



The bedside manner of homo economicus: How and why priming an economic schema reduces compassion

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ABSTRACT

We investigate how, why and when activating economic schemas reduces the compassion that individuals extend to others in need when delivering bad news. Across three experiments, we show that unobtrusively priming economic schemas decreases the compassion that individuals express to others in need, that this effect is mediated by dampened feelings of empathy and heightened perceptions of unprofessionalism, and that it is circumscribed to bad news that has economic implications. We discuss implications for theory and research on schemas, procedural justice, emotion expression, and prosocial behavior.

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Introduction

“The purely economic man is indeed close to being a social moron.” (Sen, 1976, p. 329)

Few people enjoy delivering bad news. However, in tough economic times, bad news is an inevitable feature of organizational life. In recent years, organizational scholars have focused considerable attention on the importance of treating recipients of bad news with interpersonal sensitivity and compassion. Treating individuals with compassion is known to protect the welfare of those receiving the negative news (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1987; Tyler & Bies, 1990) and result in more favorable outcomes for organizations (Brockner, 1992, 1994; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Findings from medicine, for example, show that when doctors fail to express compassion and concern, patients are more likely to sue them for malpractice (Ambady et al., 2002; Levinson, Roter, Mullooly, Dull, & Frankel, 1997). In business, when managers fail to express compassion and concern in conducting layoffs and pay cuts, employees are more likely to file wrongful termination lawsuits (Lind, Greenberg, Scott, & Welchans, 2000) and retaliate with theft and sabotage (Greenberg, 1990).

Despite the benefits of expressing compassion, research suggests that when delivering bad news, organizational actors often

express less compassion than observers and victims expect (Brockner, 2006; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998). To explain these compassion deficits, recent research has focused on the psychological experiences of those delivering bad news. In particular, researchers have advanced an “emotional overload” hypothesis, suggesting that people often fail to express compassion because they are seeking to protect themselves from high levels of emotional distress (Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998, 2001; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005; Wright & Barling, 1998). Because the act of delivering bad news elicits such high levels of guilt, anxiety and distress, individuals often disengage psychologically or even physically from the situation (Clair & Dufresne, 2004), protecting themselves but harming victims in the process.

Recently, however, researchers have introduced an alternative perspective, suggesting that not everyone delivering bad news is consumed with negative emotion, and that not everyone consumed with negative emotion fails to produce compassionate behavior (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). Indeed, in certain cases, individuals experience little emotion when delivering bad news and, as a result, express little compassion (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997). In other cases, individuals experience appropriate levels of concern but still fail to express compassion (Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). Although researchers have begun to recognize that such emotional “underload” can occur, we know little about its causes and the underlying psychological processes through which it inhibits compassion.

The purpose of this paper is to deepen our understanding of emotional underload by examining how economic schemas, which

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are widespread in organizations, can limit compassion by minimizing the amount of emotion that people experience and express. An economic schema is defined as a knowledge structure that prioritizes rationality, efficiency and self-interest, concepts at the heart of economics (Wang, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2011). As prior work on schemas suggests (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000), the economic schema can be activated by ambient cues in the immediate environment, and can shape cognition, emotion, and behavior.

We propose that the activation of this schema is an important force that reduces compassion when delivering bad news. Rather than being engulfed by emotion, people whose economic schema is elicited fail to act with compassion because they do not experience sufficient emotion or believe it is inappropriate to express the emotion they do feel. More specifically, we propose that activating an economic schema decreases compassion through two mechanisms, one emotional and the other cognitive: dampening the empathy that individuals feel and leading them to perceive expressing emotions as unprofessional and inappropriate. We examine these effects across three experiments, demonstrating how, why and when unobtrusively priming the economic schema results in reduced levels of compassionate treatment to others in need or distress. Our research advances knowledge about the dual psychological processes through which economic schemas can reduce compassion, providing new insights into the factors that constrain prosocial behavior and interpersonal justice in organizational settings.

The economic schema

As noted above, we define an economic schema as a knowledge structure that emphasizes the importance of rationality, efficiency and self-interest (see Wang et al., 2011). Little research has explicitly designated the notion of an economic schema, or directly detailed its effects on the delivery of compassionate treatment. However, important clues about the nature and consequences of the economic schema are available in three interrelated literatures: economics education, the norm of self-interest, and the psychological effects of money. We ground our theorizing in these three lines of research, which suggest that the economic schema is a pervasive knowledge structure and that it may have a powerful effect on compassionate behavior.

