

Does the promise of recognition really prompt good deeds?

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Recognition might not be as important as previously thought in motivating people to perform good deeds, such as donating money or volunteering time to a philanthropic cause, shows recent research from authors at the Penn State Smeal College of Business.

A study conducted by Assistant Professor of Marketing Karen Winterich examined how the promise of [recognition](#) interacts with one's moral identity to predict philanthropic behavior. Results showed that recognition is only necessary as a motivational tool in a certain subset of people.

Moral identity is defined as "the mental representation of one's moral character," according to the authors, and it has two dimensions: the private and the public. The private dimension of moral identity is made up of personal ideals and beliefs and is considered high in people for whom morality is of central importance to the self. The public dimension is expressed to others through action, and is considered high in those for whom it is important to project morality to others.

Recognition, the researchers found, is a great motivator for people who are high in their public dimension of moral identity but lower in the private dimension. For these people, recognition provides the ability to publically portray moral aspects of themselves. Recognition also can result in other positive outcomes for the recognized, like status elevation, increased social influence, or material reward.

On the other hand, those with a high sense of private moral identity are likely to do [good deeds](#) simply because "doing so is consistent with their understanding of what it means to be a moral person." People high in private [moral identity](#)— whether high or low in the public—don't find the recognition necessary as a motivator, and people low in both dimensions will be unlikely to act philanthropically even with the promise of recognition.

So, for organizations spending a great deal of money on recognition of its philanthropic contributors, much of that money may be wasted. The researchers suggest offering the option to decline recognition, particularly when recognition is costly to the organization.

"When Moral Identity Symbolization Motivates Prosocial Behavior: The Role of Recognition and Moral Identity Internalization" appeared in the September issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and is authored by Winterich, Karl Aquino of the University of British Columbia, and Vikas Mittal and Richard Swartz of Rice University.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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