price: Three dollars is the normal price for this type of candle in stores in the area. Even at this good price it allows us a one-dollar profit that goes to our organization for each candle sold.

Bargain price: The normal price for this type of candle in stores in the area is in the four-dollar range. Three dollars is therefore an extremely good price that gives you very good value in return for your money. In addition, we can still have a one-dollar profit that goes to our organization for each candle sold.

Altruist price: The normal price for this type of candle in stores in the area is approximately two dollars but we're charging three dollars so that the one-dollar profit can go as a donation to our organization for each candle sold.

In addition to the three exchange conditions, two “donation” conditions were included as control groups. Respondents in one donation group were asked to donate one dollar; those in a second group were asked to donate three. The one- and three-dollar groups were used to mirror, respectively, the alleged profits and costs of the candles in the exchange conditions. In neither of the donation conditions were participants offered an exchange for their contributions.⁴

The exchange fiction argument assumes that an individual will feel greater compassion when contributing to a high-need charity than when contributing to a low-need charity.

⁴ Study 1 of HML was a simpler 2 (solicitation type: exchange versus donation) \times 3 (need: high versus medium versus low) design. The high- and low-need charities were identical to those used in Study 2. Unlike the second study, Study 1 did not employ various exchange framings or “sales pitches.” The potential confound in Study 1 is that participants in the exchange condition were told that they could contribute 75 cents (and get a smaller candle in exchange) or \$3.50 (and get a larger candle). Meanwhile participants in the donation condition of Study 1 were told that the charities were requesting contributions of 75 cents or more. Thus the donation condition contained the smaller contribution anchor (75 cents) but not the larger (\$3.50). The higher anchor in the exchange condition introduces a potential confound that HML resolved in Study 2.

The greater compassion, in turn, leads to a stronger need to disguise it with an exchange fiction: the better the “bargain,” the more convincing the fiction. The authors therefore predicted that the impact of need on contributions would depend on the extent to which the act of help could be economically justified. Specifically, need was expected to have least impact under the altruist price framing, intermediate impact under the fair price framing, and greatest impact under the bargain price framing. (p. 147)

Most important, the authors predicted that the offer of an exchange would have more impact on decisions to give in the high-need than in the low-need condition, a hypothesis supported in their first study (see note 4). Again, this is the case because higher-need charities (and the concomitant higher level of compassion) generate a stronger need for an egoistic cover.

As displayed in Table 1 (which reproduces data from Table 2 of HML), the results are largely consistent with the exchange fiction account. The results show that the offer of an exchange exerted a greater effect on contributions in the high-need than in the low-need condition. Furthermore, in the high-need condition, the better the “bargain” of the exchange, the more individuals contributed.

A DISSONANCE THEORY EXPLANATION

Although the results reviewed above are consistent with the norm of self-interest approach, we contend that the findings have a simpler and more plausible explanation. Building on consistency theory (Aronson 1968, 1992), we argue that the motivation to avoid dissonance provides a more accurate account of effects such as those presented as support for the norm of self-interest argument.

Consistency Theory

Festinger's (1957) classic theory of cognitive dissonance postulates that cognitions are either consonant or dissonant. They are consonant when one logically precludes another (I'm a healthy person, I don't smoke) and dissonant when one follows from the opposite

Table 1. Average Contributions: Study 2 of Holmes, Miller, and Lerner

Condition	Form of Solicitation				
	Donation Type		Exchange Framing		
	\$1	\$3	Altruist Price	Fair Price	Bargain Price
Low-Need	31.3	25.0	27.3	27.3	30.0
	.25	.08	.09	.09	.10
High-Need	41.2	50.0	120.0	150.0	184.6
	.40	.17	.40	.50	.62

Note: These results are taken from Holmes, Miller, and Lerner (2002:148). The upper number in each cell is the average contribution in cents; the lower number is the proportion of people making a contribution.

of the other (I am smart, I failed a test). Because dissonance is unpleasant, people are motivated to avoid or reduce it. Festinger compared the drive to avoid dissonance to the physiological desire to alleviate hunger or thirst.