First, research on economics education supports the notion of an economic schema. In schools, businesses, and the broader society, economic language is frequently used to justify and explain decisions (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Miller, 1999; Sonenshein, 2006; Wang et al., 2011). There is reason to believe that exposure to economics increases the salience of knowledge structures prioritizing rationality, efficiency, and self-interest—and that when these knowledge structures are activated, people act with less compassion. For example, Frank, Gilovich, and Regan (1993) found that in a prisoner's dilemma game, economists, whose economic schema is chronically activated, defected more often than non-economists. They also found that economics professors were less likely than those from other disciplines to donate to charity. Other studies have shown that when social dilemmas involved economic decisions, people behaved more competitively (Pillutla & Chen, 1999).

Additionally, Wang et al. (2011) showed that people with greater exposure to economics kept more money for themselves in allocation decisions and had more positive attitudes toward greed, and that merely exposing people to a brief statement about the societal advantages of self-interest led them to view greed as more morally acceptable. In the domain of negotiations, Liberman, Samuels, and Ross (2004) found that referring to a prisoner's dilemma game as a Wall Street Game, as opposed to a Community Game, strongly influenced behavior within the game. When the game was called the Community Game, individuals were more likely to cooperate,

whereas the opposite pattern occurred in the Wall Street Game. Similarly, Kay and Ross (2003) showed that cooperative and competitive primes led participants to construe and respond to prisoners' dilemmas in corresponding fashions. Further, in a series of clever experiments, Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, and Ross (2004) demonstrated that exposure to physical objects with economic connotations, such as boardroom tables and briefcases, made competition more accessible, led participants to perceive social interactions as less cooperative, and caused participants to make more selfish proposals in the Ultimatum Game.

Second, a related stream of research on the norm of self-interest (Miller, 1999) suggests that individuals in Western societies have internalized schemas that prioritize self-interest above other motivations and reasons for action (Miller & Ratner, 1998; Schwartz, 1997; Wuthnow, 1991). The norm of self-interest is thought to discourage compassion by leading individuals to feel that it is socially inappropriate (Holmes, Miller, & Lerner, 2002; Miller, 1999; Ratner & Miller, 2001). The norm of self-interest is also thought to be particularly pervasive in business, where managers and employees are often trained in economic reasoning, which cultivates and reinforces beliefs in the prevalence and power of rational self-interest (Ferraro et al., 2005; Gandal, Roccas, Sagiv, & Wrzesniewski, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007; Sonenshein, 2006). Leavitt (1989, p. 39) went so far as to argue that business education, with its narrow focus on economics, creates "critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts, and shrunken souls."

Third, researchers have also shown that merely exposing people to the concept of money has a similarly powerful influence on cognition and behavior. This effect has been demonstrated in two different ways. Extensive experimental evidence shows that merely activating the concept of money leads individuals to engage in less prosocial behavior (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006, 2008). Moreover, field studies indicate that hourly pay leads employees to construe time in terms of monetary value, thereby reducing their willingness to donate their time as volunteers (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007).

Hypotheses

Taken together, these three streams of research provide evidence in support of the notion of an economic schema that can be activated through mere exposure to schema-relevant stimuli, and that can shape psychological processes and behaviors. Our goal is to examine how activating the economic schema affects the degree of compassion a performer expresses when delivering bad news. Compassion is a behavioral expression of concern that involves offering understanding, support, or solutions (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006).

Our hypotheses are grounded in theory and research on compassion in organizational settings that suggesting that once another person's need, distress, or suffering is noticed, the act of compassion unfolds in a two-step process: first, an individual must feel empathy and concern (Solomon, 1998; Wuthnow, 1991), and second, the individual must act by offering understanding, support, or solutions (Dutton et al., 2006). Research indicates that once a need is noticed, an act of compassion has two key elements: the felt experience of empathy for the person in need (Solomon, 1998; Wuthnow, 1991) and behavioral expressions of concern emanating from this felt experience (Dutton et al., 2006). We suggest that the economic schema can interfere with both of these elements. First, the economic schema may reduce empathy, a state of emotional concern for another person in need, distress, or suffering (Batson, 1990, 1998). Empathy and compassion are distinct, in that empathy involves only a feeling of concern, whereas compassion requires a behavioral expression of concern. As Dutton, Worline, Frost, and Lilius (2006, pp. 60–61) summarize, compassion differs from empathy in that compassion "implies action and must involve some sort of response... there must be a movement to respond."

