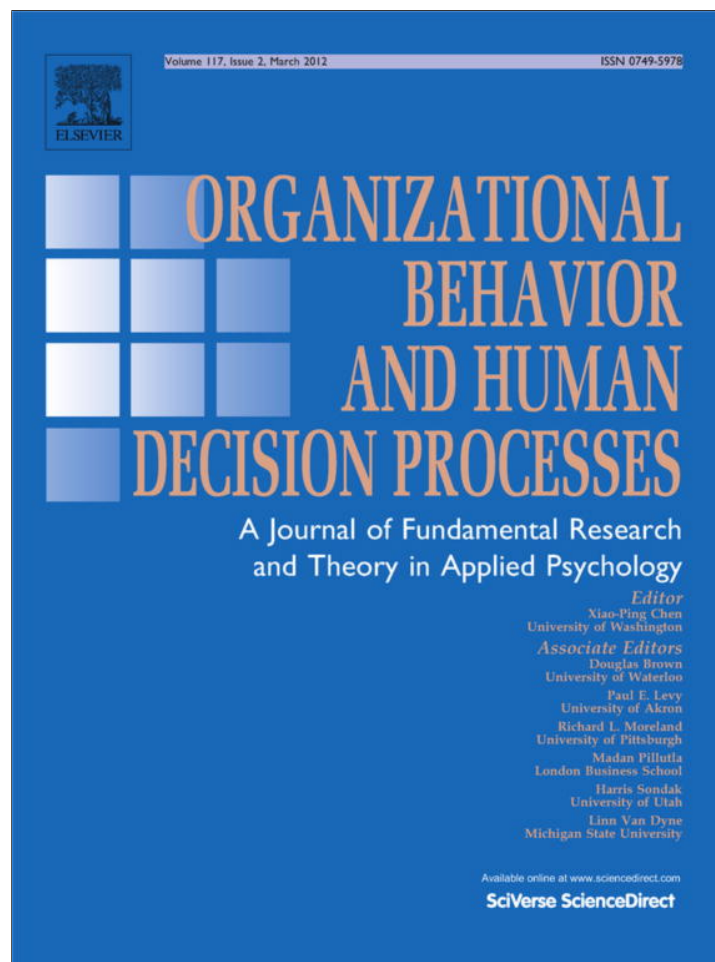


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Cheapened altruism: Discounting personally affected prosocial actors

Fern Lin-Healy^a, Deborah A. Small^{b,*}^a Auburn University, 201 Lowder Business Building, 415 W. Magnolia Avenue, Auburn, AL 36849, United States^b The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 700 Jon M. Huntsman Hall, 3730 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States

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ABSTRACT

Are charitable donors always perceived as charitable? Three studies suggest that although having a personal connection to a cause motivates much charitable giving, donors who have been personally affected by the target cause are given less “credit” for their donations, i.e., are perceived as less intrinsically charitable. These donors are perceived as having selfish motivations even when they have nothing economic or social to gain from the donation. More specifically, personally-affected donors are perceived as driven by *emotional selfishness*, or a desire to improve their own hedonic state rather a desire to improve the welfare of others, which lessens the charitable credit that they receive. In addition, although donors who have been personally affected by the target cause are seen as less charitable, they are perceived more favorably in other ways (e.g., more loyal).

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Introduction

Imagine two donors to a leukemia charity. The first has a sibling with leukemia and the second does not. Who is more charitable? Because the first may be genetically predisposed to leukemia, she can potentially benefit from her donation. Therefore, one can logically conclude that the second donor is more charitable.

Now imagine that the first donor has a friend who currently suffers from leukemia and the second donor does not. Who is more charitable? In this case, the first donor may still benefit if her friend feels indebted and reciprocates the kind action (Trivers, 1971). Therefore, it is likewise logical to conclude that the second donor is more charitable.

