Don't forget the group! The importance of social norms and empathy for shaping donation behaviour

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*F*eelings of empathy and the influence of social descriptive norms are related to intentions to donate. People are more likely to help and donate to others when they empathise with them, and when they perceive descriptive norms to encourage such behaviour. However, previous work has not considered the potential interplay between empathy and descriptive norms. Across two surveys in two different national settings ($Ns = 1300$ and 144), we assessed the interplay between empathy and social descriptive norms on frequency of donation (Study 1) and on willingness to donate (Study 2). Consistent with our main hypotheses, in Studies 1 and 2, norms and empathy were positive predictors of frequency of donation and willingness to donate. Importantly, a consistent interaction between norms and empathy was found in both studies. Empathy was a stronger predictor of donation behaviour and disposition when norms were low. Theoretical and applied implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Charitable giving; Monetary donations; Empathy; Social norms; Helping.

Monetary donations from private individuals are an indispensable resource for charitable organisations. The UK Giving study estimated that during 2016 a total of £9.7 billion were donated to charities (Charities Aid Foundation [CAF], 2017b), while in the United States a total of $390.05 billion was donated, 72% of which came from individual donors (Giving USA Foundation, 2017). But what motivates people to make a monetary donation?

Numerous drivers of charitable donations have been identified. Besides demographic variables, such as gender, age and educational level (Wunderink, 2002), and situational variables such as cause and severity of disasters and media coverage (Simon, 1997; Zagefka, Noor, Brown, Randsley de Moura, & Hopthrow, 2011), one of the most frequently cited antecedents of donations, and helping in general, is empathy. The empathy-altruism

hypothesis argues that helping others can be a selfless act triggered by other-oriented empathic motivations (Batson et al., 1991). This association between empathy and helping has been evinced multiple times. For instance, Pavey, Greitemeyer, and Sparks (2012) conducted three studies in which they showed evidence supporting the empathy-helping association, considering situational and trait empathy (i.e., empathy towards a target in need, and individual differences respectively) and different forms of helping behaviours—offering time, monetary and material donations and volunteering. This association has been also evinced in neuroscience. Morelli, Rameson, and Lieberman (2014) found that the septal area in the brain became active when participants empathised with individuals, and that this brain activity predicted helping behaviours. Given the strong evidence for the effect of empathy on helping and donations, it seems sensible

that charities design campaigns that aim to elicit empathy to trigger monetary donations. Images of hard-suffering victims and sad background music on the media aim for precisely this effect.

However, other researchers have found that helping might not be as altruistic as the empathy-altruism hypothesis states, and that empathy as a predictor of helping may vary across contexts. Examples of this are findings of Stürmer, Snyder, and Omoto (2005) about how empathy is a predictor of helping only when the target of help is part of the ingroup, or Cialdini and colleagues' findings of egoistic motives behind helping behaviour (Cialdini, Kenrick, & Baumann, 1982), among others. Indeed, research on empathy has typically focussed on helping between individuals, without giving much consideration to group identities (van Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017). However, we know that group identities shape how we perceive ourselves and the world around us (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). People express their social identity by internalising and following norms of groups with which they identify (Abrams, Palmer, Rutland, Cameron, & Van de Vyver, 2014). Thus, norms exert a powerful influence on our behaviour.

Social norms have been argued to predict prosocial behaviour and charitable donations (e.g., Shang & Croson, 2009), however this research has developed quite separately from that on empathy. Social norms are social guidelines that establish what most people do in a certain context (i.e., descriptive norms), and what is socially acceptable (i.e., injunctive norms; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Hence, social norms can affect our behaviour in two ways. First, descriptive norms can affect our demeanour by informational influence, that is, by communicating what is the most effective and adaptive way to behave in a situation. If motivation or resources to ponder behavioural choices deeply is lacking, simply displaying the behaviour which others typically display might be the easiest way of conducting oneself. Secondly, injunctive norms can impact us by normative influence, that is, by signalling what is expected from us. Hence, by acting in a socially acceptable way we can reap social rewards (acceptance), and we can avoid potential punishment (rejection).

There have been several studies that show evidence of descriptive norms influencing our behaviour. Cialdini et al. (1990), for example, investigated the impact that social descriptive norms have on littering. In one study, they manipulated perceived descriptive norms by having a clean or a littered environment. As expected, subjects who were in the littered environment littered more than those who were in the clean environment. This result was replicated in the rest of their studies. Clearly, what we perceive other people usually do in a given situation can guide our behaviour when we find ourselves in that same situation, especially in novel, ambiguous and public contexts (Campbell & Fairey, 1989; J. Smith, Hogg, Martin, & Terry, 2007).

Therefore, the usual and/or desirable conduct posed by relevant reference groups shape norms that guide our behaviour in a wide range of areas, such as consumer (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012) and healthy behaviour (Sieverding, Decker, & Zimmermann, 2010), among others. Helping and donation behaviour is no exception. For instance, Shang and Croson (2009) conducted a field experiment involving a fundraising appeal. In this study, donors gave more money to the fundraising according to what they were told the previous donor had allegedly donated (see also Croson, Handy, and Shang (2009) and Hysenbelli, Rubaltelli, and Rumiati (2013)). Agerström, Carlsson, Nicklasson, and Guntell (2016) showed that descriptive norms had a positive effect on the amount of monetary donations given, and also on the number of people who gave donations.

Given the strong effects of descriptive norms, our first hypothesis was that descriptive norms would remain a powerful predictor of donation behaviour even after controlling for the influence of empathy. The fact that the literature on empathy and norms have developed largely independently from each other means that there is, to date, insufficient evidence in this matter, and that the potential interplay between empathy and norms has not been examined.

