

Study reveals how to encourage men to give to the poor

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A new Stanford study offers ideas on how to encourage men to donate money and time to charitable causes.

The research, led by Robb Willer, an associate professor of sociology at Stanford, shows that men will contribute to a fundraising campaign if

they are convinced that their [self-interest](#) is aligned with the particular cause.

While empathy-based appeals tend to be effective with women, men typically have been shown to be less willing to give money or volunteer time to a poverty relief organization than women – a gap perhaps best explained by men's lower reported feelings of empathy toward others, according to Willer and his co-authors.

However, the right type of messaging can make a significant difference in how men view acts of giving, the researchers wrote.

Willer's co-authors were Lindsay Owens, a research associate at the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, and Christopher Wimer, co-director of the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University.

Overcoming the empathy gap

In an online survey of 1,715 participants, the researchers aimed to learn more about what prompts men and women to donate time or money to charity.

They tested how effective a variety of different ways of framing poverty relief were for promoting giving. "Empathy" was measured on a 7-point scale by answers to questions such as "I am often quite touched by things that I see happen," and respondents were asked several questions regarding their views of poverty in general.

Respondents were then presented with a brief appeal for charity by a hypothetical poverty relief organization, the Coalition to Reduce Poverty. Each person was randomly assigned to read one of five scenarios or pitches for donations emphasizing the following themes:

- Efficacy ("More than 98 percent of donations go on to directly benefit the poor.")
- Conformity ("The poor are now being helped by record numbers of charitable givers across the country.")
- Injustice (People "born into poverty never had the other opportunities that other Americans had.")
- Aligned self-interest ("Poverty weighs down our interconnected economy, exacerbating many social problems like crime.")
- The final one-fifth of participants were not presented with any pitch, but simply asked to donate.

Research findings

Overall, men were less willing to give or donate time, according to the research. The researchers found that they did so in part because they had lower levels of empathy. But one message was effective at closing that [gender gap](#) in giving – the "aligned self-interest" appeal, which focused on overall societal concerns like crime.

"The baseline effect is for men to give less due to lower empathy," Willer explained. "But the 'aligned self-interest' pitch changed men's giving, making them give more than they otherwise would."

Willer said, "Men reported significantly greater willingness to give, contributing at levels comparable to women. No other message frames were effective in increasing men's reported willingness to give or volunteer." This eliminated the gender gap between men and women on charitable giving, he said.

The study noted that this "aligned self-interest" framing worked by increasing men's concern for poverty, not by changing their understanding of the causes of poverty.

In fact, the appeals highlighting social conformity, the efficacy of giving or the injustice of poverty did not reduce the gender gap or heighten [men](#)'s likelihood of giving, the research showed.

Exposure to the same "self-interest" appeal, however, led women to report somewhat lower willingness to volunteer time for poverty relief, Willer and his colleagues said.

"It had the opposite effect for women, who might have felt less motivated to express concern about poverty when doing so seemed inconsistent with feeling empathy for the poor," he said.

Also, the researchers found that African Americans consistently reported greater willingness than other demographic groups to both give money and volunteer time.

"We explored the relationship in follow-up analyses and found that this association was not mediated by either political ideology or past levels of charitable giving," wrote Willer.

Willer said the research is important in the big picture because American society tends to rely on nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, for providing relief to the poor.

While past research on Americans' attitudes toward poverty has focused on support for governmental policies on poverty, Willer said it is important as well to understand support for nongovernmental poverty relief.

More information: Robb Willer, Christopher Wimer, Lindsay A. Owens, "What drives the gender gap in charitable giving? Lower empathy leads men to give less to poverty relief," *Social Science Research*, Available online 12 January 2015, ISSN 0049-089X,

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