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ABSTRACT

If being asked to give to charity stimulates an emotional response, like empathy, that makes giving difficult to resist, a natural self-control mechanism might be to avoid being asked in the first place. We replicate a result from a field experiment that points to the role of empathy in giving. We conduct an experiment in a large superstore in which we solicit donations to charity and randomly allow shoppers the opportunity to avoid solicitation by using the other door. We find the rate of avoidance by store entrants to be 4.5 percent. However, we also find that the avoidance effect disappears in very cold weather, suggesting that avoidance behavior is sensitive to its cost.

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1 Introduction

Why do people give to charity? Research has made it clear that pure altruism cannot fully explain many of the giving behaviors that we see, and thus it must be that people derive some positive utility from the act of giving (Andreoni, 1989; Andreoni, 1990). In a recent study, "Avoiding the Ask: A Field Experiment on Altruism, Empathy, and Charitable Giving," Andreoni, Rao, and Trachtman (henceforth ART) explored a particular channel by which giving might affect utility: the emotional pressure that people experience when asked to give. Psychologists suggest that a request to donate first triggers an emotional response, such as empathy, that makes it difficult for people to resist giving (Batson, 1991; Batson, 2011; Preston and deWaal, 2002; Andreoni and Rao, 2011). Avoiding being asked, and thereby evading the emotional response that induces giving, can serve as an important self-control mechanism.

Several recent laboratory studies show that people do incur costs in order to avoid opportunities to give (Dana et al., 2006; Lazear et al., 2006; Broberg et al., 2007), which appears consistent with the psychological mechanism described above. ART run a field experiment in partnership with the Salvation Army's familiar Red Kettle (bell ringer) campaign. At a supermarket in Boston, they randomly vary whether solicitors are placed at both doors–prohibiting avoidance–or at just one door–allowing for avoidance through the other. They also vary whether solicitation is active (verbal and with eye contact) or passive (simply ringing the bell) to uncover potential interactions between social pressure and sorting. They find that one third of patrons avoided active solicitation by using the other door when they had the opportunity to do so, suggesting that patrons were using the defense mechanism of avoiding being asked.

We run a similar experiment that both replicates and expands upon this finding. We solicited donations outside of a supermarket in Anchorage, Alaska with two entrance doors, and randomly varied whether a solicitor was present at the door located on the right side of the parking lot. By chance, we were also able to investigate the effect of increasing the cost of avoidance: one of the four days in our sample had extremely cold temperatures, so taking a longer route to avoid solicitation was presumably less comfortable. We find that on average, adding a solicitor to the right door results in a 3.5 percentage point increase in traffic through the left door. However, this effect depends on the cost of avoidance. When we restrict our analysis to the days with normal temperatures, avoidance jumps up to 4.5 percent, and if we look only at the day that was extremely cold, avoidance is negligible.

2 Experiment Design

To test the robustness of ART's results, our experiment was designed to contrast with theirs on several dimensions. ART used a well-known charity, posted college-age females at the supermarket doors, solicitors asked for donations directly, and conducted the study in the eastern United States.

Figure 1: Pin-back button for PKD Foundation

In contrast, this study chose a relatively unfamiliar charity, the Polycystic Kidney Disease (PKD) Foundation. Our solicitors were college-age males. Rather than asking for unspecified donations, we sold pins, shown in Figure 1, for $1.00. Finally, our study was conducted in Anchorage, Alaska.

We conducted the experiment over four days in November, 2013. We divided each of the four days into three one-hour time blocks: 12:00PM to 1:00PM, 1:05PM to 2:05PM, and 2:10PM to 3:10PM. Finally, we assigned each of the 12 total blocks to be control or treatment, making sure that the treatment was distributed as evenly as possible across days and time blocks. The exact schedule is depicted in Table 1. The layout of the supermarket and its two doors is depicted in Figure 2.

Table 1: Experiment Schedule

	Saturday 11/9	Thursday 11/14	Saturday 11/16	Wednesday 11/20
Block 1: 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.	Control	Treatment	Treatment	Control
Block 2: 1:05 p.m. to 2:05 p.m.	Treatment	Control	Control	Treatment
Block 3: 2:10 p.m. to 3:10 p.m.	Control	Treatment	Treatment	Control

In blocks assigned to control, there was no solicitation.[1] In blocks assigned to treatment, we placed a male solicitor at the right door who actively solicited sales of the PKD Foundation pins.[2] He stood by a small table that had an informative poster about the PKD Foundation and a collection box for proceeds. In all blocks, experimenters in vehicles in the parking lot counted how many customers entered through each of the two doors. Importantly, we only counted incoming shoppers, and ignored outgoing shoppers.[3]

[1] In the ART experiment, blocks assigned to control had solicitors at both doors, but there is no reason why the distribution of traffic should differ between the two.

[2] Since ART did not see avoidance for passive solicitation, we chose to focus our efforts only on active solicitation.

[3] ART counted both incoming and outgoing shoppers, which could explain the difference magnitudes of reported effects.

