

## Applying Social Psychology to Induce Charitable Donations<sup>1</sup>

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As part of a door-to-door campaign to raise funds for the American Cancer Society, 359 people in a middle-class neighborhood were randomly assigned to five different versions of a request for contributions. A version of the request similar to that typically used in such charity drives served as a control and the other four versions were modified slightly on the basis of social psychological principles. Three of these manipulations failed to increase donating beyond the level of the standard request. Replicating prior research, it was found that for completed requests ( $N = 293$ ) adding the words "even a penny will help" to the standard request significantly increased the percentage of people who donated. However, in 66 cases the solicitor was interrupted with a donation or a refusal *before* delivering the key phrase that differentiated the experimental conditions. An analysis of these incomplete requests suggests that the effectiveness of the even-a-penny technique may be at least partially explained by the solicitors' expectations.

In recent years a number of social psychologists have put forth persuasive arguments advocating research that integrates the basic and applied aspects of the field of social psychology (e.g., Deutsch, 1980; Mayo & La France, 1980). Such an integration has occurred in attempts to use social psychological principles to induce donations to charity. For example, Kraut (1973) successfully manipulated social labeling, a basic concept in the interactionist perspective of deviance, to induce donations. He found that if a canvasser for the Heart Association would make a comment labeling some of those who donated as "charitable" and would make no such comment to other donors, then a couple of weeks later a second canvasser, collecting for multiple sclerosis, would have better luck soliciting donations from those who had been labeled than those who had not. As expected, labeling individuals as "uncharitable" because they did not contribute to the Heart Association reduced the likelihood that they would subsequently donate to multiple sclerosis.

Although Kraut's study provided empirical support for labeling theory in an applied setting, practical use of the technique seems unlikely. Each potential

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contributor would have to be contacted twice by independent charities in order to induce greater giving to the second charity. To be fair to Kraut, however, it should be noted that his main purpose was to test the social labeling hypothesis rather than to provide a practical means of inducing donations.

A more practical, and cleverly simple, means of inducing charitable contributions was developed and empirically tested by Cialdini and Schroeder (1976). Their technique involves adding the words "even a penny will help" to a standard request for contributions. It was hypothesized that by legitimizing small donations, commonly used excuses about being short of money lose credibility and, therefore, people should be likely to contribute. Field experiments involving door-to-door solicitations for the American Cancer Society demonstrated that the even-a-penny technique significantly increased the probability that people would contribute without reducing the size of donations. This finding was later replicated by Reingen (1978).

Reingen (1978, 1982) successfully applied a number of social psychological principles to inducing donations to charities. For example, by employing the foot-in-the-door technique, in which compliance to a small request increases the likelihood of subsequent larger requests (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), Reingen (1978) found that if people were first asked to answer a few simple questions about heart disease they were subsequently more likely to donate money to the Heart Association than if they were not asked the questions. Reingen interprets these findings in terms of Bem's (1972) self-perception theory, which suggests that in many circumstances people infer their attitudes from observations of their own behavior. Therefore, if people observe themselves taking time to answer questions about heart disease it is likely that they would perceive themselves as being concerned about the issue.

In the same study, Reingen also successfully applied the door-in-the-face technique (Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, & Darby, 1975), in which refusal of a large request increases the likelihood of compliance to a more moderate request. Subjects who first refused to contribute three dollars a month were later more likely to make a single contribution than those who had not been asked the extreme request. Finally, consistent with the notion of informational social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), which suggests that people often define appropriate behaviors by observing the actions of others, Reingen (1982) found that the probability and amount of donating could be influenced by reading a fictitious list of other contributors and their supposed contributions.

The purpose of the present study was to further explore the possibility of applying social psychological principles to inducing charitable donations. One approach involved a more streamlined and practical way of employing labeling theory than that used by Kraut. The new strategy was to tell potential contributors that it has been found that "people like you" are likely to contribute. This would label people without the need to make two visits to their homes.

