

When Measuring Backfires: Moral aversion to quantification in sacred domains

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Introduction

The effective-altruism (EA) movement suggests that rather than consulting their own idiosyncratic feelings and preferences, people should direct their contributions to causes that produce the **greatest overall benefits** (MacAskill, 2015).

Thus, charities and non-profit organizations are increasingly pressured to both **collect quantitative data**, and to **produce quantitative reports** of social impact to funders and stakeholders (Draga, 2018).

However, we still don't know whether people **value** this type of information.

The Puzzle

What people say...

- Donors **say** that they care about efficiency (Gneezy, Keenan & Gneezy, 2014)
- Donors **say** that they value measurement of charity effectiveness **above most other organizational characteristics** (van Iwaarden, van der Wiele, Williams & Moxham, 2008)
- During decision-making, people consider **numerical data as better** than observations or opinions (Bansal & Sharma, 2015)

What people/organizations do...

- Organizations quantify outcomes to satisfy funders, but **don't think this information is valuable** for informing services (Draga, 2018)
- Organizations **underinvest in quantitative analysis** of programs and policy because they believe **people will not respond well** to it (Pritchett, 2002)
- Organizations that collect quantitative data are **no more likely to get government grants** than organizations that do not do so (Suarez, 2010)

What is happening?

There are often **tensions** between people's idealized conceptions, and the more complicated reality (e.g., diversity) (Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

It is possible that people like the **abstract** idea of measuring social impact but respond with moral aversion in **practice**.

Why?

- The work of non-profit and charitable organizations are "**sacred**," or moralized (Barman, 2016)
- Sacred values affect **moral reasoning** (Baron & Spranca, 1997)
- People's commitments to these values are **inviolable** (Bartels & Medin, 2007)
- People are therefore morally averse to **exchanges** between a sacred value and a secular value (e.g., money) (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997)
 - i.e., sacred values are **infungible**

Research Questions and Hypotheses

What are people's **stated** and **revealed preferences** for quantification in sacred domains?

Hypotheses:

People will **state a preference** for quantified outcomes when evaluating sacred organizations (H1)
...but will **judge them more harshly** for quantifying their outcomes (H2)

Study 1 (Testing Hypothesis 1)

Participants: Prolific (n=110; 58.6% female)

Method: Participants read about an organization that provides support to individuals struggling with mental illness (a sacred context (Ruttan & Nordgren, 2021)).

Participants were then asked: "as a prospective donor, what information would you most want to know before donating to this organization?"

Results:



Discussion: Numerical accounts of effectiveness were one of the three items ranked (equivalently) highest, alongside descriptions of effectiveness and organizational values.

Conclusion: Hypothesis 1 was supported; people state a preference for quantified outcomes when evaluating sacred organizations.

Study 2 (Testing Hypothesis 2)

Participants: Prolific (n=381; 49.1% female)

Conditions: Preregistered 2x2 Between-Subject Design

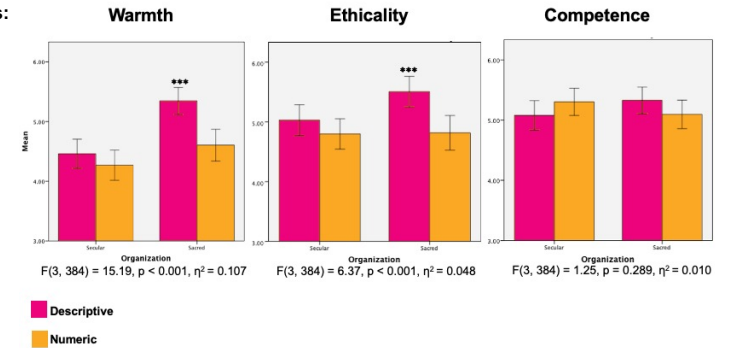
- Participants read about a **Charity** (sacred) **OR** a **Business** (non-sacred)
- Participants were told that the organization measured their impact **by describing it OR assigning a numerical value to it**, from 1-100

Study 2 (Testing Hypothesis 2) - continued

Main Measures: Warmth (3-item scale; *warmth, kindness, generosity*; $\alpha = 0.80$); Ethicality (1-item measure)

Exploratory Measure: Competence (3-item scale; *competence, effectiveness, efficiency*; $\alpha = 0.73$)

Results:



Discussion: The sacred organization was viewed as **more warm and more ethical** than the secular organization (though not any less competent), but only when it was **describing** their impact on their clients, rather than attempting to **quantify** it.

Conclusion: Hypothesis 2 was supported; people judge sacred organizations more harshly for quantifying their outcomes.

General Discussion

Additional studies show that these effects generalize across a **range of domains** (religion, diversity in organizations, mental health) and across a **range of quantification types** (rankings, ratings, counts).

We also find consistent **indirect effects on behavioral outcomes** (e.g., donating behavior).

Initial Conclusions and Contributions:

- Although organizations are increasingly quantifying their outcomes to increase legitimacy and gain support, **quantification may damage people's perceptions of certain organizations**.
- Looking at this through the lens of moralized values may help us understand why this effect happens.

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