

Why cuteness wins over neediness when making charitable donations

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What is the most important factor you consider before choosing where you might make a donation to charity? Most people I ask reply, understandably, that the neediness of the recipient is key.

But the choices donors actually make suggest that the neediest recipients

are often allocated a disproportionately small share of charitable giving. Universities in the US, for example, [attract far greater philanthropic contributions](#) than charity organisations addressing the most pressing needs of the developing world.

Even in popular fund-raising areas such as animal conservation, the majority of attention and money goes to a few favoured species, [such as pandas](#). Increasing the survival chances of other, "less photogenic", endangered fauna is apparently considered less appealing.

To investigate the degree of this disparity, which we call the "charity beauty premium", my colleagues [Cynthia Cryder](#), [Simona Botti](#) and I asked people to donate to one (or more) of eight endangered species supported by a national conservation centre.

[We found](#) that the donors didn't support the species that had the greater need for conservation – but those rated the "cuter" animals.

In fact, the four species rated as the most attractive – giraffe, zebra, elephant and flamingo – attracted almost twice as much money as the other four "less attractive" animals – lemur, orangutan, chimpanzee and penguin.

Similarly, people were inclined to help more beautiful human recipients, when they had to make decisions about children or adults helped by charities. This tendency to donate to more attractive rather than to needier recipients seemed even more puzzling when we found that attractive people were perceived to be less needy. So why do people claim to care so much about neediness and then seemingly donate according to attraction?

Want vs should

One reason for this is that we can simultaneously hold "want" and "should" preferences. For example, there might be a "should" [preference](#) to watch a high-brow documentary, and a "want" preference [to watch a low-brow comedy instead](#). When making a [decision](#), the "want" preference comes in when choosing automatically or intuitively, while "should" preference decisions are the result of a more deliberative process.

Applied to the context of charitable giving, [our findings](#) suggest that donors have "want" preferences to donate to more attractive recipients when they decide intuitively, and "should" preferences to donate to more needy recipients when they decide deliberatively.

When asked to make an intuitive decision, participants wanted to help the child that was rated the cutest and least needy. But when they were asked to make a deliberative decision, their choice benefited the child who was rated the neediest.

Decisions also favoured the most beautiful recipient when potential donors were asked whom they *wanted* to help. However, the neediest recipient was chosen when the donors were asked whom they *should* donate to.

Choices were also in line with their "should" preferences when people were asked to make a decision on behalf of other donors, or when asked to rate the recipients' neediness before making a decision. In these cases, people typically make more deliberative decisions.

Empathy counts

However, the "[charity](#) beauty premium" effect seems to disappear in situations when donors experience high levels of empathy towards potential recipients. In one example, when people were told that a patient

recovering from [bone cancer](#) was seeking financial help to move forward in life, the donation likelihood was higher for a recipient rated as more beautiful.

But when donors were told that a recipient was struggling to recover from bone cancer and was no longer able to work and support a family, the donation likelihood was not affected by different levels of attractiveness.

Interestingly, deliberation did not benefit people's willingness to support charities in the future. The prospect of donating over the long term was greater when [people](#) were intuitively donating to more attractive recipients. Charitable organisations may well benefit from using images of recipients looking attractive, rather than needy, in their marketing and advertising materials.

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