Now imagine that the first donor lost her best friend to leukemia, and the second donor has not known anyone with leukemia. Who is more charitable? Neither donor will benefit by supporting this cause. But the first has been personally affected by the cause.

This paper explores how donors' personal connections to a cause influence perceptions of their charitable traits and behavior. We use the term *charitable credit* to refer to the perception that a donor is a benevolent person whose prosocial behavior is untainted by self-interest. When donors get credit is an important question because research has shown that people perceived as charitable enjoy higher status (Flynn, 2003; Hardy & Van Vugt,

2006) and more respect (Price, 2006), and that expectations of social rewards can motivate prosocial actors (Grant & Gino, 2010; Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). It is therefore critical to investigate when and why credit is granted.

We examine this question in the context of donors' personal connections to the target cause. Personal connections to causes are strongly related to charitable giving (Small & Simonsohn, 2008). Although a personal connection is often confounded with direct self-interest, Small and Simonsohn (2008) found an effect on giving even without any possible economic or social gain. Specifically, people who know someone who suffered from a particular misfortune are more caring towards other victims of the same misfortune even when they get nothing in return.

We theorize that a personal connection to a charitable cause cheapens the prosocial act in the eyes of others, thus diminishing the actor's image of benevolence. Importantly, such acts are cheapened even in the absence of potential economic or social gain. Logically, it makes sense to grant less credit when a donor expects such a gain. For instance, in the context of a donor's relationship with a victim, a donor to a leukemia charity who has a family history of leukemia may indeed be incentivized to give. A friend of a woman with leukemia might also gain from donating if her friend feels indebted to reciprocate. In these cases, observers may reasonably perceive a selfish motivation that cheapens such helpers' generous actions. In contrast, friends of deceased victims do not directly benefit by supporting the cause that claimed their friend's life yet their charitable choices are tied selectively to their personal experience.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: fernlinhealy@auburn.edu (F. Lin-Healy), deborahs@wharton.upenn.edu (D.A. Small).

In sum, we predict that donors who have been personally affected by a cause are given less credit for their donations. In other words, the very thing that empirically increases charitable giving nevertheless makes donors appear less charitable.

Background

Behavioral decision research and related disciplines have explored a wide variety of determinants of charitable giving. Research has focused on characteristics of the cause description (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Verrochi, 2009) and on characteristics of successful donation request strategies (Briers, Pandelaere, & Warlop, 2007; Liu & Aaker, 2008; Shang & Croson, 2006). Other research has sought to understand the fundamental motives driving charitable giving. Psychologists and economists have long debated whether prosocial behavior is ever caused by pure altruism or whether such behavior, however altruistic in appearance, can be explained by self-interest. One alternative explanation for altruistic-appearing behavior is that the actors are benefiting in some *emotionally selfish*, rather than economically or socially selfish way (Andreoni, 1990; Manucia, Baumann, & Cialdini, 1984). Specifically, it has been argued people are motivated to relieve their own sadness upon witnessing suffering rather than to relieve victim's suffering (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973) and that people experience a "warm glow" from the act of helping others (Andreoni, 1990). On the other hand, there is also evidence that empathy can cause people to want to help others without concern for potential self-benefit (Batson, 1991).

In spite of this ongoing interest, almost no work has explored folk psychological beliefs about those motivations. In other words, regardless of whether prosocial actors are actually motivated by altruism or self-interest, when do others think they are? This paper explores this question in the context of evaluating donors to a charity who have been personally affected by the target cause.

Evaluating prosocial actors

The limited research on trait perceptions of prosocial actors focuses on favor-recipients' perceptions of their favor-givers. This research finds that the recipients are sensitive to the favor-givers' motives, and such perceptions predict their propensity to reciprocate (Ames, Flynn, & Weber, 2004; Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Jones, 1964; Schopler & Thompson, 1968). For example, Ames et al. (2004) found that recipients are more inclined toward future interaction and reciprocation when they perceive that a favor was motivated by positive feelings about them than when they perceive that the favor was motivated by the favor-giver's role or a cost-benefit analysis. More generally, people tend to be astute detectors of ulterior motivation for good deeds and thus may be especially sensitive to signals of selfishness (Fein, 1996; Miller, 1999; Vonk, 1998).

