

Study: People are more willing to give when they can empathize with poor women's plight

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Non-profits aiding the sick or poor could increase charitable donations through ads in which consumers empathize with an actor portraying an unfortunate plight.

A new study by researchers at the University of Michigan, Westminster College and University of North Carolina looks at observers' reaction to a poor woman's emotions when asking for assistance.

The study's participants who viewed the ad had [negative emotions](#) toward a woman who expressed anger about being poor.

When the woman expressed [shame](#) about her [economic status](#), viewers had more positive emotions—such as pride and confidence—and a willingness to donate money to the charity, the study indicates.

"This implies that if women find themselves in positions in which they need to elicit help from others, it behooves them to act in an ashamed manner," said Elizabeth Cole, chair and professor of U-M's Women's Studies Department. "But when the poor express shame, they suggest that they blame themselves for their poverty, and those with social class privilege are able to feel that inequality is appropriate and just. This means that the display of emotion can be used to legitimize economic inequality."

Cole collaborated on the study with lead author and U-M alumna Cathleen Power of Westminster College and Barbara Fredrickson of

UNC.

"Observers' responses to stigmatized women were influenced by whether the woman's behavior fulfilled a feeling ... linked to her class status."

The study also looked at how viewers responded to a major illness, such as cancer. Respondents expressed more anger toward the women who were upset about being poor than they did toward the woman who was angry about breast cancer.

Cole said the anger isn't directed at the woman, but with her, perhaps in solidarity with her plight.

The poor, the findings indicate, are only able to avoid [anger](#) and gain pity from those with power by expressing emotions that suggest they accept the blame for poverty.

"In doing this, those with class privilege are able to feel pride about their 'accomplished' higher standing, thus justifying inequities in the class system," researchers said.

The findings appear in *Feminism & Psychology*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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