

Empathy or justice: What makes consumers donate more to charity?

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Have you ever received a request for help and wondered how deserving the recipients are of your donation? This way of thinking may seem inconsistent with your moral values, especially if you consider yourself an otherwise compassionate and empathic person. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* suggests that moral identity decreases donations when recipients are deemed to be responsible for their plight.

"Our research examines how moral values of [empathy](#) and justice have distinct influences on people when they are asked to make donations benefiting others whose choices have led them to an unfortunate place in life," write authors Saerom Lee (University of Texas at San Antonio), Karen Page Winterich (Pennsylvania State University), and William T. Ross Jr. (University of Connecticut).

Across four studies, the authors asked for donations to various charities benefiting people who donors may believe are responsible for their current situation (for example, a community health center that treats people who cannot hold a steady job due to drug or alcohol use). Results showed that not all [study participants](#) perceived making a donation to these particular types of charities as moral. Participants who placed a high importance on their own [moral identity](#) indicated they were less likely to donate money.

However, when asked to recall their own past immoral behavior, study participants could more easily take the perspective of recipients receiving assistance from the charities and felt higher levels of empathy.

As a result, the likelihood of monetary donations from these participants increased.

"Our results can help non-profits be more cautious when describing the causes and beneficiaries they are supporting. Donation appeals should specify or imply low responsibility of the charity recipients or, alternatively, seek to elicit empathy to increase [donations](#)," the authors conclude. "Rather than appealing to a broader spectrum of moral values, messages should focus on the [moral values](#) of empathy and benevolence."

More information: Saerom Lee, Karen Page Winterich, and William T. Ross Jr. "I'm Moral, but I Won't Help You: The Distinct Roles of Empathy and Justice in Donations." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014.

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