

# Paying To Be Nice: Consistency and Costly Prosocial Behavior

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Drawing on self-perception theory and research exploring that theory (e.g., Bem 1970, 1972; Goethals and Reckman 1973), we propose that when recent prosocial behavior was personally *costly*, people would interpret that behavior as a signal of their prosocial identity; we predict, and demonstrate, that having drawn that inference, individuals are more likely to subsequently behave prosocially. Prosocial behavior that comes at lower cost, however, offers a more ambiguous signal: prosocial behavior is clearly positive, yet since it came at no cost, it is less likely to be judged as diagnostic of one's prosocial disposition. Under those circumstances the positive act can serve as a license ("my actions have led to a positive outcome...") without a substantial influence on self-perceptions, resulting in a reduction in subsequent prosocial behavior ("... so I am going to be a bit more greedy now."). Field and lab experiments test our hypothesis.

In the Experiment 1, we sought to test the idea that costly forms of altruism would lead to subsequent increases in prosocial behavior, while costless altruism would result in moral licensing. We further expected costly prosocial behavior to send a signal to the self of one's altruistic preferences, leading to an increase in self-reported prosocial identity; in contrast, because costless altruism does not send a strong signal, we expected no change in prosocial identity. To manipulate the cost of altruism, some participants had part of their payment donated to charity (costly altruism); other participants learned that a donation had been given on their behalf, but that it was not deducted from their payment (costless altruism). Control participants were not exposed to the charitable cause. To measure subsequent prosocial behavior, we created a task in which people could either lie to benefit themselves or tell the truth to benefit an unspecified other. Truth telling and reported self-perceptions of prosociality served as our DVs.

The results show that the three treatments differed in the extent to which people reported feeling prosocial,  $F(2, 167) = 8.90, p < .001$ . Specifically, participants in the Costly treatment reported feeling more prosocial ( $M = 3.85, SD = .86$ ) than those in the Control treatment ( $M = 3.27, SD = .82$ ),  $t(109) = 3.59, p < .001$ , and those in the Costless treatment ( $M = 3.26, SD = .75$ ),  $t(104) = 3.74, p < .001$ . Participants in the Control and Costless treatments did not differ in reported prosocial identity,  $t(117) = .08, p = .93$ . In addition, a comparison of the percentage of participants who told the truth in each treatment revealed a significant difference,  $\chi^2(2) = 18.35, p < .001$ . Consistent with our predictions, participants in the Costly Donation treatment were substantially more likely to send a truthful message (71%) than Control participants (52%),  $\chi^2(1) = 4.49, p = .04$ , and Costless (30%),  $\chi^2(1) = 18.35, p < .001$ . Also, Control participants were more likely to tell the truth than those in the Costless treatment  $\chi^2(1) = 5.82, p = .02$ . A mediation analysis confirmed that individuals' truth telling was mediated by their reported self-perceptions of prosociality; the effect of costliness on truth-telling was reduced (from  $\beta = .42$  to  $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ) when prosocial identity was included in the equation, and prosocial identity remained a significant predictor of truth-telling ( $\beta = .17, p = .02$ ).

Next, we ran a large field experiment to test our predictions in the wild. We conducted the experiment at a ride in a large American amusement park. Visitors were photographed while on the ride and could purchase their photo. To test the effect of prosocial behavior on subsequent behavior, we randomly assigned participants to one of two treatments that differed with respect to whether the photo was sold with a charitable-giving promotion. On some days the photo was sold such that half of the price was donated to a charity (a major patient-support organization); on others, photos were sold without the charitable element. Participants chose whether to buy the photo, and then walked through a retail area that contained other merchandise. Surveyors intercepted a random sample of photo purchasers at the exit, and asked them three questions: "Did you buy a photo?", "Did you buy any other merchandise?", and in reference to the latter, "Are any of those purchases going to be gifts for others?" Responses to the final question served as our primary dependent measure; buying a gift for someone is a prototypical prosocial behavior (Dunn et al 2008).

Neither photo purchasing ( $\beta = -.18, p = .67$ ) nor the prosocial promotion ( $\beta = -.20, p = .62$ ) influenced subsequent gift buying. However, we observed a marginally significant interaction ( $\beta = 1.04, p = .05$ ). When participants were exposed to the prosocial cue, those who purchased a photo were *more* likely than non-purchasers to buy gifts for others ( $\beta = .82, p = .04$ ), consistent with our costly altruism account. While all participants were exposed to the prosocial cue, only those engaging in a *costly* prosocial behavior demonstrated subsequent increase in prosocial behavior. When participants were *not* exposed to the prosocial cue, photo purchasers and non-purchasers were equally likely to buy gifts for others ( $\beta = -.45, p = .43$ ).

These findings have implications for understanding when and why consistency and licensing may emerge. Furthermore, the current work informs a decades-long dispute across psychology and economics over whether social preferences – selfless behavior toward another – truly exist (Batson et al. 1997; Cialdini et al 1997; Levitt and List 2007). It appears that in part, this debate is rooted in the different orientations toward the study of prosocial behavior, with psychologists generally exploring why people don't help enough and economists exploring why, given a lack of incentives, people help at all (Ariely and Norton 2007; Fehr and Schmidt 1999). By combining both economic and psychological approaches, we show that the two approaches in fact converge: When behavior is costly to the self, that cost serves to make the behavior an informative input in the inference of one's moral disposition, and that changed self-perception also changes one's preferences for future similar behaviors, leading to consistency.

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