A second technique was to induce pressure to make social comparisons (Festinger, 1954) by telling people that it has been found that "people in neighborhoods like this are likely to contribute." Social comparison theory suggests that to fulfill a need to evaluate themselves people compare themselves to similar others and attempt to perform as well or just a little better than those others. If others in similar neighborhoods are contributing, then people should feel pressure to donate. A third technique was a modification of the even-a-penny manipulation. If even-a-penny induces donations because it legitimizes small donations, then the more general statement "any amount will help" should also help induce contributions. The final two conditions were a replication of the even-a-penny technique and, as a control, a standard request. It was expected that all of the experimental conditions—people-like-you, neighborhoods-like-this, any-amount, and even-a-penny—would produce greater donating than would the standard request.

### Method

#### *Subjects*

A total of 360 adults were contacted in a door-to-door fund-raising campaign for the American Cancer Society. The area canvassed was a predominately white middle-class neighborhood. The 360 people contacted were assigned to the five experimental conditions by using a random sequence of requests. The sample was reduced to 293 people (123 males and 167 females) because a researcher failed to record the data for one subject and 66 potential subjects either agreed or refused to donate before the solicitors completed the requests. Since the manipulation of the experimental conditions was done at the end of the requests, comparisons of donations between conditions would be most valid for the 293 completed requests.

#### *Researcher-Solicitors*

The researcher-solicitors were 18 undergraduate students (14 females and 4 males) enrolled in an upper division social psychology laboratory course. They received training from both the instructor of the laboratory class and a local representative of the American Cancer Society. In order to ensure uniformity of requests in each experimental condition and to avoid incomplete requests, the solicitors were trained to make requests in a businesslike, yet friendly, manner. All the researcher-solicitors wore American Cancer Society Volunteer badges.

#### *Procedure*

The study was conducted on a Saturday in April as part of the local chapter's annual fund-raising drive. To facilitate the recording of data the researcher-

solicitors canvassed in two-person teams and alternated making donation requests. At each house the solicitor made the request and, to be consistent with the usual procedure of the American Cancer Society in the area studied, handed the subject a brief pamphlet entitled *Self-Test on Cancer Risks*. The other researcher observed and recorded the subject's sex, the amount of the donation, and comments, particularly whether the request was completed before the subject said that he or she would contribute. To keep the measurement process as unobtrusive as possible, the observer wrote down his or her observations *after* the research team left the house. Each team canvassed until they had made 40 face-to-face requests. Since the requests were similar to what people would normally experience in charity drives and since no deception was used, the subjects were not debriefed.

### *Manipulations*

The standard request, devised in consultation with the representative from the American Cancer Society, was as follows:

Hi, I'm (*solicitor's name*) and this is (*observer's name*). We are volunteers for the American Cancer Society. We are distributing this self-test on cancer risks (at this point the solicitor handed the person the self-test). We are also collecting donations. Would you like to contribute?

In the even-a-penny condition the words "even a penny will help" were added to the end of the request. In the any-amount condition the words "any amount will help" were added to the end of the request. In the people-like-you (labeling) condition the solicitor said "we have found that people like you are likely to help" just before saying "Would you like to contribute?" In the neighborhoods-like-this (social comparison) condition the solicitor said "we have found that people who live in neighborhoods like this are likely to help" just before saying "Would you like to contribute?" The added statements in the latter two conditions are consistent with the experience of the representative of the American Cancer Society who typically targets her door-to-door campaigns to middle-class people and neighborhoods.

### Results

A breakdown of mean donations and the percentage of people donating is presented in Table 1. Although it might have been of interest to compare mean donations across conditions with analysis of variance, two of the underlying assumptions for such an analysis were violated. There was heterogeneity of variance, Cochran's  $C = 0.34$ ,  $p < .05$ . Also, since the modal score in each condition was zero, the distributions were badly skewed. These violations of the assump-

Table 1

*Mean Donations and Percentage of People Donating for Completed Requests<sup>1</sup>*

	Request				
	Standard	Even a Penny	Any Amount	People Like You	Neighborhoods Like This
Mean (dollars)	.85	1.45	1.15	.98	.70
Percentage	39 (59)	57 (53)	36 (61)	33 (57)	40 (63)
Males	29 (28)	48 (23)	31 (29)	26 (23)	20 (20)
Females	48 (31)	64 (28)	41 (32)	36 (33)	49 (43)

<sup>1</sup>Note: The number of subjects per condition is indicated in parentheses.

tions underlying parametric statistics are common in helping studies; therefore, nonparametric analyses were planned.