Although the findings on favor-giving are informative, they may not generalize to other prosocial acts. Inferences about motives are important in the context of favor-giving because they provide the favor-recipients with information about their underlying relationship with the favor-giver—information that can help them interact with the favor-givers in the future. In contrast, for many prosocial acts, such as charitable giving, the recipients are strangers or other abstract entities. There is no expectation of future interaction and no opportunity to reciprocate. Observers are likely judging the character of the actor rather than something about their relationship to them.

We propose that in the context of charitable donations, observers perceive donors who have been personally affected by the target cause as less benevolent. Even in the absence of potential economic or social gain, people infer that these donors had greater selfish motivations compared with donors who have not been personally affected.

Why are they viewed as more selfish? We expect that people hold a theory that *emotional selfishness* can motivate prosocial behavior and that this is the motive that drives friends of victims to support causes that benefit victims of the same misfortune suffered by their friend. This theory is akin to theories of actual motivation for prosocial behavior. Cialdini and Kenrick's negative-state-relief model argues that seemingly altruistic behavior can be attributed to a motivation to relieve the self-suffering inherent in witnessing others' suffering (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976). Batson and colleagues, who do assert that a pure altruistic motive exists, argue that there is a qualitatively distinct vicarious emotion, personal distress, which results in behavior directed toward reducing that distress (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). In our context, we define perceived emotional selfishness as a belief that donors are motivated to improve their own emotional state as opposed to improving the welfare of others in need. Even though there is no potential economic or social gain, we predict that friends of deceased victims are nonetheless perceived as selfishly motivated because people believe that "true" charity is about caring for others, and that friends of victims instead are motivated by emotional selfishness. This selfish signal will lessen the charitable credit they would otherwise be given.

Finally, we theorize that giving a donor charitable credit is not the same as viewing that donor more positively in general. While people may perceive personally affected donors who have been personally affected by the target cause as less charitable compared with donors who have not, people may nonetheless view the former more positively on other dimensions.

In sum, we theorize that donors who have been personally affected by a cause signal selfish motivation, even in the absence of potential economic or social gain, and people give them less charitable credit as a result. In the subsequent section, we describe three experiments that tested our predictions.

Overview of studies

We tested our hypotheses by examining perceptions of donors to a charity, some of whom lost a friend to the misfortune supported by the charity ("friends of victims"). We use this particular operationalization of a personal connection because, unlike relatives, friends of victims cannot infer a genetic predisposition to the disease, which would make the donation potentially personally beneficial. Moreover, we use deceased friends so that friends of victims cannot help their own friend by donating. In other words, many personal connections to causes are confounded by a possible immediate or future gain for the donor. Examining friends of deceased victims is a conservative test because such donors have been personally affected by the cause yet can help only strangers.

Study 1 tested the first hypothesis that compared with donors who have not known any victims, friends of victims who donate to the cause that claimed their friend's life are given less charitable credit for their donations. Study 2 directly tested the mediating role of perceived selfish motivation on charitable credit. In addition, Study 2 sought to distinguish charitable credit from other positive trait perceptions. Study 3 further examines this mechanism and shows that friends of victims are perceived as more *emotionally* selfish, or as acting prosocially to relieve the guilt they feel for their friend's death. Together, the studies shed light on the psychological mechanisms that drive evaluations of charitable donors.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants read about a donor to a leukemia charity who either lost a friend to the disease or has not known any victims of the disease. Participants evaluated the donor's charitable traits and made predictions about the donor's likelihood to engage in future prosocial behaviors in other domains.