A second concern was the potential interplay between norms and empathy. There is ample evidence that people's need to belong and to be accepted by relevant ingroup members trumps many other psychological concerns (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We therefore reasoned that in situations in which group norms are strong they might "push" people so strongly towards conforming that empathy effects might be wiped out. In other words, in situations where the ingroup strongly suggests that behaviour '×' should be displayed, it is very likely that behaviour '×' *will* be displayed, irrespective of the influence of other factors. Given the severe penalties often incurred by those who do not conform to ingroup norms (Abrams et al., 2014), people's desire to not be alienated by their ingroup might eclipse other concerns and becomes the motivating force driving their behaviour. In contrast, in situations in which norms exert a less strong pull, more room is left for other forces. If my ingroup does not mind whether or not I donate, and if I am not bound in my behaviour by group norms, I will be more at liberty to choose whether to donate. In such situations, it is likely that decisions to donate will be driven by emotional reactions to the person in need, along the often-demonstrated lines of the empathy-helping effect.

Work around the concept of situational strength also points towards this pattern of expected results. This line of work highlights the moderating role that the strength of situations plays on the relation between individual differences and behaviour (Cooper & Withey, 2009). Because

stronger situations state clearly what is the expected behaviour, these situations constraint the possible range of behaviours buffering the personality-behaviour link. In contrast, weaker situations allow behaviour to reflect individual differences, as there is no clear cues or guidelines of what to do. Hence, according to the situational strength and in line with our hypothesis, emotional reactions would be less likely to inform behaviour when the situation is strong than when it is weak.

The same pattern as described previously might be expected on the basis of a third rationale. We know that our attentional resources are limited, and that focussing on one stimulus can distract us from focussing on other stimuli (e.g., Chajut & Algom, 2003). Those focussed on and constrained by norms will direct their attention towards other ingroup members from whom the norm emanates, whilst those experiencing empathy will direct their attention to the person(s) in need. When social pressures draw our attention to things other than the person in need, emotional reactions towards said person will be less relevant in informing behavioural choices; thus, its influence will be decreased. In other words, when norms favour donations there will be a high need to follow the socially accepted guidelines of behaviour, and less room is left for emotional reactions to the target of help to shape our behaviour. In contrast, when social pressures/norms are negligible, empathy should have a stronger effect on donation decisions, as attentional resources are freed up to focussed on the target of help, and the helper's behaviour will be driven by this.

Although we have described the hypothesised interaction as norms moderating the empathy-donation association, the reverse can also be true. That is, empathy might moderate the association between norms and donations. Norms shape behaviour especially when there is ambiguity or uncertainty on how to behave (J. Smith et al., 2007). Individuals who do not have strong empathic emotions towards the target in need might not be certain about their decision to donate or not. Hence, norms might affect behaviour especially in these individuals with low empathy towards people in need.

Therefore, a second hypothesis we aimed to test was that there would be a descriptive norms-empathy interaction in predicting donations. We expected that the empathy-donation association would be particularly pronounced in contexts where normative pressures are relatively absent. The reverse logic could also be true, that is, the descriptive norms-donation association would be stronger within individuals with less empathic feelings towards the target of help. In investigating this question, our aim was not to contradict the strong body of research on the importance of empathy effects, but rather to explore whether a more nuanced picture would emerge when group dynamics are taken into account, by considering the influence of salient group norms.

There are a few exceptions of studies that have considered norms and empathy together as predictors of helping, like Sierksma, Thijs, and Verkuyten's (2014) and Nook, Ong, Morelli, Mitchell, and Zaki's (2016) work. However, the former ones measured descriptive norms by asking participants how much they thought that their classmates liked the outgroup; this variable therefore seems to capture attitudes towards the outgroup as well as descriptive norms. The latter researchers did not measure norms and prosocial behaviour in the same context, that is the authors tested if norms about donations to charities impacted on how prosocially participants behaved towards another participant in a task not related to donations. In our current studies, our goal was to test the predictive power of empathy and norms on donations when all constructs refer to the same target and behaviour.

In summary, we expect first that descriptive norms and empathy would predict donation choices (H1) operationalised as past frequency of donation in Study 1, and as willingness to donate in Study 2. These two measures were considered in the present work as proxy measures of donation behaviour. Since the measure past frequency of donation used in Study 1, might be susceptible to inaccurate recall, in Study 2, we used willingness to donate to tap into donation disposition. We expect second that there would be an interaction between descriptive norms and empathy, so that the empathy-donation association would be particularly pronounced when normative pressures are comparatively low (H2). Given the practical as well as the theoretical importance of studying individual charitable monetary donations, understanding the psychological drivers of donations and the interplay between those different antecedents seems highly relevant.

STUDY 1

In this study, participants' empathy and descriptive norms based on behaviour displayed by family and friends were considered jointly as predictors of past frequency of monetary donations. Measures for this study were part of a larger survey conducted in Chile about attitudes, helping behaviours and politics conducted by the third author of this article, and supported by Centro de Medición MIDE UC. This large survey called Foco Ciudadano (Civic focus in Spanish) was the first of a series of Foco Ciudadano surveys, which aim at studying relevant phenomena in the Chilean society from a psychosocial perspective. Each Foco Ciudadano survey consists of three modules, and each one of these modules is developed around one topic. The variables used in Study 1 were part of a module regarding helping behaviours that aimed to describe how prosocial were Chilean people in general.

