Kim Darnell
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Essay 2

Random Acts of Kindness and Sensible Acts of Experimentation: A Proposal

Background

Prosocial behavior, referred to more popularly as "kindness"or "generosity", occurs when one voluntarily incurs a cost in order to benefit others (Wittek & Bekkers, 2015). Engaging in prosocial behavior is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including higher self-esteem (Zuffiano et al., 2014), increased positive affect (Snippe et al., 2017), and better ability to cope with stress (Raposa, Laws, & Ansell, 2015). This has led some to make the conscious choice to perform "random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty" (Herbert, 1995) on a regular basis, in order to improve their own mental health while attempting to make the world a nicer place. There is even a Random Acts of Kindness Day, celebrated in mid-February, to help people discover the personal benefits of behaving prosocially.

Goals

The proposed study will investigate whether altruistic prosocial behavior (i.e., kindness with little or no likelihood of tangible personal reward) has a different impact on one's emotional state than mutualistic prosocial behavior (i.e., kindness with high likelihood of tangible personal reward), and whether either or both of these differ on the same measure(s) from simple goal achievement. Specifically, the researchers will compare participants' self-reported polarity of affect and level of satisfaction when they engage in three types of behavior: kindness to people they don't know, kindness to people they do know, and completion of a task for which they themselves are the primary benefactor.

Hypotheses

The primary prediction is that participants will report feeling happier after showing kindness to strangers than people they know, and after showing kindness to others as compared to completing a personal task. Conversely, it is expected that participants will find completing a personal task more satisfying than showing kindness to others, and showing kindness to familiars more satisfying than doing so to strangers.

Participants

Volunteers (n = 40) for the study will be recruited from among the personal and professional contacts of the researchers. All will be age 18 or older, and thereby independently able to give informed consent. They will have regular access to a mobile phone and the ability to send and receive text messages. In addition, they will have access to a PayPal, Venmo, or other online account that permits them to receive monetary payments.

Materials

For the purpose of facilitating prosocial behavior without placing an unnecessary financial burden on the participants, each participant will receive $10 to spend on others over the course of the study.

Procedure

The researchers will prepare a list of potential activities, including altruistic, mutualistic, and goal achievement behaviors, with at least 10 activities of each type. Examples of each type of activity are summarized below:

Behavior	Example
Altruistic	● Compliment a stranger on one of their fashion choices ● Let a stranger go in front of you to pay at the market ● Leave quarters near a vending machine or laundromat appliance
Mutualistic	● Give a generous tip to a restaurant server who you know and who knows you ● Complete a household chore that is usually done by another household member ● Make a grocery run for a friend who is sick or very busy
Goal Achievement	● Wake up without snoozing the alarm ● Give up social media for a day ● Prepare and eat a healthy breakfast

Task Assignment. Over the course of nine days, participants will receive a text message on their cell phones each afternoon describing the activity they are to complete in the next 24 hours. Each task will be randomly assigned from across the three behavior categories using Latin square blocking. As such, each participant will a) receive one task from each category before receiving a task from the same category again, and b) receive each category once in each position in the block order. The example below shows a possible order of tasks for three participants (P1-P3; A = altruistic, M = mutualistic, G = goal achievement):

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
P1	G	A	M	A	M	G	M	G	A
P2	M	A	G	G	M	A	A	G	M
P3	A	M	G	M	G	A	G	A	M

Task Reporting. After completing a task, participants will send a text to a predetermined number indicating their emotional response and level of satisfaction. Emotional response will be indicated by the use of a :) or □ "smiling"emoji. The intensity of the emotional response will be indicated by the number of times the selected emoji is repeated, up to five times. For example, □□□ would indicate more happiness than □ and less happiness than □□□□□. Satisfaction will be indicated with a number between 1-5, with 1 indicating low satisfaction and 5 indicating high satisfaction. Thus, a participant who was feeling moderately happy and very satisfied at performing a task might respond "□□ 5". Participants will be sent text reminders to report their scores for the day as necessary.

Analysis

After summarizing the data for each behavioral category for each participant, we will submit the data for each dependent variable to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on repeated measures. In addition, we will perform a Pearson's correlation on the emotion and satisfaction data by participants. As appropriate, we will explore the influence of covariates on our primary factors through linear regression.

Pilot

The study would benefit from a pilot with $n = 5$ participants to determine the effectiveness of the texting and scoring system, the ease with which money can be distributed to participants using various methods, and the relative difficulty of performing the different types of tasks. It may also be useful to have a separate

group of participants review lists of proposed tasks and rate them in terms of difficulty, in order to more effectively balance the difficulty of tasks across behavior categories.