Method

Two hundred and two participants, 95% of whom were undergraduate students at a mid-size private university, completed this study as part of a 1-h series of unrelated studies for which they received \$10. One participant was dropped prior to data analysis because of many incomplete responses, resulting in a final sample of 201 participants. The average age of the participants was 20.25 years ($SD = 2.34$ years), and 57% of the participants were female.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, corresponding to three versions of a donor profile. The profile was allegedly gathered through an anonymous post-donation survey conducted by the charity. For realism and to conceal the purpose of the research, the profile also contained information about donor age, gender, marital status, and income. All these attributes, in addition to donation amount, were controlled across conditions.

The profile also included a question asking the donor whether she has known anyone who died of leukemia. Depending on random assignment, the response indicated that the donor has not known anyone who died of leukemia, that the donor's friend died of leukemia, or that the donor's best friend died of leukemia. The second and third levels allowed us to test whether the strength of the relationship with a past victim also influences charitable credit. We selected leukemia because it often strikes young or middle-aged people, so it is realistic for a typical young donor to have lost a friend to leukemia. Moreover, it avoids social/moral judgments associated with deaths by non-natural causes, such as car accidents and substance abuse. Participants were instructed to read the profile and provide their impressions of the donor. Participants indicated how nice, altruistic, kind, and generous the donor is on a 1 (not at all)–7 (extremely) scale. They subsequently rated the donor's likelihood to donate blood, give to a homeless person, and donate used clothes. Finally, participants provided demographic information and indicated whether they have known a leukemia victim themselves, as it is possible that the participants' own personal relationships with a victim could affect their perceptions of the donors. This question was asked at the end of all three studies. Including responses as a covariate never altered results, so we do not discuss it further.

Results

The four measures of charitable traits (nice, altruistic, kind, generous) were averaged into a composite charitable trait score (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). A one-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences among the three conditions, $F(2, 198) = 5.35, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$. Planned contrasts revealed that donors who have not known any victims were perceived as significantly more charitable than donors whose friend or best friend died of leukemia, $t(198) = 3.22, p < .01$. There was no difference in perceived charitable traits between friends ($M = 4.97, SD = .83$) and best friends ($M = 4.89, SD = .99$), $t(198) = -.543, p = ns$.

If donors who have not known any victims are perceived as more charitable, people should also expect them to engage in more future prosocial behavior. Donors who did not know any victims were perceived as more likely than friends and best friends to give to a homeless person and to donate clothes, p 's $< .05$, but there was no difference in judgments about giving blood. Table 1 presents all means.

Discussion

As predicted, participants gave more charitable credit to donors who have not known any victims compared with friends of victims.¹ It appeared that participants treated a personal relationship

¹ A replication study also included a condition for which no information was provided about whether the donor knew any victims as a baseline. Results indicate that people both augment charitable credit for non-friends of victims and discount charitable credit for friends of victims.

Table 1

mean responses to judgments about a donor as a function of their relationship to a victim, study 1.

	Donor's relationship to a victim		
	No relationship	Friend	Best friend
Perceived charitable traits	5.36 [*] (.81)	4.97 (.83)	4.89 (.99)
<i>Perceived likelihood of future behavior</i>			
Donate blood	5.00 (1.13)	5.00 (1.28)	4.63 (1.44)
Give to a homeless person	4.37 [*] (1.36)	3.52 (1.06)	3.26 (1.26)
Donate used clothes	5.39 [*] (1.01)	4.37 (1.14)	4.14 (1.36)

Note: SDs are in parentheses following means. All scales ranged from 1 to 7.

* After the mean indicates that the mean was significantly different ($p < .05$) from the other two conditions.

with a victim as a diagnostic factor that shifted their beliefs about the donor's underlying nature. We found no difference between friends and best friends of victims. Perhaps this was due to the ambiguity of terms. Studies 2 and 3 examine the psychological mechanism driving this effect.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to expand our understanding of charitable credit. Prior research suggests that people infer dispositional traits from motive inferences (Reeder, 2009; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002). Building on this, we theorized that people perceive more selfish motivations in friends of victims, even in the absence of potential economic or social gain, and this perception negatively affects charitable credit. In other words, perceptions of selfish motives mediate the effect of relationship with a victim on charitable credit.

