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The Effects of Solicitor Appearance on Charitable Contributions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ongoing political and economic changes have led to a heightened prominence of charities in American society. Today, Americans are increasingly being called upon to contribute to a wide variety of charitable organizations. Despite this trend, relatively little research has been conducted in this area (Benson & Catt, 1978). This may be due to an assumption that contributions to charities are similar to other forms of helping behavior. However, such an assumption overlooks some of the unique aspects of charitable giving. Foremost among these is the role of the solicitor, who acts as an intermediary between contributors and charitable organizations. This situation makes the relationship between the benefactor and beneficiary much less direct than in traditional studies of helping behavior.

Previous studies have concluded that helping behavior is affected by certain characteristics of the beneficiary. For instance, Emswiller, Deaux, & Willits (1971) found that similarity in regard to style of dress influenced helping behavior. In some studies, similarity in regard to race was found to facilitate helping behavior (e.g., Bryan & Test, 1967; Wegner & Crano, 1975). In other studies, however, this relationship was not supported (e.g., Gaertner & Bickman, 1971).

Furthermore, some researchers have found that women exhibit helping behavior more than men (Wegner & Crano, 1975), while others have found that men help more often than women (West, Whitney, & Schendler, 1975).

However, it has consistently been found that people are more likely to help others that are perceived as innocent victims (external locus of causality) than those who are

perceived as at least partly responsible for their situations (Berkowitz, 1968; Betancourt, 1990). For this reason, the present study focused on contributions to a disaster relief fund.

This study sought to determine whether the modification of certain aspects of a solicitor's appearance (style of dress, hair length, etc.) would affect contributions. It was hypothesized that a "clean cut," formally dressed solicitor would collect more money than a casually dressed, "non-conformist" solicitor.

## **METHODS**

The primary investigator solicited contributions for an accredited international disaster relief organization outside two grocery stores- one in a higher income, predominantly White area (median income = \$80,759, 3.8% Black) and one in a lower income area which was more racially diverse (median income = \$31,161, 48.0% Black) [statistics from the 1990 Statistical Abstract and Atlas for Missouri Legislative Districts]. For each location, the White male investigator assumed two modes of appearance:

- A) long hair, facial hair, casually dressed (jeans and "tie dye" t-shirt)
- B) short hair, clean shaven, formally dressed (slacks, tie, etc.).

The investigator solicited the first 100 adults exiting the store each day, four times weekly (Wednesday through Saturday) for four weeks, thereby creating a total of 1600 subjects. Solicitation began at 12:00 noon each day. The standardized pitch, "Would you like to contribute to the (name of charity) disaster relief fund?" was used for each subject. Gender and amount of contribution were recorded for each subject.

## **RESULTS**

A 2 (appearance) X 2 (income) analysis of variance was performed on the mean contributions of the subjects. The main effect for appearance was statistically significant,  $F(1, 1596)=23.124$ ,  $p<.001$  (see Fig. 1). The mean amounts contributed (in cents) were 10.02 (“long hair-” appearance A) and 18.20 (“short hair-” appearance B). The main effect for income was not significant at the .05 level.  $F(1, 1596)=.750$ . The mean amount contributed (in cents) was 14.84 in the lower income area and 13.37 in the higher income area. The appearance X income interaction was not significant at the .05 level,  $F(1,1596)= 1.834$ .

A t-test for independent samples revealed that females contributed more ( $M=15.48$ ) than did males ( $M=11.98$ ),  $t(1511.42) = 2.085$ ,  $p<.05$  (see Figure 2).

Because of the possibility that the subjects in the lower income area had less money to contribute, a chi-square test was performed to assess whether there was a difference in the number of contributors in each area. This revealed that the lower income area generated significantly more contributors,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1600) = 5.873$ ,  $p<.05$  (see Figure 3).

## **DISCUSSION**

The statistically significant increase in donations supported the hypothesis- that a “clean cut” solicitor would collect more money than a “non-conformist” solicitor. However, the patterns of contribution were quite intriguing. Females gave an average of \$.035 more than males. While there was no main effect for income area, the lower

income, racially diverse area produced more money and more contributors in both appearance conditions. This unsuspected finding warrants further investigation. Racial similarity between solicitor and target area did not appear to exhibit any strong effects on contribution rates.

However, the finding that both communities increased their donation rates for the “clean cut” solicitor suggests that they both internalized the same stereotypes concerning certain appearance characteristics. Since the appearance of the volunteer solicitor would provide no logical basis regarding a decision on whether to give to a charity, the reasons behind the results are unclear.

However, it may be useful to think of charitable solicitation as a form of persuasion. Given this model, it may be that a cognitive heuristic, such as source attractiveness, is at play.

## **References**

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