Method

Participants

By design, the study intended to have a total sample of 1300 participants between 18 and 64 years old in five administrative regions of Chile. A total of 1893 households were selected as part of the sample, from which 1300 agree to participate in the study (68.67%). Hence, 1300 participants were interviewed face-to-face in five geographically disparate regions in Chile: II region (Antofagasta), V region (Valparaíso), VIII region (Bío Bío), IX region (Araucanía) and XIII region (Santiago Metropolitan) (687 women, 613 men; 18–24 years old: 193, 25–34 years old: 238, 35–54 years old: 529, 55–64 years old: 340). Participants came from main cities in Chile, and they were recruited by probability sampling in three stages (blocks, housing units within blocks and persons living within a housing unit) without replacement in any of the stages. The sample is therefore reasonably representative of the urban Chilean population. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the studies.

Measures

Frequency of donations ($\alpha = .79$) was measured using six items: "Over the last 12 months, how often have you donated money…" (1) "…to people begging on the streets," (2) "…of your spare change to charity organisations," (3) "…to the Teletón campaign," (4) "…in response to natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, etc.)," (5) "…to national collections (e.g., Coanil, Coaniquem, etc.)," and (6) "…to collections organised in the workplace, study place, neighbourhood and among friends." The response scale ranged from 1 to 5 (1 "*never or almost never*," 2 "*rarely*," 3 "*sometimes*," 4 "*often*" and 5 "*Almost always or always*").

These items included the main elicitation methods for donations that are frequently used in Chile. While the nature of most of these will be obvious to any reader, a couple of approach methods might need elaboration. Teletón is a charity campaign that asks for donations for the rehabilitation of children with developmental disabilities. In this campaign, all Chilean television networks join in a 27-hour coverage of the issue. People can donate in different ways, such as online banking or by buying branded goods from sponsors. Another elicitation method typically used in Chile are national collections organised by charities during a whole day, in which volunteers dress with a distinct t-shirt and collect monetary donations on the street.

The items were taken from a previous series of surveys developed and conducted by Centro de Medición MIDE UC that studied helping behaviours in which Chilean people often engage. This frequency of donation items proved to be positively associated with variables previously related in research to helping and charitable donations (González & Cortés, 2009; González, Cortés, Lay, Valencia, & Castillo, 2010; González, Cortés, Manzi, Lay, & Herrada, 2012; Luengo Kanacri et al., 2016; Maki et al., 2019), such as prosocial values (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2010; Van Lange, Bekkers, Schuyt, & Van Vugt, 2007), strength of identification as a religious person and as a volunteer (Fidelity Charitable, 2014; Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016), feelings of social responsibility with the recipients (Schuyt, Smit, & Bekkers, 2010; Weerts & Ronca, 2007), civic engagement (Jones, 2006) and perceived impact of help (Zagefka, Noor, Brown, Hopthrow, & de Moura, 2012). According to the new Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014), this evidence based on relations to other variables supports the validity of using these items as a measure of donations.

Empathy ($\alpha = .87$) was measured with these items: "People empathise when they put themselves in the place of others. How much do you empathise with people who…" (1) "…beg on the streets," (2) "…are helped by the spare change you donate to charities," (3) "…are helped by Teletón," (4) "…are helped by donation campaigns in disaster situations," (5) "…benefit from national collections" and (6) "…are helped by the collections organised in your workplace, study place, neighbourhood or among friends." The response scale ranged from 1 to 5 (1 "*not at all*," 2 "*slightly*," 3 "*more or less*," 4 "*very much*" and 5 "*extremely*"). These measures were developed so as to assess situational empathy in the different elicitation methods that were asked in the frequency of donation scale. In order to keep our measure of empathy closely related to the construct we wanted to measure, participants read this short definition of empathy "people empathise when they put themselves in the place of others" before reading and answering the empathy items. This definition was based on the cognitive aspect of empathy, that is, the understanding of mental states of other people or perspective taking (De Waal, 2008; Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2009; A. Smith, 2006).

Descriptive norms ($\alpha = .90$) were measured with these items: "In general how often do your family and friends…" (1) "…donate money to people begging on the streets," (2) "…donate part of their spare change to charity organisations," (3) "…donate money to the Teletón campaign," (4) "…donate money in response to natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, etc.)," (5) "…donate money to national collections" and (6) "…donate money to people in need in collections organised in the workplace, study place, neighbourhood and

among friends." The response scale ranged from 1 to 5 (1 "*never or almost never*," 2 "*rarely*," 3 "*sometimes*," 4 "*often*" and 5 "*almost always or always*"). As before, these measures were created in order to assess perceived descriptive norms considering the elicitation methods asked in the frequency of donation scale. These items were adapted from previous studies that assessed perceived descriptive norms based on family and/or friends' behaviour (Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012; Pedersen, Grønhøj, & Thøgersen, 2015; Priebe & Spink, 2011).

Control variables

There were also additional variables that were considered as control variables. Income was measured by asking participants the following question: "In what of the following income groups is your household?" Participants could choose one of six possible answers 1 "Less than $200,000 monthly net" ($n = 86$), 2 "From $200,001 to $360,000 monthly net" ($n = 305$), 3 "From $360,001 to $540,000 monthly net" ($n = 411$), 4 "From $540,001 to $913,000 monthly net" ($n = 292$), 5 "From $913,001 to $1,567,000 monthly net" ($n = 87$), 6 "More than $1,567,001 monthly net" ($n = 69$; 50 missing). In order for the reader to have a general idea of these amounts, $100,000 Chilean pesos is equivalent to $147 USD approximately.

The religious identification variable was constructed based on the question "Which religion do you practise?" Participants who reported practising one religion (e.g., Catholicism or Mormonism) were considered as having a religious identification. Also, those who identified with the option "I am a believer, but I don't adhere to any religion in particular" were considered as religious too. Only those participants who identified themselves as being an Atheist or an Agnostic were considered as not having a religious identification. This variable was coded as 0 "no" ($n = 120$) and 1 "yes" ($n = 1180$).