According to Aronson's (1968) consistency theory, dissonance is strongest when it involves a self-relevant cognition and a behavior that violates the self-concept. In other words, actors are motivated to achieve consistency between self-perception and behavior (Aronson 1992, 1999). Thus the strongest dissonance occurs when an individual's actions are incongruent with his or her self-perception: for example, if he considers himself to be equitable, but free rides on a group project. Because consistency theory (like dissonance theory) is based on the assumption that individuals tend to view themselves positively, Aronson (1999:238) concludes that people are most likely to experience dissonance when they "consciously or knowingly do something stupid" or if they "do something that hurts another person." In short, people want to see themselves as *rational* and *moral*. Behaviors that suggest otherwise lead to dissonance.

A number of classic studies support the basic claim that dissonance is strongest when a person perceives his or her actions (or anticipated actions) as immoral or irrational. For instance, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) asked subjects to participate in a boring (and seemingly meaningless) task. At the end of the study, subjects were asked to tell another person (actually a confederate) who ostensibly was about to participate in the same study that the task was enjoyable. Some subjects were paid 20 dollars; others were paid one dollar. Compared with those who received

one dollar subjects who were paid 20 dollars could readily justify their actions: they were simply engaged in a "rational transaction." In contrast, subjects who received one dollar did not have a rational account for their behavior. Thus Festinger and Carlsmith predicted that the latter subjects would experience dissonance following the immoral act (lying about the task's being enjoyable). These subjects could reduce dissonance by convincing themselves that the task actually *was* enjoyable. In line with this reasoning, those who were paid one dollar for lying subsequently rated the task more favorably than those who were paid 20.

In another study, Aronson and Mills (1959) showed that dissonance was generated by undergoing a difficult initiation to gain membership in a boring discussion group. Those who went through the initiation felt irrational or "stupid" (Aronson 1999). To reduce dissonance, they subsequently reported that the group was interesting. (That is, the subjects reasoned: "Why would I, a rational person, go through a tormenting initiation phase to be a member of this group? Because it's an interesting group, and I really like being a member.")

Finally, Aronson et al. (1974) linked immoral behaviors with dissonance. In exchange for a small reward, subjects who held negative attitudes toward marijuana use were videotaped making a speech advocating its use. Subjects who were told that the videotape's intended audience was firmly committed to a position on the issue (pro or con) experienced little dissonance. By contrast, subjects who were told that audience members were uncommitted on the issue experienced significant dissonance. These findings suggest that dissonance arises when a person

believes he or she may be harming others by advocating a position with which he or she does not agree (for only a small reward).

In short, previous research strongly supports the argument that dissonance tends to be created by behaviors that are inconsistent with a person's view of himself or herself as rational or moral. Thus, because actors are motivated to minimize or reduce dissonance, an individual's tendency to pursue a given line of action should increase as that line of action becomes increasingly "moral" and/or "rational." For instance, a person may donate to a charity because *not* contributing would be inconsistent with his view of himself as moral (as may have happened for many after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast), because it would be inconsistent with his view of himself as rational (as may happen when tax deductions motivate charitable donations), or both.

One can argue, then, that with an increase in the number of moral or rational reasons for pursuing a given line of action, actors tend more to follow that course of action. Thus, unlike the norm of self-interest argument, our application of consistency theory does not posit as necessary a discrepancy between acting on behalf of others and acting for oneself.⁵ For instance, a person may decide to contribute to a charity because it makes her feel good to know that she has helped someone in need (a moral choice) *and* because she receives some item in return for her contribution (a rational choice).

From this perspective, then, as there is an increase in the number of valid rewards for contributing, *not* contributing becomes increasingly inconsistent with one's view of self; thus dissonance is created. Yet we are not suggesting that a rational cost-benefit calculation necessarily guides such decisions.

⁵ We use the phrase *acting on behalf of others* loosely. For the argument proposed here, it does not matter whether a prosocial act is truly altruistic (i.e., where reducing another's suffering is the ultimate goal) or "pseudo-altruistic," where helping is an instrumental route to egoistic ends such as obtaining internal rewards (Cialdini, Baumann, and Kenrick 1981) or reducing one's own aversive arousal (Hornstein 1982). For a review of altruistic and pseudo-altruistic approaches and the difficulties entailed in teasing them apart, see Batson (1987).

Rather, as suggested by recent work in behavioral decision theory, people often invoke much simpler heuristics in making decisions. For instance, the conjunctive decision rule proposed by behavioral decision theorists (Gilbride and Allenby 2004; Marini 1992; Schoemaker 1982) suggests that actors decide to pursue a given line of action *if* it satisfies multiple screening rules: for example, if the choice seems both rational and moral.