The major hypothesis of the study was not confirmed as a Chi-square analysis indicated that the proportion of subjects donating in the experimental conditions (41%) was not significantly greater than that in the control condition (39%),  $\chi^2(1) = 0.02, ns$ . Additional analyses did, however, indicate some significant effects. A significantly greater percentage of subjects in the even-a-penny condition (57%) donated than in the other four conditions (37%),  $\chi^2(1) = 6.07, p < .05$ . Also, a significantly greater percentage of females (47%) donated than did males (31%),  $\chi^2(1) = 7.26, p < .05$ . As can be seen in Table 1, the superiority of the even-a-penny request seemed to hold for both males and females. It should also be noted that neither the sex of the solicitor nor whether the sex of the solicitor and the subject matched significantly influenced donating,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.25, ns$  and  $\chi^2(1) = 0.98, ns$ , respectively.

After the data were collected, several of the researcher-solicitors commented that they felt more comfortable and confident when making the even-a-penny and any-amount requests than when making the people-like-you and neighborhoods-like-this requests. It is possible, therefore, that artifactual differences in the percentages of donating per condition may have occurred. Consistent with this speculation, a breakdown of percentages of people donating per condition for *incomplete requests*, that is donating decisions made *before* the experimental manipulations, shows an interesting trend, as seen in Table 2. The sample sizes for the incomplete requests is too small for a Chi Square analysis (50% of the expected frequencies are less than 5); however, a Fisher exact probability test indicates that, for those cases where the solicitor was interrupted with either a donation or a refusal *before* delivering the critical phrase that differentiated ex-

Table 2

*Percentage of People Donating for Incomplete Requests<sup>1</sup>*

Standard Request	Even a Penny	Any Amount	People Like You	Neighborhoods Like This
0 (11)	28 (18)	23 (13)	7 (14)	10 (10)

<sup>1</sup>*Note:* The number of subjects per condition is indicated in parentheses.

perimental conditions, the even-a-penny and any-amount conditions nevertheless produced significantly higher percentages of people donating than did the other conditions ( $p = .0258$ , one-tailed).

### Discussion

The present study replicated the findings of Cialdini and Schroeder (1976). Adding the words "even a penny will help" to a standard request for donations to charity significantly increased the likelihood that a person would contribute. Also consistent with Cialdini and Schroeder's findings, the suggestion of a one cent contribution did not reduce the average size of donations by those who contributed, which in the present study was \$2.57 in the even-a-penny condition and \$2.50 overall.

In contrast to the success of the even-a-penny technique, three new applications of social psychological principles—the any-amount, people-like-you, and neighborhoods-like-this conditions—failed to induce donations beyond the level of a standard request. The solicitors' uneasiness about the people-like-you and neighborhoods-like-this conditions may have contributed to the ineffectiveness of the techniques and perhaps less awkward manipulations of social labeling and social comparison would be more effective.

Although it is clear that the even-a-penny technique increased donating, it is less clear why the technique worked. Cialdini (1980) explains the effect by suggesting that saying a penny will help legitimizes small donations, which takes away a common excuse for not contributing. It would not be credible to refuse for financial reasons, such as being short of money that day, because surely anyone would have a penny. Cialdini's explanation seems reasonable and indeed it was supported by variations of the even-a-penny technique (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). Nevertheless, in the present study comments by the researcher-solicitors and data for the incomplete requests suggest that at least part of the effectiveness of the technique might be explained by the bias of the solicitors. Feeling most confident about, and comfortable with, the even-a-penny technique may have influenced the demeanor of the solicitor. The fact that a higher

percentage of donations occurred in the even-a-penny condition even when the solicitor had not yet said the phrase is consistent with this alternative explanation. Although Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) reported that their solicitors were blind to the hypothesis, it is doubtful that the solicitors did not form expectations that some versions of the request would be more effective than others.

While the solicitors' expectations about the even-a-penny technique might complicate drawing a simple theoretical explanation for the effect, the applied, or practical, implications are clear. Regardless of the theoretical underpinnings, several studies indicate that the even-a-penny technique is an effective way of increasing the likelihood of successful door-to-door donations.

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