Participants also had to report their sex (0 "male" $n = 613$ and 1 "female" $n = 687$) and their age (1 "18 to 24 years old" $n = 193$, 2 "25 to 34 years old" $n = 238$, 3 "35 to 54 years old" $n = 529$ and 4 = "55 to 64 years old" $n = 340$).

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations of the measures used in this study are found in Table 1.

The good reliability for the overall scales shows that, as expected, donations, empathy and descriptive norms covaried significantly for different types of contexts and different recipients. Hence, we used the overall mean response across different donation contexts as key dependent variable (see first row in Table 2). However, we supplemented this analysis with analyses that specifically

TABLE 1
Study 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean	SD	*(1)*	*(2)*
Empathy	3.58	0.89	.65***	.56***
Norms (1)	3.42	0.87	—	.58***
Frequency of donations (2)	3.41	0.93		—

***$p < .001$.

probed the patterns in different specific contexts, using just the single items tapping into that context. That is, for each of the six different types of donations, the item of donation was regressed on the empathy item and on the norms item regarding that same type of donation, as well as their interaction (e.g., donations to people on the street was regressed on empathy towards people on the street and norms regarding family and friends donating to people on the street).

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses in two steps (Aiken & West, 1991). First, frequency of donation was regressed on descriptive norms and empathy to test H1. In a second step, the interaction term between descriptive norms and empathy was added to the regression analyses in order to test H2. In order to build the interaction term, the product of the centred variables of norms and empathy was used. Whenever homoscedasticity could not be assumed, HC3—a heteroscedasticity consistent covariance matrix estimator—was used as the covariance estimator in order to get robust standard errors and get accurate levels of significance. When HC3 was used, SPSS RLM (Darlington & Hayes, 2017) and PROCESS (model 1; Hayes, 2018) macros, were used to run the regression analyses. There were no signs of multi-collinearity while using the scales, nor when probing the patterns separately for different contexts. The regression coefficients of norms and empathy estimated in Step 1, and of the interaction estimated in Step 2 of the regression analyses are reported in Table 2. As expected, descriptive norms and empathy were both significant positive predictors of frequency of donation (H1). This was true for the overall scale, but also when analysing the different contexts separately (see Table 2). Thus, the influence of norms was significant even when controlling for empathy. Consistently with H2, the interaction term between norms and empathy was significant in every situation with the exception of donations to Teletón and local collections.

Table 3 shows simple slopes of significant interactions and Figure 1 displays the interaction patterns between empathy and descriptive norms. When descriptive norms were low, the association between empathy and frequency of donations was consistently stronger than when norms were high, as it was predicted in H2. Empathy was a significant predictor at every level of norms with the exception of donation of spare change. In this particular case, the coefficient was significant only in

TABLE 2
Study 1. Regression analyses

	Step 1		Step 2			
	b Norms	*b Empathy*	*b Interaction*	R^2	ΔR^2	*Interaction effect size (f^2)*
Frequency of donations	0.39***(0.04)	0.34***(0.03)	−0.06** (0.02)	.40***	.01**	0.01
Donations to people on the streets	0.31***(0.04)	0.29***(0.03)	−0.10*** (0.02)	.26***	.01***	0.02
Donations of spare change	0.44***(0.04)	0.14***(0.03)	−0.07** (0.02)	.19***	.01**	0.01
Donations to national collections	0.39***(0.04)	0.30***(0.03)	−0.05* (0.02)	.24***	.003*	0.003
Donations in disasters	0.37***(0.04)	0.28***(0.04)	−0.05† (0.03)	.21***	.002†	0.002
Donations to Teletón	0.48***(0.04)	0.29***(0.04)	−0.01 (0.03)	.26***	.00	0
Donations in local collections	0.36***(0.04)	0.34***(0.04)	−0.002 (0.03)	.26***	.00	0

Note: Unstandardised coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 3
Study 1. Simple slope analyses

	Norms levels	b Empathy	95% CI
Frequency of donations	Low (−1 *SD*)	0.37***(0.04)	[0.30, 0.45]
	High (+1 *SD*)	0.26***(0.04)	[0.18, 0.34]
Donation to people on the streets	Low (−1 *SD*)	0.41***(0.04)	[0.33, 0.48]
	High (+1 *SD*)	0.19***(0.04)	[0.11, 0.27]
Donation of spare change	Low (−1 *SD*)	0.21***(0.04)	[0.14, 0.29]
	High (+1 *SD*)	0.06 (0.04)	[−0.02, 0.14]
Donation in national collections	Low (−1 *SD*)	0.34***(0.04)	[0.27, 0.42]
	High (+1 *SD*)	0.23***(0.05)	[0.14, 0.33]
Donation in disasters	Low (−1 *SD*)	0.31***(0.04)	[0.22, 0.39]
	High (+1 *SD*)	0.21***(0.06)	[0.10, 0.32]

Note: Unstandardised coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. CI, Confidence Interval.
***$p < .001$.

the low levels of norms, but it was non-significant with high norms. The same pattern of results was obtained when household income, religious identification, sex and age were added to the analysis as control variables.

Discussion

Results were in line with our predictions. Descriptive norms and empathy were significant predictors of frequency of donations. The interaction between descriptive norms and empathy was significant in predicting frequency of donations. The association between empathy and frequency of donations was stronger when descriptive norms were low. When participants believed that their family and friends rarely donated, the association between empathy and monetary donations was stronger compared to when they perceived their family and friends donated often.

