A framework of donation decisions: expected goals-congruence estimation biased by representation accessibility

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Background

The best charities can be several times more effective than an average charity within the same area (e.g., Ord, 2013).

People express a preference for effectiveness in their donation decisions, but that often doesn't translate into behavior (Caviola, Schubert & Nemirow, 2020).

Psychological research on effective giving currently lacks a unifying framework to explain the range of biases that can influence donation decisions.

Framework overview

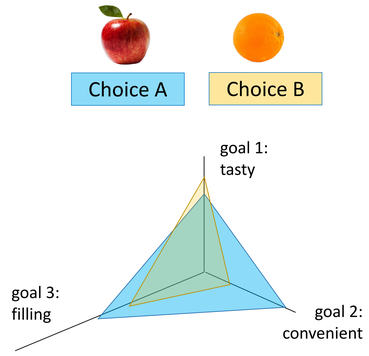
To reach a decision, the mind compares the congruences or (mis)matches of expected action outcomes with relevant goals.

Decisions are thus dependent on:

- the current importance of each goal (length of axes on figures)
- the perceived probability of the action outcome (shape opacity)
- the congruences of the action outcome with each goal (distance from each apex to axis end point)

Decisions can be biased by the accessibility of the mental representations of action outcomes and goals.

- More accessible goals can seem more important, thus increasing the expected goal-congruence.
- More accessible action outcomes can seem more probable, thus increasing the expected goal-congruence.



For example, when choosing between an apple and an orange for a quick bite, both **taste** and **conviniency** are important goals to consider. For an especially hungry decision-maker, the goal for the choice to be **filling** is even more important (note the longer axis for that goal).

The decision-maker expects the orange to be slightly superior in taste and the apple to be slightly more filling and substantially more convenient (no peeling and no mess involved!).

A recent experience with a spoiled orange reduces the perceived probability that the orange produces the experience it usually does (note the reduced opacity).

Thus, the decision-maker chooses the apple (note the larger area and opacity of the blue triangle).

Example: identifiable victim effect

The identifiable victim effect: the option to help a specific individual is chosen over the option to help a group of unidentified individuals even if helping the group would result in more well-being overall.

According to our framework, this occurs through 3 mechanisms illustrated by the figures on the right.

Example from Caviola, Schubert & Nemirow, 2020

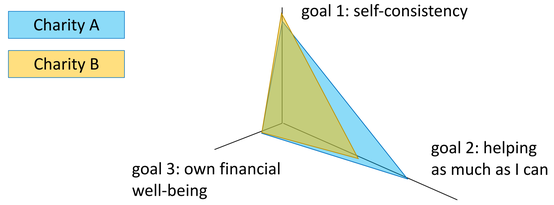
No photo used for Charity B

Charity A
This is Benge. He is seven years old and lives in Kenya. When he grows up, he wants to become a teacher. Benge contracted HIV and needs to be flown to Europe to be treated in a hospital. Donating to Charity A will help save Benge's life and give him a bright future.

Charity B
Charity B distributes bed nets in Kenya to protect children against malaria-carrying mosquitos. Donating to Charity B will allow for the distribution of such bed nets in the areas that are most affected by malaria-carrying mosquitos.

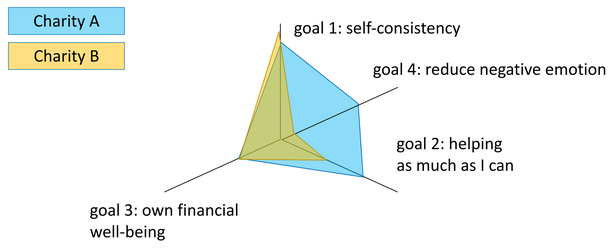
1. Increased goal accessibility

Emotional reaction evoked by the identifiable victim increases the accessibility of the goal to help, making it appear more important



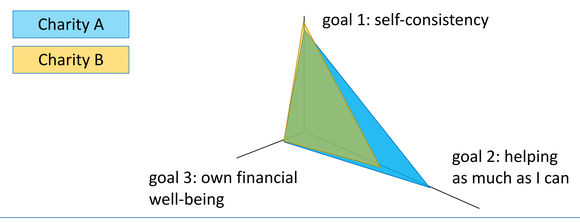
2. Increased number of accessible goals

Emotional reaction also activates an additional goal to reduce one's negative emotion, increasing the total goals-congruence of helping



3. Increased action outcome accessibility

With an identifiable victim, the outcomes of helping are easier to imagine (more accessible) and thus appear more probable



Explaining other biases in effective giving

	Increased goal accessibility	Increased number of accessible goals	Increased outcome accessibility
Scope neglect (Dickert, Västfjäll, Kleber, & Slovic, 2015)	√	√	√
Narrow moral circle (Passini, 2016)	√	√	√
Personal connection (Small & Simonsohn, 2008)	√	√	√
Emotional appeal (Batson, 1990)	√	√	
Overhead heuristic (Baron & Szymanska, 2011)		√	√
Moral threshold model (Zlatev, Kupor, Laurin, & Miller, 2020)		√	√
Reputational benefits (Burum, Nowak, & Hoffman, 2020)		√	
Personal sacrifice (Olivola, 2011)		√	
Prioritization aversion (Tetlock, 2003)		√	

Aims and next steps

Once finalized, we hope this framework can be used to:

- Advance our understanding of the psychological mechanisms of donation decisions
- Identify gaps in current empirical knowledge about effective giving
- Design novel interventions to encourage more effective giving

To do that, the first step is to refine the framework based on existing empirical and theoretical work and the insights and intuitions of researchers in the field of prosocial behavior and judgement and decision-making. The next step is to experimentally test the hypotheses proposed by the framework in various donation contexts.

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