Figure 2: Supermarket Layout

3 Results

Over the four days we observed 7,276 entrances through both doors. During the first three days of the study, temperatures were within the normal range for Anchorage (between 20 and 30 degrees Fahrenheit). However, on the fourth day (November 20), temperatures were unseasonably cold, with the daytime temperature of zero degrees approaching a new record for that date. The cold weather presumably reduces the appeal of walking to the less convenient door, allowing us to test whether the avoidance effect is sensitive to its cost. As shown in Figure 3, on the three normal days combined, 53.8 percent of customers entered through the left entrance (without the solicitor) in the treatment, relative to 48.8 percent in the control, which is a five percentage point avoidance effect. On the fourth day, the extremely cold temperature had a significant impact on entrances through the left door, yielding no discernible difference between the treatment and control (49.1 percent and 48.4 percent, respectively).

We use a probit regression to confirm these findings, and report marginal effects in Table 2.[4] Column (1) shows a significant effect of the treatment on traffic through the left door (the door without the solicitor). Column (2) shows that when we control for cold and its interaction with the treatment, adding the solicitor to the right door increases the fraction of entrances through the left door by 4.5 percentage points. This result is significant at the 1% level. Moreover, cold weather dampens the effect of the treatment, reducing the fraction of entrances through the left door by 4.2 percent. This negative effect is significant at the 1% level. Thus, the extremely cold weather essentially neutralized the effect of the treatment on avoidance.

[4] A linear probability model gives almost exactly the same results.

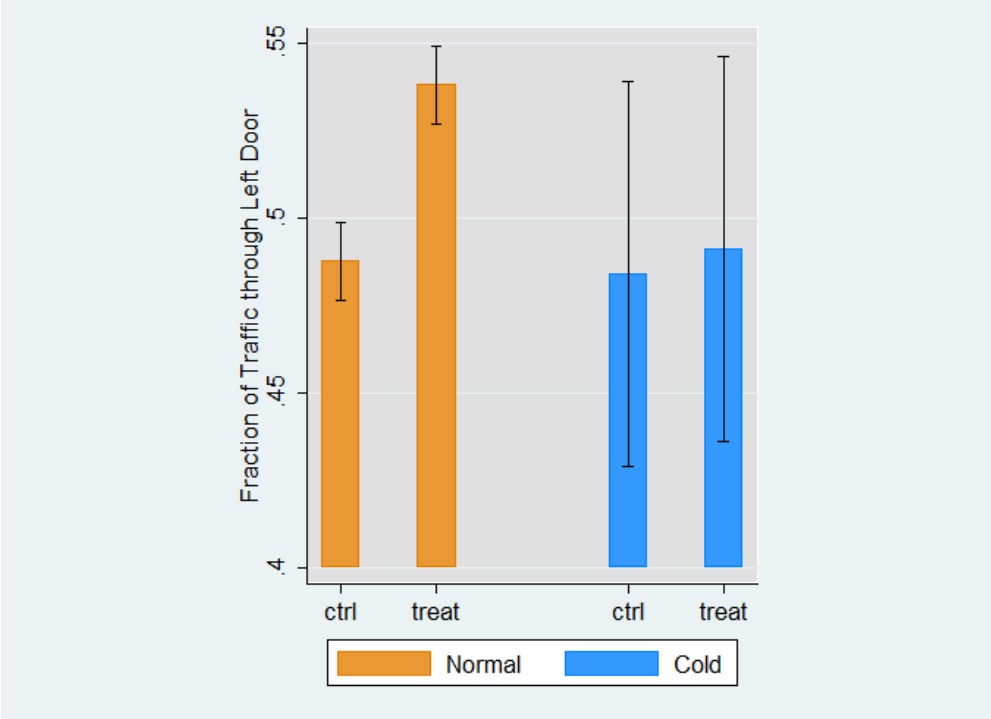

Figure 3: Mean fraction of passings through left door by condition and weather. Bars give 1.96 standard errors from identical regressions restricted to normal days and the cold day, respectively (for the cold day, standard errors are not clustered by block since only one block received the treatment).

Table 2: Marginal Effects of Probit Regression: Left Door Choice on Treatment

	(1)	(2)
VARIABLES	.	.
treatment	0.0351***	0.0454***
	(0.00839)	(0.00659)
cold		0.00568
		(0.0161)
treatXcold		-0.0416***
		(0.0161)
Observations	7,276	7,276
Date/time fixed effects	YES	YES

Standard errors clustered by block in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

4 Conclusion

We conducted an experiment that was similar to Andreoni, Rao and Trachtman (2011), but which also differed in many key respects. We solicited money for a relatively unknown charity, while they used the Salvation Army. Our solicitors were male while theirs were female. We asked for $1 in exchange for lapel buttons rather than an unspecified donation. We ran our study in Anchorage, Alaska, while they ran theirs in Boston. Our results confirm the findings of Andreoni, Rao and Trachtman that there is significant avoidance of charitable solicitation. This replication is notable given difference in methods and setting, and the fact that this study measured only entrances to the store. Moreover, our findings shed some light on the cost-benefit calculation that underlies avoidance. As ART hypothesized, if giving only increases utility by resolving the feeling of empathy experienced when asked, then there is a major benefit to avoiding feeling empathy in the first place, and thereby avoiding the guilt (or giving) that results. Both experiments indicate that the benefit is big enough to induce avoidance under most circumstances. But the fact that avoidance behavior is also sensitive to its cost triggers further questions about the precise trade-offs faced by individuals, providing important direction for future research.

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