Interestingly, the general interaction pattern did not emerge in two specific contexts, and there might be a number of reasons for this. In the context of Teletón, during the 27-hour television coverage viewers are showered with vivid images of different beneficiaries. Coverage is designed to elicit strong emotional responses. Thus,

viewers' empathy levels may especially be salient and strongly affect decision to donate in this context regardless of perceived norms.

A similar effect might occur in the context of local collections (i.e., organised in the workplace, neighbourhood, etc.). When there is a close relationship between the recipient of help and the potential donor (e.g., a friend, colleague, an acquaintance, etc.), empathy might be triggered more easily and become more salient, motivating behaviour no matter what other contextual factors (e.g., norms) would imply. In these situations, what others do might not affect the strength of this association, as the personal relationship and closeness that exists between the target of help and donor would trigger a strong emotional reaction in any case, predicting helping (Stürmer et al., 2005).

STUDY 2

To test the replicability and generalisability of the previous results, empathy and perceived norms according to family and friends were considered jointly as predictors of willingness to donate in a different national context than in Study 1 and with a sample of different characteristics, namely undergraduate students in the
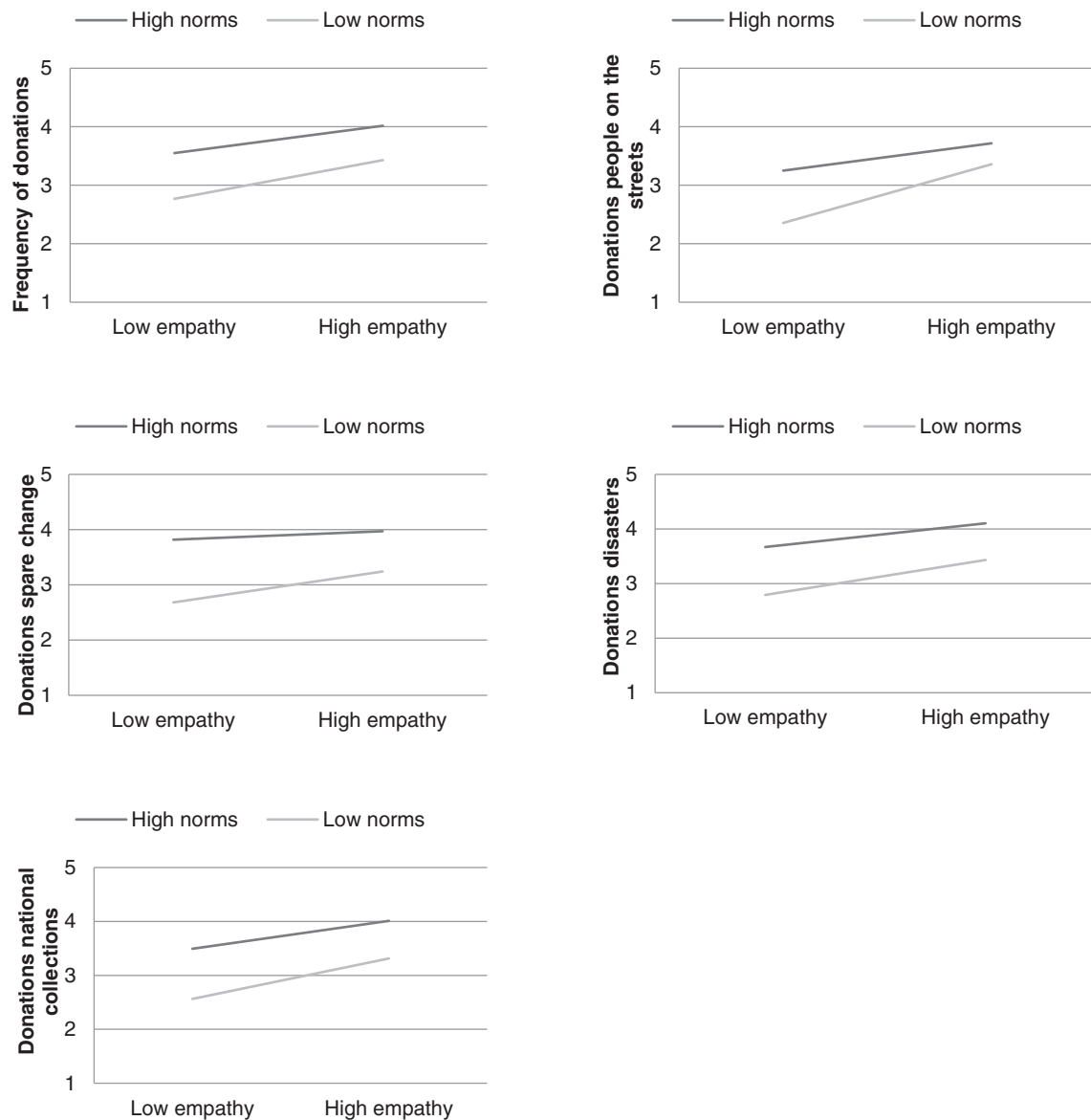
Figure 1. Study 1. Interaction charts. Empathy predicting frequency of donations for 1 *SD* below (low) and above (high) the mean of descriptive norms.

United Kingdom. Study 1 focussed on past donations, since the survey aimed to describe the different helping behaviours Chilean people engaged in, thus, relying on the accurate recall by participants of their previous behaviour. In this study, it was deemed important to test the results with a new dependent variable to avoid a possible recall bias. Hence, Study 2 asked participants to self-report their current willingness to donate to a charity organisation. Additionally, the empathy measure was changed from a more cognitive aspect in Study 1 that considered perspective taking, to a measure that taps into the affective component of empathy. Finally, in order to avoid the potential validity concerns regarding the use of self-developed measures, the items used in Study 2 were taken and adapted from previous studies

(Batson et al., 1991; Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012; Zagefka et al., 2011) that measured the same constructs of interest.