The above discussion suggests that the greatest incentive to contribute in the HML study exists in the "high-need/bargain price candle" exchange condition. From the standpoint of consistency theory, respondents in this condition were most able to justify giving because their contributions went to a truly needy cause (the moral choice, related to the low-need charity) *and* they got a good deal on a candle (the rational choice, related to the donation condition as well as the other exchange conditions).⁶ By extension, the next greatest incentive existed in the "high-need/fair price" condition. Meanwhile, given the framing used for the altruist price condition, participants in that condition could tell themselves that they would help a needy charity and receive something in return. This item, however, would be (subjectively) more costly, and thus less rational, than in the fair price or bargain price conditions.

Holmes et al. found that participants were no more likely to contribute to the low-need charity when they received something in exchange than when they were confronted with a donation request without an exchange offer, regardless of the framing of the exchange offer (altruist, fair, or bargain price). This suggests that the candle, whether pitched as a bargain or not, was not valuable enough to subjects to generate action *independent of the charity's need*. For contributors to the high-need charity, however, the candle

⁶ Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) apply similar reasoning to explain charitable giving. In their study they showed that calls for charitable donations increased significantly when accompanied by the statement "Even a penny will help." They argued that the effectiveness of this call centered on avoidance of dissonance: after all, who cannot afford a penny? Thus, in terms of the argument put forth above, not contributing would be both immoral and irrational.

apparently provided the extra push that made the difference between giving and not giving. The utility derived from receiving the candle and donating to the (high- or low-need) charity appears to be multiplicative rather than additive; this point is consistent with conjunctive models of decision making (Gilbride and Allenby 2004; Marini 1992; Schoemaker 1982) just discussed.

More generally, according to our application of consistency theory, a high-need charity's offer of something in return (especially when pitched as a bargain) would be expected to lead to more contributions than would the opportunity either to donate to that high-need charity *or* to receive that item. This is the case because; contributing to the high-need/exchange condition is both moral and rational in comparison with the other conditions of the HML study. Thus the HML results are consistent with the reasoning we offer. How, then, do we empirically tease apart the norm of self-interest argument from our application of consistency theory?

One way of distinguishing the two arguments involves giving those *who have already agreed to contribute to a charity* an opportunity to "justify" or "cover" their actions with an exchange fiction (as it is called in the norm of self-interest hypothesis). Whereas the exchange fiction hypothesis suggests that people will use the exchange offer as an egoistic cover for their compassionate acts, the consistency account contends that people will use the offer, when necessary, to reduce dissonance. Under these conditions, the two lines of reasoning lead to very different predictions as to how the effectiveness of a quid pro quo depends on whether the beneficiaries of charitable donations are high-need or low-need. The exchange fiction hypothesis predicts that those who contribute to higher-need charities will feel greater compassion and therefore will be more likely to accept an exchange offer in return for their contributions. In contrast, our application of consistency theory suggests that contributors to the low-need charity will experience greater dissonance and therefore will be more apt to accept an exchange offer.

More specifically, a contribution to a low-need charity is less justified (morally or rationally) than a contribution (of the same

dollar amount) to a high-need charity. Thus, whether or not it is rational, contributing to a high-need charity (as compared with a low-need charity) is consistent with a view of self as a moral person. In contrast, contributing to a low-need charity (as compared with a high-need charity) is not consistent with a view of self as a rational person; and when compared with contributing to a high-need charity, it is largely irrelevant to one's view of self as moral. Contributions to a low-need charity therefore will lead to more dissonance than contributions to a high-need charity. Accepting an exchange offer reduces dissonance by making the contribution "more rational." Consequently we should expect that contributors to low-need charities will be more apt to accept an exchange offer. Our approach therefore makes a prediction precisely the opposite of the exchange fiction hypothesis. In the next section we outline a new field experiment designed to tease apart these competing predictions.

METHOD

Our design is based explicitly on the HML procedure. We were careful to use charities nearly identical, except for name and location, to those used by HML for their low- and high-need conditions. Both are actual charities whose permission we secured before conducting the study. All donations raised during the study were passed on to the charities. A total of 509 students (235 males and 274 females) were approached for contributions.