A second goal was to examine friendship-related trait perceptions. Though friends of victims may be judged as less benevolent, we doubt that they are judged less positively in all respects. Specifically, we expect that people view friends of victims more favorably on friendship-related judgments such as loyalty—a positive trait inference that is distinct from the altruism-related traits. Interpersonal loyalty is highly valued in our society (Beer & Watson, 2009; Jones & Burdette, 1994), and friends of victims, due to their perceived loyalty, may be more attractive as potential friends. Prior research demonstrates that trait loyalty is correlated with altruism and other positive traits (Beer & Watson, 2009). However, friends of victims might not be perceived as both. In this study, therefore, we measure a broader array of judgments of donors.

Method

One hundred fifty-nine participants completed this study as part of a 1-h series of unrelated studies for which they received \$10. The average age of the participants was 23.83 years ($SD = 6.61$ years), and 59% of the participants were female. Fifty-six percent of the participants were undergraduate students at a mid-size private university.

As with the first study, participants saw a profile of a donor to a leukemia charity and rated the donor on the aforementioned measures of charitable traits and likelihood of future prosocial acts. In one condition, the donor profile indicated that the donor has not known anyone who died of leukemia, and in the other condition the profile indicated that the donor's best friend died of leukemia. We also included two measures of perceived selfish motivation, both on a 1–7 scale with higher numbers indicating greater perceived selfish motivation: "To what extent was their donation selfless versus selfish?" and "To what extent was their donation society-serving versus self-serving?" Finally, to examine a distinct positive perception that we expected to diverge from charitable credit, we asked how loyal the donor is and how much the participants would like to be friends with the donor, again on a 1–7 scale.

Table 2
Mean responses to judgments about a donor as a function of their relationship to a victim, study 2.

	Donor's relationship to a victim	
	No relationship	Best friend
Perceived charitable traits	5.55* (.83)	4.91 (1.03)
<i>Perceived likelihood of future behavior</i>		
Donate blood	5.17* (1.29)	4.78 (1.20)
Give to a homeless person	4.21* (1.25)	3.42 (1.16)
Donate used clothes	5.46* (1.10)	4.52 (1.20)
Perceived selfish motivation	2.46* (1.27)	3.25 (1.27)
Perceived loyalty	5.04* (.95)	5.43* (1.14)

Note: SDs are in parentheses following means. All scales ranged from 1 to 7.
* After the mean indicates that the mean was significantly different ($p < .05$) from the other condition.

Results

As in the first study, the four measures of charitable traits were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). Replicating the results of Study 1, best friends of victims were perceived as less charitable ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.03$) than donors who have not known any victims ($M = 5.55, SD = .83$), $t(154) = 4.25, p < .001$.

The three measures of likelihood of future charitable behavior provide further support that friends of victims are given less charitable credit. Best friends of victims were perceived as less likely to engage in all three future prosocial behaviors than donors who did not know a victim, all p 's $< .05$.² Table 2 presents all means.

The two measures of perceived selfish motivation were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). As expected, participants perceived greater selfish motivation in best friends of victims ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.27$) compared with donors who have not known any victims ($M = 2.46, SD = 1.27$), $t(157) = 3.92, p < .001$. We used the bootstrap method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008) to test our theory that perceived selfish motivation mediates the effect of best friendship with a victim on charitable credit. Consistent with this theory, a 3000-sample bootstrap test estimated an indirect effect of $-.23$ ($SE = .09, 95\% CI [-.43, -.08]$) of best friendship with a victim on charitable traits via perceived selfish motivation.