Method

Participants

One-hundred and forty four undergraduate psychology students from a university in the United Kingdom completed an online survey using Qualtrics. They were invited via a research participation scheme in exchange for course credits. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 47 years old (123 women, 19 men, 2 missing; $M_{age} = 19.08$, $SD = 3.06$).

Measures

Participants first read a brief text which emphasised homelessness as a pressing issue in the United Kingdom, and introduced a charity dedicated to this cause (Shelter).

Willingness to donate ($\alpha = .90$) was measured using five items: (1) "I would be willing to give donations to Shelter," (2) "I think it is important to give donations," (3) "I would be willing to give donations to homeless people," (4) "I would really like to help homeless people" and (5) "I would be willing to help homeless people." The response scales ranged from 1 "*strongly disagree*" to 7 "*strongly agree*." These items were adapted from previous research that also tapped into willingness to donate (James & Zagefka, 2017; Zagefka et al., 2011).

Empathy towards homeless people ($\alpha = .93$) was measured asking participants to report to what extent they felt a list of six emotions towards homeless people: (1) "sympathetic," (2) "compassionate," (3) "soft-hearted," (4) "warm," (5) "tender" and (6) "moved." The response scale ranged from 1 "*not at all*" to 7 "*extremely*." This scale was taken from Batson's line of work that has focussed on studying situational empathy towards different targets of help (Batson et al., 1991).

Descriptive norms according to family and friends ($\alpha = .83$) was measured using four items: (1) "My family often donates to charity organisations," (2) "My family often donates to homeless people," (3) "My friends often donate to charity organisations" and (4) "My friends often donate to homeless people.". The response scales ranged from 1 "*strongly disagree*" to 7 "*strongly agree*." As in Study 1, these items were adapted from previous research that measured perceived descriptive norms regarding family and/or friends' behaviour (Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012; Pedersen et al., 2015; Priebe & Spink, 2011).

Control variables

Other variables that were considered as control variables were also included. Participants were asked their level of agreement (1 "*strongly disagree*" to 7 "*strongly agree*") with the statement "I feel that I have a lot of money to spend each month on what I want," tapping into subjective discretionary income ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.69$). Religious identification was asked with the question "Do you identify with any religion?" (0 = "no" $n = 77$, 1 = "yes" $n = 67$). Finally, participants reported their gender (0 "male" $n = 19$, 1 "female" $n = 123$, 2 missing) and their age ($M = 19.08$, $SD = 3.06$, 2 missing).

Results

This study originally aimed to manipulate empathy experimentally. There was no evidence that the manipulation

TABLE 4
Study 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean	SD	(1)	(2)
Empathy	4.70	1.26	.40***	.69***
Norms (1)	3.81	1.46	—	.51***
Willingness to donate (2)	5.34	1.22		—

***$p < .001$.

worked, since it did not affect the empathy manipulation check measure, $F(2, 141) = .83$, MSE = 1.15, $p = .440$. Therefore, the results presented here are obtained by analysing the data as if this was a correlational study.

Descriptive statistics and correlations of the measures used in this study are found in Table 4. To test the hypotheses, a hierarchical regression analysis was run, as in Study 1 (Aiken & West, 1991). To test H1, in the first step, willingness to help was regressed on descriptive norms and empathy. To test H2, in the second step, the interaction term between descriptive norms and empathy was added to the regression analysis using the product of the centred variables of norms and empathy. Since homoscedasticity could not be assumed, RLM (Darlington & Hayes, 2017) and PROCESS macros (Hayes, 2018), were used in order to use HC3 as the covariance estimator. There were no signs of multi-collinearity.

In Table 5, the regression coefficients of empathy and norms estimated in Step 1, and of the interaction estimated in Step 2 of the regression analyses are reported. Mirroring the findings in Study 1 and as was predicted in H1, together with empathy descriptive norms were a positive predictor of willingness to donate. The interaction between descriptive norms and empathy was significant. The same pattern of results was obtained when subjective discretionary income, religious identification, gender and age were added to the analyses as control variables.

As seen in Figure 2, the interaction was consistent with H2 and with previous results in Study 1. When participants perceived low norms, the association between empathy and willingness to donate increased ($b = 0.67$, $SE_b = 0.09$, $t(139) = 7.63$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.85]) in comparison to when norms were more supportive of donations ($b = 0.36$, $SE_b = 0.07$, $t(139) = 4.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.50]).

Discussion

Results confirmed the hypotheses. Descriptive norms and empathy were a significant predictor of willingness to donate. Moreover, the interaction between descriptive norms and empathy predicted willingness to donate. This interaction consisted of a stronger positive link between empathy towards homeless people and willingness to donate when participants reported lower levels of descriptive norms. Importantly, the results were replicated with

TABLE 5
Study 2. Regression analysis

	Step 1		Step 2			
	b Norms	*b Empathy*	*b Interaction*	*R²*	*ΔR²*	*Interaction effect size (f²)*
Willingness to donate	0.24***(0.06)	0.55***(0.07)	−0.11** (0.04)	.57***	.03**	0.07

Note: Unstandardised coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.
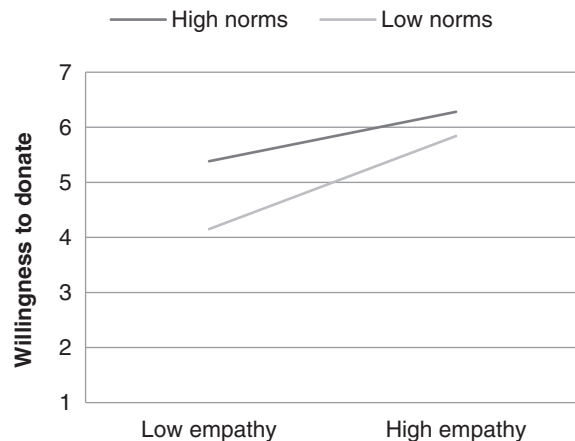**$p < .01$.   ***$p < .001$.