A male research assistant (RA), blind to the study hypotheses, was stationed at one of two high-traffic areas at a large public university. After he was set up, the RA selected students walking alone according to a predetermined procedure: for example the fifth female walking alone past a preselected landmark. Whether the RA approached a male or a female, and whether he used the high-need or the low-need script was determined randomly in advance. (We anticipated more refusals in the low-need condition and therefore approached more students for this condition.) If the student approached by the RA did not stop or declined to donate, the RA thanked the student, repositioned him-

self, and repeated the procedure. The RA stayed in the location for a designated period (typically one to two hours).

We replicated as closely as possible the scripts from HML, making only the necessary changes (e.g., names and locations of the charities). Students in the low-need condition were approached as follows:

Hi, my name is [RA's name] and I'm from the South Carolina Irmo/Chapin Recreational Commission. We are interested in helping our midget softball team buy equipment for their members, who are seven to ten years old. They are being sponsored for some of the necessary equipment but we'd like them to be fully outfitted and feel they should have the best equipment.

Students in the high-need condition were approached as follows:

Hi, my name is [RA's name] and I'm from the South Carolina/Greenwood Emerald Center for Developmentally Disabled Children. We have an early intervention program for children from seven to ten years old who have severe problems coping with most normal activities. We hope that with this program, we can avert the tragedy that will result if these children are left to cope alone with their problems. There are many children who could remain damaged for life if they don't get help, so we need a lot of support to make the program effective.

Immediately after finishing one of the above scripts, the RA showed the student a candle (measuring about 3 by 12 inches, with a retail price of about \$1.50 to \$2.00), and stated:

We are asking that each person make a two-dollar contribution. In exchange, we are offering a candle [shows the candle] to those who would like one—you can decide yourself whether or not you would like a candle . . . would you like to make a donation?

If respondents declined, they were thanked and sent on their way. If a respondent agreed to contribute, the research assistant replied:

Okay, good. Would you like the candle?

Our primary dependent measure is whether or not the respondent took the candle.

After respondents indicated whether they wanted the candle, the RA explained that, in addition to volunteering for the charity, he was involved in a research study on "charitable donations." He then asked whether the research team could include the respondent's choices (to give and whether to accept the candle) in the research report, and assured him or her that no identifying information would be included in the report. In all cases, the respondents agreed. The RA then gave the respondent a sheet of paper containing general information about the study. Finally, the respondent was asked to avoid discussing the study with other students for the next several months, sufficient time for the study to be completed. After the student walked away, the RA recorded his or her responses.

To summarize, the most important difference between the HML design and our design is that one of HML's independent variables (whether the participant is offered a candle) effectively becomes our dependent measure (whether the participant accepts the offer of a candle). This allows us to tease apart whether the exchange offer creates an "egoistic cover" (as the exchange fiction hypothesis predicts) or whether participants use the exchange offer to reduce dissonance. If the candle is used as an egoistic cover, we should expect contributors to *high*-need charities (for which compassion is highest) to be more likely to accept it. If the candle is used as additional justification for a contributor's actions (as the dissonance-avoiding account suggests), we should expect contributors to *low*-need charities (whose actions are less strongly justified) to be more likely to accept it.

RESULTS

Of the 282 students approached for the low-need condition, 36 (12.8%) agreed to contribute. Of the 227 students approached for the high-need condition, 52 (22.9%) agreed. Thus the students asked to contribute to the low-need condition were just over half as likely to contribute as those approached

for the high-need condition.⁷ The greater likelihood of contribution among those approached for the high-need condition is statistically significant ($p < .005$), evidence that our manipulation of need was successful.

Among those who agree to contribute, will contributors to the high-need or the low-need charity be more likely to accept the exchange offer? Again, the norm of self-interest argument predicts that respondents who agree to contribute to the high-need cause will be more likely to accept the candle than contributors to the low-need charity; the consistency account predicts that they will be less likely to do so.

The results strongly support the consistency argument. Whereas 75 percent of the 36 contributors to the low-need charity accepted the candle, only 46.2 percent of the 52 contributors to the high-need charity did so.⁸ This difference is highly significant, chi-square = 7.26, $p = .007$, (two-tailed). Therefore, these data support the contention that contributors accepted candles not in an effort to disguise their compassion under a cloak of egoism (as suggested by the exchange fiction hypothesis), but to reduce dissonance that resulted from a (comparably) irrational act.

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

The results reported above seem to strongly support the consistency explanation over the norm of self-interest argument. An anonymous reviewer, however, suggested

⁷ We include as “noncontributors” those who resumed walking before the research assistant could finish reciting the high- or low-need script. Thus a few of those classified as refusing to contribute to the high- or low-need charity did not actually hear the details. Such respondents were few, however, if anything, their inclusion as noncontributors probably causes us to underestimate the difference in respondents’ willingness to give to the high- versus low-need charity.

