

A handout or a hand up? How we judge others guides how we help others

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Credit: UC Berkeley Haas

Charities often emphasize the desperation and dependence of those they assist—as in heart-tugging videos of starving children in Africa. Yet a focus on helplessness may change how we choose to help those in need,

and not necessarily for the better, according to research by UC Berkeley Haas assistant professor Juliana Schroeder.

"Charities want to motivate people to give more, but they may also make people think poor people don't have the ability to take care of themselves," says Schroeder, a social psychologist who studies judgment and decision-making as well as interpersonal and intergroup processes. "If you perceive of someone as having less [mental capacity](#) to think or feel, then you are subtly degrading and dehumanizing them."

In a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Schroeder and co-authors Adam Waytz of Northwestern University and Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago found that people act more paternalistically towards those they believe have lower mental capacity. What's more, they found, people often believe they have more mental capacity than do others.

Their findings reveal fundamental truths about how people think about giving and receiving aid. These insights have implications not just for international [charity](#), but also for policies on a wide range of issues, from soda taxes to gun control.

Paternalistic aid

Schroeder and her colleagues conducted a series of nine experiments, making a distinction between paternalistic aid, in which givers make a decision about what recipients need, and agentic aid, in which recipients can decide for themselves what they need.

In the first experiment, they asked people to rate their perceptions of poor people in Kenya and Uganda, using an eight-point scale that measured perceived self-control, memory, planning, thoughtfulness, and cognition. They then asked subjects to decide whether they'd rather

contribute to a charity called GiveDirectly, a relatively agentic charity which transfers money to [poor people](#) with no strings attached, or to a more traditional, paternalistic charity such as the Red Cross, which provides food, medicine, and other services.

They found that those who rated the mental capacity of the African aid recipients more highly were also more likely to choose GiveDirectly, and less likely to believe the recipients would waste the money. "When you think of a person having less self-control and willpower, you think they will make bad decisions and will be more likely to waste the aid," says Schroeder. "They don't know what is good for themselves."

(Schroeder's study didn't examine which charity was actually more effective, focusing rather on which charity people thought would be better. However, a controlled experiment by Princeton professors Johannes Haushofer and Jeremy Shapiro found no evidence that recipients of GiveDirectly's unconditional cash transfers waste the money; rather, the cash transfers measurably increase food security and economic and psychological well-being. A group of researchers, including UC Berkeley's Michael Walker and Ted Miguel, are currently conducting a larger study on the program.)

Helplessness vs entrepreneurial spirit

Moreover, the researchers found that people's ideas about aid recipients' mental capacity could be easily manipulated. In another experiment, they gave more than 500 visitors to Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry a token representing a dollar, and then asked them to drop it in one of two slots—one for GiveDirectly and the other for Oxfam, a more paternalistic global charity that seeks to alleviate poverty.

Beforehand, they gave participants one of two descriptions about charity recipients: one highlighted their drive and entrepreneurial spirit; the

other, their neediness and resignation. While overall, 58 percent of participants gave to Oxfam versus 42 percent to GiveDirectly, those who were told of the recipients' pluck were 23 percent more likely to choose GiveDirectly. "Even when the recipient group is exactly the same, the information you give someone about them meaningfully influences their giving behavior," Schroeder says.

Different rules for ourselves

Schroeder and colleagues also found that when it comes to themselves, however, people tend to prefer a more hands-off approach. In another set of experiments, they presented participants with a series of policies on issues including healthy eating, credit card debt, retirement savings, and gun control. They then asked them whether a paternalistic or agentic policy would be more effective for the average citizen, as well as which policy would be more effective for themselves.

Participants were much more likely to choose the paternalistic policy for others. For example, 35 percent recommended a ban on unhealthy foods over a policy of listing calories in restaurants for others, whereas only 28 percent recommended it for themselves. Likewise, 55 percent recommended mandatory retirement accounts rather than optional accounts for others, versus 39 percent for themselves. A similar 55 percent recommended bans on certain firearms over a gun safety course for others, but only 39 percent for themselves.

Using statistical analysis, the researchers found that the results were largely determined by how people rated others' mental capacities versus their own. "People are pretty convinced they have a lot of willpower, while others don't have the same level of self-control," Schroeder says.

Thinking twice about assumptions

In yet another experiment, however, researchers found this assumption too is changeable. The day before Thanksgiving, the researchers asked participants whether they had high willpower; they then asked a different group of people the same question the day after Thanksgiving—presumably after they'd had one or two extra helpings of turkey and apple pie. The second group not only rated themselves as having lower willpower, but they were also more open to paternalistic policies on healthy eating, both for themselves and others.

Schroeder points to the fact that such perceptions are malleable as a good reason to question how our perceptions of ourselves and others may affect the way we behave. Charities that emphasize the helplessness of aid recipients may unintentionally send a signal they have low mental capacity. "When you dehumanize an individual or a group it can affect how you help them," Schroeder says.

Meanwhile, those donating to charities or setting policies for fellow citizens may want to think twice about the assumptions they are bringing to their own altruistic impulses, and what is most likely to empower those they seek to help. "People can be more cognizant about the ways they are thinking about their own mental capacity and that of others," says Schroeder, "and pause to get more information before they start helping."

More information: Juliana Schroeder et al. Endorsing help for others that you oppose for yourself: Mind perception alters the perceived effectiveness of paternalism., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000320](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000320)

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