Finally, the two Friendship-related measures—loyalty and desire to be the donor's friend—were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). In contrast to the measures of charitable credit, friends of victims were rated higher on these friendship-related measures ($M = 5.43, SD = 1.14$) compared with donors who have not known any victims ($M = 5.04, SD = .95$), $t(155) = 2.27, p < .05$.

Discussion

Study 2 sought a better understanding of charitable credit by examining the perceived motives that affect charitable credit and by differentiating charitable credit from other positive perceptions. Best friends of victims were perceived as less charitable compared with donors who have not known any victims, replicating the previous study. Participants also perceived greater selfish motivation in best friends of victims, and this perception mediated the effect of best friendship with a victim on charitable credit. But while best friends of victims were perceived as less charitable, this perception did not extend to all positive evaluations, specifically those related to friendship.

² In addition to the three measures of likelihood of future prosocial behavior, we asked the likelihood that the donor would give again to the target charity. While friends of victims were perceived as less likely to engage in future prosocial behavior in unrelated domains, they were perceived as more likely to donate again to the target charity ($M_{\text{friend}} = 5.77, SD = 1.19; M_{\text{no relationship}} = 5.26, SD = 1.16$), $t(156) = 2.71, p = 0.01$. This result dovetails with the evidence that friends of victims are perceived as less charitable but higher on friendship-related measures.

Study 3

Study 3 sought to further explain people's lay theories about the motives driving charitable giving among personally-affected donors. We predicted that people hold a lay belief about personally-affected donors that is consistent with the argument that seemingly altruistic acts are truly driven by a desire to improve one's own mood rather than a desire to help others. We refer to this motive as emotional selfishness. We first sought to confirm that people perceive emotional selfishness as selfish in a pre-test. Then, we examine whether perceived emotional selfishness explains why personally-affected donors are granted less credit.

Pre-test

Seventy-seven United States residents were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.77$ years, $SD = 11.15$; 57% female). The instructions stated that "people donate to charity for a variety of possible reasons, some of which are listed." Participants rated each reason on a 1 (not at all selfish) to 7 (extremely selfish) scale. The list of reasons included an economic motive (tax write-off), a social motive (to look good in the eyes of others), two other-oriented motives (give to society, do something good for others), and two emotionally-selfish motives (feel better, avoid guilt).

An exploratory factor analysis with a Varimax rotation revealed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The two factors clearly distinguished between selfish and unselfish motives. Moreover, the two emotionally selfish motives loaded onto the same factor as the economic and social motives. Table 3 reports the selfishness judgments of each motive. The pre-test results suggest that the two emotionally-selfish motives are indeed judged as more selfish than the two other-oriented motives, albeit they are judged as less selfish than the economic and social motives.

Method

Having established that people perceive emotionally selfish motives as indeed more selfish than other-oriented motives, we next tested whether personally affected prosocial actors are perceived as more emotionally selfish, and whether that mediates the effect of friendship with a victim on charitable credit.

Two hundred and thirteen United States residents were recruited online using Amazon Mechanical Turk ($M_{\text{age}} = 31.13$ years, $SD = 10.23$; 61% female). As in the previous studies, participants saw an anonymous donor profile, but we changed some substantive details on the profile. First, because leukemia may invoke associations with children, we tested another charitable cause, bone cancer research. Bone cancer strikes people under age 50 but does not have leukemia's associations with children. Second, the donor profile included a question asking how the donor heard about the charity; the donor indicated that he searched a lot of charities online. Therefore, the effort that the donor put into her decision to

Table 3
Judged selfishness of motives for giving, study 3 pre-test.

Motive for giving	M	SD
Explicitly selfish		
Tax write-off	6.09 _a	1.1
Looking good in the eyes of others	5.86 _a	1.23
Emotionally selfish		
Feeling good about themselves	4.73 _b	1.44
Avoiding guilt	4.19 _b	1.51
Other-oriented		
Giving to society	1.9 _c	1.21
Doing something good for others	1.75 _c	1.07

Note: Judgments were made on seven-point scales (1 = not at all selfish to 7 = extremely selfish). Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

donate was equal across conditions. This addition served to address a plausible alternative explanation that people give personally affected donors less credit because they infer that the donors were simply lazier.