⁸ Our preliminary analyses included a binary logistic regression, with decision to accept the candle regressed on need level, respondent’s gender, and the need-by-gender interaction term. Neither the gender term ($p = .96$) nor the interaction term ($p = .83$) reached statistical significance. Therefore, these analyses include both males and females.

that the results also might be explained by a *self-selection* process. As noted by this reviewer, our dependent measure (whether to accept the candle) is the *second* decision made by each person we approached; participants first must decide whether to contribute. Thus only those who contribute decide whether to accept the candle. At issue is whether those with a greater interest in getting the candle (for whatever reason) are more likely to select themselves into a given condition (low- versus high-need). If this is so, it might explain why contributors to the low-need charity were more likely than contributors to the high-need charity to accept the candle. That is, these participants may have contributed in order to gain the opportunity to accept the candle.

More generally, to make a case for our application of consistency theory over a self-selection explanation, we need evidence that the *prospect of getting the candle* in our study did not select for one “type” of contributor in the low-need condition and another “type” in the high-need condition.⁹ We present such evidence by comparing the differences in contributions to high- versus low-need charities in our study with those of the donation only conditions of the HML study (see Table 1). As we show, the differences are strikingly similar across the two studies.

As we stated above, those persons approached in our study were asked to contribute two dollars. Of the 227 approached in the high-need condition, 52 (or 22.9%) agreed to contribute. Of the 282 approached in the low-need condition, only 36 (or 12.8%) did so. Thus, in our study, participants approached in the high-need condition were 1.79 times more likely to contribute than were those approached in the low-need condition.

How do our contribution results compare with those from the *donation-only* conditions of the HML study? In those

⁹ A consistency theory explanation would suggest that simply asking participants about why they made their choices would be ineffective because they already would have rationalized their initial behavior (whether to give) by the time they decided whether to accept the candle.

conditions, participants' decisions about whether to contribute could not have been affected by the prospect of receiving a candle because there was no mention of a candle. Thus the HML donation-only conditions provide a baseline with which to assess whether the prospect of the candle selected for different types of contributors to the high- and low-need conditions of our experiment.

Given that the contribution requested in our study (\$2) is the average amount requested in the two donation-only conditions (\$1 and \$3) of the HML study, we take the average of those conditions. As shown in Table 1, 28.5 percent of those approached in the high-need/donation-only conditions agreed to contribute: that is, the average of 40 percent and 17 percent, respectively, for the one-dollar and three-dollar donation conditions. On the other hand, only 16.5 percent of those approached in the low-need/donation-only conditions agreed to contribute. In other words, in the donation-only conditions of the HML study, participants approached in the high-need condition were 1.73 times more likely to contribute than were those approached in the low-need condition.

The greater likelihood of contributing to the high-need charity is virtually identical in the two studies (1.79 versus 1.73). This finding suggests that differences in contribution rates for the high- versus the low-need charity in our study resulted from the charities themselves, rather than from the prospect of a candle, which selected different types or rates of contributors into one condition or another. That is, the decision to accept or not accept the candle apparently was made *after* the decision to donate to the charity: a much larger proportion of contributors to low-need charities accepted the candle in order to rationalize or justify their behavior.

DISCUSSION

When coupled with previous work, the results presented here support our application of consistency theory over the norm of self-interest hypothesis. Both the norm of self-interest and the consistency approach account for the findings presented in a previous study by HML, but only the consistency

approach predicts the outcomes from the field experiment described in this paper.

But why does the consistency argument predict that contributions will be higher when potential contributors to *high-need* charities necessarily receive a quid pro quo for their contribution (as in the exchange conditions of the HML design), while contributors to *low-need* charities will be most likely to accept an optional quid pro quo following a contribution in the scenario presented to participants in our study? To recap, our application of consistency theory to the HML findings is based on the argument that, as the number of rational or moral reasons for pursuing a given line of action increases, so does the actors' tendency to follow that course of action. In other words, as the number of valid rewards for contributing increases, *not* contributing becomes increasingly inconsistent with one's view of self, and thus leads to dissonance.