We predict that when the economic schema is activated, performers will be heavily influenced by notions of rationality and efficiency. As a result, economically oriented task performers will appraise and make sense of the situation in these terms, rather than in terms conducive to the experience and expression of empathy (Batson, 1998). For example, the performer may focus on the efficiency of delivering the message as quickly as possible (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998) as opposed to the importance of delivering it with compassion and sensitivity. In information processing terms (Epstein, 1994), “cool” rational processing mechanisms instigated by the economic schema will override “hot” intuitive processing, which is ordinarily responsible for the experience of prosocial emotions such as empathy (Loewenstein & Small, 2007). As a result, an individual will feel significantly less empathy when the economic schema is activated than when it is not (Zhong, 2011).

Second, even if the economic schema does not extinguish empathy, we predict that it can discourage individuals from acting on their feelings of empathy to express compassion when delivering bad news. Research shows that even when people have positive feelings toward an action, they often withhold the action if they perceive it as socially inappropriate (Ajzen, 1991). Guided by a “logic of appropriateness” (March, 1991, 1994), people implicitly ask themselves, “What does a person like me do in a situation like this?” When delivering bad news and the economic schema is not active, the intuitive answer to this question is “express compassion.” In an economic mindset, however, people may take the role of a manager who, concerned with the goals of the organization—as opposed to the interests of the victims of bad news—answers “what is appropriate” very differently. When the economic schema is salient, the answer to the question may be “avoid expressing emotion” because that is what rational, efficient actors are expected to do.¹

Even if under ordinary circumstances, people might reject the stereotype of the rational, unemotional executioner as a guide for their own behavior, we predict that under the influence of the economic schema, things may change considerably. Individuals will construe compassionate behavior as being inconsistent with their role of the self-interested, rational, efficient task executioner (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Miller, 1999; Sanchez-Burks, 2005) and as a result will be less likely to produce compassionate behavior. Thus, the economic schema may reduce compassion not only by decreasing empathy, but also by leading people to perceive the expression of emotion as unprofessional.

However, the economic schema may not always have this negative effect on compassion. An important boundary condition for this effect is the actual content of the bad news itself. In particular, we predict that the relationship between activation of an economic schema and reduced compassionate behavior will be particularly pronounced when the consequences of the bad news itself are economically relevant. This prediction is grounded in trait activation theory, which suggests that people only act on knowledge struc-

tures that they perceive as situationally relevant (Tett & Burnett, 2003). If the bad news has economic implications, the economic schema is directly relevant; if the bad news has no immediate or obvious economic implications, the economic schema may seem irrelevant. As such, we expect that the economic schema will only discourage compassion when the bad news has economic implications. This predicted relationship is also grounded in priming research, which underscores the importance of a schema-relevant context for eliciting schema-consistent behavior. In their elegant priming studies, for example, Bargh and colleagues demonstrate how activating a “rudeness” schema can influence behavior by creating an opportunity to engage in rude (or polite) behavior (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Similarly, in our studies, we predict that the power of an economic schema will reveal itself and have a robust effect on participants’ behavior in schema-relevant contexts, which in our case are contexts in which the bad news itself has an economic component to it.

This discussion suggests the following four hypotheses concerning the relationship between the activation of an economic schema and a person’s actions, cognitions and emotions while under its psychological influence:

Hypothesis 1. Activating the economic schema reduces compassionate behavior.

Hypothesis 2. The negative effect of the economic schema on compassion is mediated by dampened feelings of empathy toward the victim.

Hypothesis 3. The negative effect of the economic schema on compassion is mediated by perceived unprofessionalism.

Hypothesis 4. The effect of the economic schema on compassion is moderated by the consequences of bad news, such that when these consequences are not economically relevant, the negative effect of the economic schema on compassion will be attenuated.

Overview of the present research

We tested these hypotheses across three experiments. Because direct manipulations can elicit demand characteristics (e.g., Hertel & Kerr, 2001), we used relatively subtle, unobtrusive techniques to activate economic schemas. To establish mundane and psychological realism, we presented working managers with scenarios similar to what they might encounter in their professional roles (Experiment 1) and asked participants to write a letter that they believed would actually be delivered to a student (Experiment 2) or make time for a meeting with recipients of bad news (Experiment 3).

Experiment 1

We asked working professionals to deliver negative news to employees in two different scenarios that might evoke compassion. We assessed compassion by measuring the extent to which participants expressed concern to each of the victims. To examine the mediating mechanisms, we directly measured their feelings of empathy and perceptions of unprofessionalism.