Figure 2. Study 2. Interaction chart. Empathy predicting willingness to donate for 1 *SD* below (low) and above (high) the mean of descriptive norms.

a different measure of donation (from frequency of previous donation in Study 1 to willingness to donate) and empathy (from cognitive empathy to affective empathy).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The reported findings show that empathy and descriptive norms are positive predictors of donation behaviour and disposition. Importantly, the association of descriptive norms and donation were largely stable even when empathy was controlled for. Moreover, the strength of the association between empathy and donation was shown to vary depending on the normative context. The empathy-donation association was stronger when descriptive norms were low rather than high. This pattern suggests that it is crucially important to consider the group contexts in which donation occurs. Social norms can clearly impact on behavioural choices, and they might also modulate the effect of other variables that have classically been linked to helping. The data supported the idea that there is less room for empathy to guide behaviour in situations in which norms are strongly prescriptive and supportive of donations. In contrast, when there is less social pressure to abide by social norms, empathy will have a greater influence on helping.

The present correlational data is also consistent with the reverse logic. Based on the results, the influence of high empathy levels might override norms effects on donation, thus social norms will have a stronger effect on donation when empathy is low. This too is in line with our logic. At high levels of empathy, normative effects on behaviour will decrease. In contrast, when empathy levels are low, thus individuals are not certain on how to behave, there will be more space for descriptive norms to inform behaviour. Importantly, the general pattern of results across studies shows that the best scenario was when there were high descriptive norms and high empathy. Individuals who perceived supportive norms towards donations and felt more empathy towards the target of help, were more likely to donate.

As always, the studies were not without their limitations. The studies had a correlational design; thus, no causation can be inferred. This allows for both possibilities presented here to be feasible: descriptive norms or empathy can moderate the empathy-donation or descriptive norms-donation association, respectively. Future experimental studies could shed light on the different roles that empathy and descriptive norms play in predicting helping and donation.

Also, both studies are based on self-reported data. Although there is good evidence that self-reported data regarding donations correlates well with behaviour (Zagefka et al., 2011), studying actual behaviour would be a logical next step, especially considering that common methods can inflate or deflate the relation observed between variables. For instance, in the current work the use of survey research might be a source of common method variance. However, adding to the regression analysis independent variables that might also suffer from common method variance might help decrease bias (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2009); and in both studies reported here, the pattern of results did not change when control variables measured in the same survey were added. Besides, interaction terms can be attenuated in the presence of common method variance; hence, if it was the case that a common method effect was present in this current work, the significant interaction terms reported here are evidence that an interaction effect indeed exists (Evans, 1985; Siemsen et al., 2009). Still though, the studies did not measure social desirability, which can play a role in the over reporting of charitable behaviours, especially in Study 1 that used face-to-face interview as part of its design (Krumpal, 2013). Nonetheless, the same pattern

of results was obtained in Study 2 with a self-administered web survey, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured at the beginning of each study—features that previous research has related with less social desirability bias (Paulhus, 2017). Moreover, it is important to note that in both studies the means of the variables of interest are close to the mid points of the scale with substantial variability. In addition, in both studies all the variables were normally distributed, taking into account the cut-off points in normal distributions of 2 for skewness and 7 for kurtosis (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995), rendering the potential limitation of social desirability a less relevant factor that might have influenced our results. Hence, we think that the validity of the obtained results is not to be doubted. Nevertheless, future studies should consider adding a social desirability measure and/or use a different technique in its design (e.g., unmatched count technique) as a way of controlling for potential impression management issues.

In addition, it was assumed that social norms used in these studies regarding family and friends were important for participants, since they are primary groups. Yet, it is important to verify in future studies if this is indeed the case. Another possible shortcoming is the use of self-developed measures to tackle empathy and frequency of donations in Study 1, which can raise validity concerns about the interpretation of results. However, in order to avoid this potential problem, and to guarantee participants' understanding, the self-developed measures were developed taking into close account the underlying construct of empathy and frequency of donations and the main elicitation methods of donations in Chile. Moreover, we dealt with this potential issue in Study 2 with the use of measures that were taken or adapted from previous research. The fact that the same pattern of results emerged in Study 2 supports the view that measures used in Study 1 capture the constructs in an adequate way. Finally, observed effect sizes were relatively small. Nonetheless, even small effects can translate into large sums of money in the context of donation appeals with thousands of donors. Therefore, we believe the present results have some important applied implications.

First, the association of descriptive norms and donations (H1) suggests that charities could stimulate donations by enhancing the normativeness of donating directly. For instance, organisations could describe what the usual behaviour of citizens in the local area is (e.g., "60% of students in this university have supported this fundraising campaign"). Another feasible strategy could be for charities to target their registered donors' network of family and friends, thus assuming that in those networks norms supporting fundraising are strong and salient. Of course, such strategies should not replace current efforts that focus on empathy, but they may be a useful supplement. However, there is always a risk in assessing what figure corresponds to a high norm in a determined context.

For example, a message that 60% of people have donated might be perceived as a strong, supportive norm by some people and as a weak norm by others. Therefore, careful pilot work to set appropriate normative targets should be carried out, since a high norms message might have an undesirable effect on donation by decreasing perceived need of donation.