Following behavioral decision theory models (Gilbride and Allenby 2004; Marini 1992), we assume that actors are most likely to pursue a given line of action if it satisfies multiple screening rules: that is, if the choice is both rational *and* moral. Thus, when the candle is presented as part of the deal (that is, when it is offered automatically in exchange for some contribution), as in the HML study, the greatest incentive to contribute is found in the "high-need/bargain-price candle" exchange condition. We argued that respondents in this condition would be most able to justify giving because their contributions went to a truly needy cause (the moral choice, relating to the low-need charity) *and* because they got a "bargain" on a candle (the rational choice, relating to the donation only condition).

The experimental design introduced here was motivated by consistency theory's prediction that actors are most likely to experience dissonance (and thus the need to reduce it) when their actions are inconsistent with their views of self as rational and moral agents. From this perspective, as explained above, contributions to low-need charities are expected to lead to more dissonance than are contributions of the same amount to high-need charities. Accepting a quid pro quo, when offered, is one means of reducing

dissonance. Thus, by disaggregating the decision to contribute to a charity from the acceptance of a quid pro quo, our field experiment allowed us to address whether the candle would serve as an “egoistic cover” for a compassionate or moral behavior, or as justification for an otherwise (relatively) irrational act. Our results strongly support the latter contention.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we argue that evidence previously presented as support for the norm of self-interest argument can be explained with a classic social psychological theory. Most important, the results of our new field experiment support our application of consistency theory over the norm of self-interest hypothesis. Beside its theoretical significance, this demonstration has important practical implications for how charities can motivate contributions most successfully. For example, in contrast to the norm of self-interest argument, our application of consistency theory suggests that low-need charities often may benefit more than their high-need counterparts from the implementation of a quid pro quo.

Following Holmes et al. (2002), we have focused on a quid pro quo that may provide *egoistic* cover or a means by which contributors can rationalize their donations. Yet the effectiveness of the quid pro quo in generating contributions to high- versus low-need charities may differ when the items in question are purely symbolic or have no use value such as ribbons, lapel pins, and bumper stickers. In fact, high-need charities often use such items, but not necessarily because they provide “egoistic” cover. Rather, these objects may signal altruism or compassionate behavior (“I helped a needy child today”). Similarly, as observed by a reviewer, some items offered by charities in exchange for contributions, such as wristbands, may convey particular (altruistic) identities. Our research is a first step and thus necessarily disregarded these issues. Future work, however, should address different “types” of quid pro quo and their effectiveness at generating contributions to charities of varying levels of need.

In summary, our results suggest that, if a norm of self-interest exists, it is less ubiquitous than suggested in previous work. Thus the question becomes “Under what conditions would researchers be most likely to observe to a norm of self-interest?” A study by Frank, Gilovich, and Regan (1993) suggests that certain social categories may be more subject than others to something akin to a norm of self-interest. These authors showed that economics majors cooperate less in prisoners’ dilemma games than non-economics majors (also see Marwell and Ames 1981). The authors ruled out the possibility that these differences in cooperation could be attributed solely to a greater tendency for self-interested persons to choose economics as a major area of study; instead they proposed that repeated exposure to the neoclassical economic model (which assumes self-interested actors) in textbooks and classrooms might lead economics majors to act in accordance with the model.

As noted by Frank et al. (1993:170), it is still not entirely clear that such a process underlies the lower levels of cooperation among economics majors. In short, although the work of Frank et al. is suggestive, it has not been demonstrated that the norm of self-interest operates even in a category of persons we should expect to be most subject to it: those continually exposed to the assumption that self-interested behavior guides human action (see Miller 1999). Thus a major goal for future research should be to establish more clearly whether a norm of self-interest exists and, if it does exist, the conditions in which it emerges to influence human action. Such research should yield useful insights into the important practical problem of motivating beneficence.

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Brent Simpson is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of South Carolina. His primary research interests include social psychology, trust, and cooperation. Recent publications have appeared in *Social Forces*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Social Psychology Quarterly*. He has received a grant from the National Science Foundation (with Barry Markovsky) to study how power affects perceptions regarding who is tied to whom in social networks.

Kyle Irwin is a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina, whose interests center on social dilemmas and collective action problems, especially how emotions, social identity, and norm conformity generate cooperation. His dissertation focuses on the genesis of social identification in social dilemmas via conformity to group norms.

Peter Lawrence is a graduate student in sociology at the University of South Carolina. His research interests include social psychology, altruism, and prosocial behavior.