Challenges

The proposed study does not overtly account for a variety of third variables that may influence participants' performance on the behaviors of interest. Upon review, the research team may choose to revise the experiment structure to include or control for one or more of these variables in order to improve the efficacy of the results. In no particular order:

- Task Difficulty and Demand. Complimenting a fellow elevator passenger on a fashion choice is, in many ways, a simpler and less demanding task than making homemade treats for a sick friend. The researchers may need to classify tasks by level of difficulty and demand across categories to ensure that these dimensions are balanced and participants are not given assignments that they cannot reasonably complete without distress in a 24 hour period.
- Gender norms regarding altruistic behavior.Women are typically encouraged to be more altruistic than men, which may influence how members of these groups respond to performing certain tasks relevant to this study. It may be useful to gather gender identity data from participants in order to determine if this factor influences their responses to engaging in the study tasks.
- Presence of first and second order witnesses. Some altruistic tasks involve a first order witness, or someone who *must* witness the behavior in order for it to occur (e.g., the person whose coffee is paid for by the participant), whereas others do not (e.g., someone can find quarters left at a laundromat without knowing *who* left the quarters). In contrast, all mutualistic tasks have a first order witness, but goal achievements typically do not. All tasks may have second order witnesses, or individuals who see the behavior occur, but do not benefit from it (e.g., the people in line who see the participant buy coffee for a stranger). Participants may respond differently to tasks with and without first or second order witnesses, depending on how they feel about "performing" in front of an audience or how much they value being recognized for engaging in prosocial or goal achieving behaviors. The researchers may want to control or balance the presence of first witnesses across altruistic tasks and second order witnesses across all categories of task.
- RAKtivist history. Engaging intentionally in random acts of kindness (i.e., Random Acts of Kindness activism or RAKtivism) is an established practice, and thus the researchers may expect that some participants will already have experience with it. This experience may affect participants' expectations and responses to engaging in RAKtivism for the study, thereby influencing their responses on the dependent variables. The researchers may need to gather a "RAKtivism history" or develop a "RAKtivism profile" for each participant in order to contextualize their reactions to participation.
- Spontaneous RAKtivism. A common response to performing random acts of kindness is the desire to perform more of them. The researchers may need a mechanism for participants to report any *additional* prosocial behaviors they engage in during the nine day study period, as well as their subjective responses to those behaviors. These measures, in addition to corresponding measures related to additional goal achievement behaviors performed, could potentially serve as additional dependent variables.
- Goal personalization. Participants will vary in what types of goals are personally meaningful for them to achieve *and* within the scope of the study. The researchers may need to provide a list of sample goals to achieve and have participants rank them in terms of perceived level of personal difficulty, then balance the difficulty of assigned goal achievement behaviors across participants. To reduce the effects

of "pre-screening" behaviors on participants' performance, the sample tasks should be slightly different from those that are actually assigned.

- Typical mood. Participants are likely to vary in their typical affect and level of personal satisfaction. This will influence the baseline judgment against which participants are comparing their experience after completing tasks. It may be useful to gather mood data from participants at the start of the study in order to establish a baseline for each person.
- Subjectivity of dependent variables vs. sensitivity of measures. Both level of happiness and level of satisfaction are subjective measures, and it is unclear whether emojis and numbers are sensitive enough to capture differences in individual response to engaging in different types of behaviors. A pilot study would be especially useful in determining if these measures need to be revised before the experiment "goes live" with a full contingent of participants.
- Comparability of tasks across categories: How similar can the tasks across conditions be, and how important is this to gathering useful data? For example, the researchers may benefit from generating parallel tasks across categories like {Compliment a stranger vs. compliment a friend vs. Wear something you think you look good in} more often than {Compliment a stranger vs. Write a thank you note vs. Eat fruit for breakfast}. Given the subjectivity of the study's measures, controlling the variation in tasks tightly could be especially important.
- Personal choice. Engaging in prosocial behavior may be a positive experience, in part, because it encourages people to look for opportunities to be kind and choose to do so in a moment that seems right to them. To this end, the researchers might consider offering participants a choice of behaviors each day and permitting them to choose the one that best fits their personal circumstances. Comparing participants' responses to chosen and assigned tasks could be another interesting avenue of analysis.

Conclusion

The proposed study explores whether engaging in externally directed random acts of kindness results in different levels of happiness and/or satisfaction depending on whether those acts are altruistic or mutualistic in nature. Furthermore, it examines whether there are differences in the levels of happiness and satisfaction generated by behaving prosocially or achieving personal goals. If the implementation is successful, it potentially lays the groundwork for an interesting Capstone project involving the collection of data related to prosocial behavior and the potential customization of a tool designed to help people engage in prosocial and goal achieving behavior as a means of personal growth or mental health improvement.

The proposed study is not technically difficult; most people are familiar with sending and receiving texts via mobile phone and money via services like PayPal or Venmo. The challenge of this study is in crafting stimuli (i.e., task assignments) that will be meaningful to all participants and an experimental design that manipulates or otherwise controls a sufficient number of relevant variables to gather useful data.