As in previous studies, we manipulated whether the donor has known someone who died of the disease supported by the charity (this time bone cancer). To further explore whether relationship strength further influences charitable credit, we included three levels of a relationship with a victim. The three conditions were: the donor's best friend died of the disease; a casual acquaintance died of the disease; and the donor has not known anyone who died of the disease.

After reviewing the profile, participants rated the donor on the same four measures of charitable traits and three measures of charitable behavior as before. We also asked about four possible motives, two clearly altruistic and two emotionally selfish. Participants rated the degree to which they believe each motive played a role in the donor's decision to donate, on a 1 (played no role) to 7 (played extremely large role) scale. Specifically, participants rated the degree to which the donor donated because he wanted to feel better, avoid feeling guilty, make a positive difference, and give to society. The two question blocks (charitable credit and motives) were counterbalanced, and items within each block were randomized. Question block order did not affect results so we collapsed across this manipulation.

Results

We averaged the four measures of charitable traits (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). An omnibus test rejects the null that relationship with a victim does not influence perceived charitable traits, $F(2,210) = 3.66$, $p < .05$. Planned contrasts revealed that donors who have not known any victims are viewed as more charitable ($M = 5.59$, $SD = .91$) than donors whose casual acquaintance ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.04$) or best friend died of bone cancer ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(210) = 2.7$, $p < .01$ and there was no difference between casual acquaintances and best friends, $t(210) = .12$, $p = ns$. Moreover, donors who have not known any victims were perceived as more likely to give to a homeless guy, to donate blood, and to donate used clothes than donors whose casual acquaintance or best friend died of bone cancer, all p 's $< .01$. Table 4 presents all means.

In addition, planned contrasts revealed that compared with donors who have not known any victims, acquaintances and best friends of victims were perceived as more motivated to avoid guilt, $t(210) = -4.00$, $p < .001$. The effect on perceived motive to feel better was in the same direction, but not significant, $t(210) = -1.30$, $p = ns$. On the other hand, donors who have not known any victims were perceived as more motivated to give to society, $t(210) = 4.39$, $p < .001$ and more motivated to make a positive difference, $t(210) = 2.91$, $p < .01$. There were no significant differences between acquaintances and best friends on any of these measures, all p 's = ns.

We theorized that personally affected donors are perceived as more selfishly motivated because people believe their donations are driven more by emotionally-selfish motives. Because only the motive to avoid guilt showed a significant effect, we tested whether this item mediates the effect of relationship with a victim on charitable credit. A 3000-sample bootstrap test estimated an indirect effect of $-.14$ ($SE = .07$, 95% CI $[-.34, -.033]$) of friendship with a victim on charitable traits via perceived feelings of guilt.

In sum, Study 3 sheds some light on why personally affected prosocial actors are seen as more selfishly motivated. Personally affected prosocial actors are seen as having more emotionally selfish motives, specifically guilt, and less altruistic motives. People judge these motives as selfish and therefore give less credit to personally affected prosocial actors.

Table 4

Mean responses to judgments about a donor as a function of their relationship to a victim, study 3.

	Donor's relationship to a victim		
	No relationship	Casual acquaintance	Best Friend
Perceived charitable traits	5.59* (.91)	5.19 (1.04)	5.21 (1.06)
<i>Perceived likelihood of future behavior</i>			
Donate blood	5.23* (1.31)	4.80 (1.62)	4.52 (1.42)
Give to a homeless person	4.65* (1.53)	4.06 (1.66)	3.61 (1.44)
Donate used clothes	5.59* (1.33)	4.89 (1.66)	4.42 (1.39)
<i>Perceived motives</i>			
Guilt	2.74* (1.54)	3.64 (1.78)	3.88 (1.99)
To feel better	4.97 (1.25)	5.27 (1.24)	5.19 (1.61)
To give to society	5.62* (1.14)	4.84 (1.36)	4.67 (1.60)
To make a positive difference	6.07* (.88)	5.51 (1.14)	5.70 (1.28)

Note: SDs are in parentheses following means. All scales ranged from 1 to 7.