Second, findings suggest that appeals to empathy will be differentially successful, depending on the strength of normative forces (H2). Charities often try to elicit donations by triggering empathy through posters, TV and radio advertisements. However, these appeals may not have as much effect on donations when the potential donors' ingroup norms are already supportive of donations. Charities could, for instance, target empathy campaigns on those contexts in which normative support can be assumed to be low. These approaches can be expected to be more cost-effective and to lead to greater yields overall.

Although fundraisers and marketing experts often study which images to use in campaigns, in order to elicit the most empathy for those in need, they do not routinely ask potential donors whether they perceive their ingroup norms to be favourable towards donating or not. They might be well advised to study this more carefully, in order to gauge the effectiveness of a marketing strategy with empathy at its centre. For instance, one can assume that there are considerable variations in perceived norms between individuals, social classes, regions and even countries. Some countries, like Germany and Scandinavia, place huge emphasis on the "social" of their social market economies. In those countries, citizens are less likely to perceive a strong norm to donate to charities, because there is a widespread believe that it is the role of the state to take care of the weak. In other countries which have a stronger tradition of individualism, like the United Kingdom, United States and indeed Chile, the state is seen as less responsible for such causes, and perceived norms supporting charitable donations might be higher. This would imply that in countries with low normative forces, such as Germany, empathy appeals will be much more effective and should be prioritised. In countries such as the United Kingdom, normative forces should be stronger and empathy appeals might be less effective. In those contexts, fundraisers might focus on other aspects that have an impact on donor decisions, such as victim blame or knowledge about the recipients of help (Kogut, 2011; Zagefka, Noor, & Brown, 2013). Ideally, we would like this paper to spur such research, which we believe could help to boost donations to charities worldwide.

Results also suggest that the effectiveness of normative appeals would depend on individuals' levels of empathy. Campaigns targeting descriptive norms could be carried out especially with recipients of help that in general do not trigger high empathy levels, such as targets of help that are perceived as more responsible for their plight (Zucker & Weiner, 1993).

The current work also has important theoretical implications. Empathy and social norms as antecedents of individual monetary donations have largely been studied in isolation. However monetary donations do not happen in a vacuum; therefore, individual and group variables should be considered jointly when explaining human behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In an attempt to achieve this, this research aimed to consider simultaneously two relevant and widely cited antecedents of charitable donations, empathy and descriptive norms and the interplay between them.

This research showed consistent support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson et al., 1991), since empathy was a significant and positive predictor of donations at almost every level of social norms. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that helping is only altruistic, based on the results showing that social norms also predicted donations. As stated by self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987), individuals internalise norms established by the groups with which they identify. People will follow these norms in order to act accordingly to their ingroup's behaviour and express their social identity. Hence, it seems that people can also help motivated by egoistic motives, such as to boost their own positive affect by the act of helping others, that is, warm glow (Andreoni & Miller, 2002), to relieve their own feelings of sadness—negative state relief model (Cialdini et al., 1982), or to act accordingly to the behaviour of relevant others—as was shown in the current research, among other motifs. Importantly enough, it looks like this is not a "one or the other" situation, but other and self-focused motivations can jointly stimulate helping behaviours.

Still, the strength of one type of motivation effect on helping is indeed modulated by the other. This moderation seems to give support for the strength of the situational hypothesis (Cooper & Withey, 2009), that is, when there are clear cues of what is the expected behaviour in a certain situation, individual variables will inform in a lesser extent the resulting behaviour, in comparison to when there are no clear guidelines on how to behave. However, since the current research is based on cross-sectional studies, this should be tested further to rule out the alternative interpretation of the moderation that was described previously. Another variable that could have a similar effect on the empathy-helping association might be social responsibility, since it can establish a clear guideline of what to do in a certain situation. For instance, medical doctors might feel especially compelled to help in a car accident, regardless of their levels of empathy since in those situations their levels of responsibility would be particularly high.

Additionally, different aspects of empathy were considered in this research. In Study 1, the cognitive component of empathy (i.e., perspective-taking) was asked, while in Study 2, participants reported an affective component of empathy. Nevertheless, both predicted helping. Considering that previous work has found that there might be differences in the effect of these two aspects of empathy on helping (e.g., Edele, Dziobek, & Keller, 2013), future studies might use both affective and cognitive empathy as predictors.

The current research was conducted in different national contexts, with different participant samples, increasing confidence about the generalisability of the obtained results. Moreover, it covered results in an underrepresented region in research, as it is a Latin American country, and tested if the results obtained could also be found in a WEIRD context (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic), with undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. As noticed by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010), research has largely been conducted within WEIRD societies. Hence, it is relevant to stress the robustness of the results as they were tested in such different contexts. Still, in terms of charitable behaviour both are positioned within the 25% most charitable countries in the world (CAF, 2017a). Thus, future research should explore how social norms and empathy impact on disposition to donate in even more diverse contexts, that is, different countries in different regions of the world to increase the generalisability of the current results.

Future studies should explore the generalisation of these results across different targets of help and contexts (e.g., sick people, elders and environmental issues). Furthermore, future studies could consider analysing injunctive norms as well. Moreover, this research has only considered past frequency of donations and willingness to donate as criterion variables, but not the amount donated. This could also be an important development of this line of research. The rationales behind the expected interaction could also be tested in future research. For instance, the idea that salient social norms supporting donation requires to focus the attention on the group that establishes the norm, while empathy requires the attention to be on the target of help could be examined.

As said before, charities usually rely on methods that elicit empathy to trigger monetary donations, regardless of the context. However, based on our findings we suggest that although this approach triggers donations, perceived group norms can also impact on helping. Moreover, empathy and norms interact with each other to predict helping. Thus, it seems sensible to take a more contextual approach to the study of charitable donations and helping behaviours in general; it seems important to give the social context in which helping decisions are made due consideration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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