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Avoiding the Ask: Evidence on Empathy

Today, we're featuring a guest post from IPA Project Associate Hannah Trachtman. She just published [a paper](#) with co-authors James Andreoni and Justin M. Rao about what makes people give when confronted with Salvation Army volunteers ringing bells and/or asking us for money. As people finalize their 2011 donations, we think this post is particularly interesting, because it makes us think about how and why we think about giving.

At IPA we're mostly concerned with figuring out how to have more than good intentions. But it's also worth thinking about where good intentions come from in the first place. Why do we care about other people? Some researchers think that what appears to be unselfishness is really just indirect selfishness: we believe generous acts will be reciprocated, or we expect that cooperation will benefit us. Others have proposed various theories of social preferences and inequality aversion. In attempts to understand *why* we are altruistic, some recent studies have posed the slightly different question of *when* we are altruistic, or *under what circumstances*. To what extent do we care about a family member versus a friend versus a stranger? What if we can't imagine what we could do to be helpful? What if we know that our act of generosity will be publicly recognized and appreciated?

Researchers have investigated these questions in the realm of charitable giving, and have found some interesting answers. Giving increases when social distance is reduced, when subjects communicate, and when the act of giving is publicly visible. These results about the importance of circumstance in altruism inspire a new question: to what extent do we actually create our own circumstances? Unfortunately for IPA, our circumstances are not randomly assigned. They are at least somewhat endogenous: we have some say in who becomes our friend and who remains a stranger, in who we communicate with, and in how we present ourselves to the world. If we only focus on giving, and not on the giving circumstances into which we place ourselves, then we are only seeing half the picture.

In our study, "Avoiding the Ask: A Field Experiment on Altruism, Empathy, and Charitable Giving," we observe giving, but we also observe selection or sorting into the circumstance of being asked to give. Specifically, we look at whether shoppers avoid or seek bell-ringing solicitors during the Salvation Army's annual Red Kettle Campaign. In the winter of 2009, we rang bells outside of a supermarket in Boston over four days. We varied two aspects of solicitation. First, we varied which supermarket doors were covered by solicitors: half the time, we kept two solicitors at both main doors; the other half of the time, we took one solicitor away (giving people the chance to avoid solicitation by using the other door). Second, we varied the intensity of solicitation: half the time, we rang bells, made eye contact, and said "Hi, Merry Christmas, please give today;" the other half of the time, we just rang

bells. We counted traffic through both doors, instances of giving, and donations.

We find that the verbal solicitation has an important effect on both giving and avoidance behavior. Verbal solicitation increased giving rates by nearly 60%, and more than 25% of customers chose to avoid verbal solicitation by changing the store entrance they used. What is it that causes this particular circumstance—being asked to give to charity—to have such a powerful influence on our behavior? We think it has something to do with empathy. Being looked in the eye and asked to give stimulates our empathy, sometimes causing us to give, and other times causing us to avoid that verbal solicitation altogether (if we expect we'd give unwillingly, or not give and feel guilty).

One question that our study does not answer is whether this type of empathic stimulation has positive or negative effects on welfare. It is probably good, and important, if it helps us recognize things we care about in the world and act accordingly. But it's not so great if it compels us to give when we don't want to, or if it makes us feel guilty for not giving when we can't (and if either of these things cause us to avoid the emphatic stimulation in the first place). The hitch is that we actually have very little control of our empathy: it is subject to marketers, our moods, and chance run-ins with bell-ringers. In an ideal world, maybe we'd harness our empathy a bit more: empathically stimulate ourselves on a regular basis, make decisions about the things we care about, and give in a way that makes sense for us. The results of this study make it clear that we are not there yet, but it's something to think about as we pass by (or not) bell-ringers this holiday season.

December 30, 2011