* After the mean indicates that the mean was significantly different ($p < .05$) from the other conditions.

As in Study 1, we did not find any differences between friend descriptions suggestive of relationship strength (acquaintance versus best friend). It is an open question whether people are ever sensitive to relationship strength or, as we suspect, our participants are less sensitive to the descriptions than are people in the real world who have more contextualized knowledge of others' relationships. Nevertheless, it is interesting that even a distant past relationship (acquaintance) is sufficient to reduce the credit granted to donors.

General discussion

The spirit of charity rests on thinking about others and not oneself. However, some charitable donors clearly stand to gain from their donations and may seek these rewards. They may receive tax benefits, fame, or higher status, for instance. It is reasonable for people to view these donors as selfishly motivated and adjust their evaluations accordingly; that is, give them less charitable credit for their donations. As we've demonstrated, people also view donors as selfishly motivated when they perceive that the donors gain emotionally, even if not economically or socially.

We theorized that even when donors who have been personally affected by the target cause—operationalized as friends of deceased victims—stand to gain nothing more from their donations, economically or socially-speaking, than donors who have not been affected, people nonetheless perceive personally affected donors as having had selfish motivations, violating the other-oriented spirit of charity. As a result, merely having a personal connection to the target cause cheapens their charitable donations.

Three studies supported our predictions. In Study 1, friends of victims were given less credit for their donations compared with donors who have not known any victims. In Study 2, results support our hypothesis that people perceive greater selfish motivation in friends of victims, and this perception reduces charitable credit. However, although friends of victims were perceived as less charitable, friendship with a victim actually bolstered friendship-related judgments such as loyalty and desire to be the donor's friend. Study 3 further explored the perception of selfish motivation and found that similar to Cialdini & Kenrick's (1976) Negative-state-relief model and to Batson et al.'s (1987) notion of "personal distress" r regarding actual motives for giving, people hold a lay belief that the motive to improve one's own mood is selfish and that personally affected donors are perceived as motivated to reduce the guilt they feel about their friend's death. In addition, Study 3 ruled out the plausible alternative explanation that friends of victims are believed to have searched less (i.e. were lazier)

before donating by providing equal information across conditions about the level of search effort.

One question for future research is whether individuals give themselves less credit for donating when they support a cause that has personally affected them, given that it is so common to support such causes. Prior research suggests that people make dispositional attributions differently for others than they would for themselves (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Furthermore, these actor–observer differences can be attenuated or even eliminated through perspective-taking (Galper, 1976; Regan & Totten, 1975). If it is indeed the case that people are more forgiving of the influence of their own personal experiences, then it may be possible to change charitable credit judgments by having observers adopt the perspective of the donor or to remind them of a time they gave to a charity that served a cause that had personally affected them.

Finally, the current research does not address the downstream effects of charitable credit. Do donors internalize the charitable credit that others give them and adjust their future charitable behavior? If so, we expect that this would result in trait-consistent future behavior. On the other hand, Ariely, Bracha, and Meier (2009) found that people behave less prosocially, at least in public, in the presence of monetary incentives because they do not want to appear to be motivated by the money. Therefore, it seems possible that donors may come to recognize situations in which they could be viewed more or less positively and alter their behavior to generate a more positive impression. These opposing predictions should be tested in future research.

To conclude, this research takes a first step at examining perceptions of charitable donors who give to causes that have personally affected them. This is an important question, as a personal connection to a cause is a large determinant of charitable giving. Three studies demonstrate that not all charitable actors are viewed as charitable, even when the potential benefits are merely emotionally selfish.

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