Method

Participants and design

Fifty working professional managers who attended an executive education course at a leading East Coast business school in the US

¹ Importantly, insofar as expressing compassion threatens one’s public image as an economically rational, professional, efficient actor, it may influence one’s private identity or self-concept as well. Building on the symbolic interactionist tradition (Mead, 1934; see also Cooley, 1902, and James, 1890), research on identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and self-verification theory (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004) suggests that individuals’ private self-views are shaped heavily by their public images. In fact, in many situations, public images and private identities are inextricably intertwined (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). As such, we expect that when the activation of an economic schema leads individuals to perceive expressing emotions as unprofessional in the eyes of others, this perception may spill over to reduce their own perceptions of the professionalism of the act. In the language of norm theory, social norms may become subjective norms. Our objective is not to tease apart these closely related processes, but rather to suggest that even when individuals feel empathy, they may choose not to express their emotions by acting with compassion because they are concerned—publicly and privately—about behaving in an unprofessional and inappropriate manner.

volunteered to participate in this study. The managers averaged 40.54 years of age ($SD = 6.16$) and tenure in their professions of 13.61 years ($SD = 6.77$). They averaged 5.58 years of experience in their current roles ($SD = 4.87$), which were director (38%), manager (30%), vice president (20%), or president, chief, or partner (12%). They were highly educated: 72% had earned a college degree, 64% one or more master's degrees, and 12% doctorates. They managed an average of 139.53 employees ($SD = 616.55$). We recruited the managers via email after they had completed their executive education course, achieving a response rate of 52%.

To unobtrusively activate the economic schema, we used the Scrambled Sentence Task (Sruil & Wyer, 1979). The task requires individuals to unscramble groups of words to form complete sentences, and research indicates that when a subset of the words is related to a schema, the schema becomes more accessible and psychologically salient, leading participants to think and act in ways congruent with the concept (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). For example, Bargh et al. (1996) demonstrated that participants who unscrambled sentences including words related to stereotypes of the elderly (e.g., gray, Bingo, Florida) walked more slowly than participants who unscrambled sentences containing neutral words.

Consistent with past research by Bargh and colleagues, we asked participants to unscramble a total of 30 sentences. In the economic schema condition, 15 of the sentences contained words related to economics (e.g., "high into they profits earn" unscrambled to read "they earn high profits," "costs where and benefits analyze" unscrambled to read "analyze costs and benefits," and "continues economy two growing our" unscrambled to read "our economy continues growing"). The other 15 sentences contained neutral words. In the control condition, all 30 sentences contained neutral words (e.g., "where adverb an occasionally is" unscrambled to read "occasionally is an adverb" and "there then put they it" unscrambled to read "they put it there").

The Scrambled Sentence Task was positioned as a "cognitive test that resembles what a human resources consulting firm uses to screen applicants," and explained that we were interested in how managers from various industries and functional backgrounds perform on this test. Using a random number generator, we randomly assigned the managers to unscramble the control sentences ($n = 26$) or the economic sentences ($n = 24$). After unscrambling the sentences, the managers responded to two different managerial dilemmas.

Procedures

Sarah scenario. In the first scenario, we asked the managers to think about delivering negative feedback to a team member, Sarah, who is not pulling her weight on the team. The scenario stated that Sarah is highly competent, but sometimes fails to show up at early team meetings because she does not have a car. We asked the managers to imagine that they would be meeting with Sarah tomorrow in person and write down what they would say to her. After they had finished writing, the managers completed a short questionnaire about their feelings of empathy and unprofessionalism when delivering the message to Sarah.

John scenario. In the second scenario, we asked the managers to deliver disappointing news to a direct report, John, about transferring to an undesirable city. The scenario stated that John currently worked in the Minneapolis office, and was hoping for a transfer to the Los Angeles office to be closer to his family. However, we informed the managers that as part of a reorganization planning team, they had decided to transfer John to Atlanta instead, as the company had a strong talent pipeline in Los Angeles and needed to build one in Atlanta. We stated that since John was out of the country in a completely different time zone, they should draft an email message to him as they would really write it if they were

John's boss. The managers drafted the message and then completed a short questionnaire about their feelings of empathy and perceptions of the professionalism of expressing emotions toward John.

Measures

To assess compassion, we enlisted two independent coders to rate the managers' responses (1 = not at all compassionate, 7 = extremely compassionate). The two coders, who were blind to the experimental conditions and hypotheses, achieved good reliability, $ICC(1) = .56$, $ICC(2) = .72$, $p < .001$, and we averaged their scores to construct our dependent variable of compassion. We measured empathy and perceived unprofessionalism on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 = not at all and 7 = very much. To assess empathy, we asked the managers how they felt toward Sarah and John using Batson's (1987) scale, including "sympathetic" and "moved" ($\alpha = .74$ for Sarah and $.80$ for John). To assess perceived unprofessionalism, we asked the managers how they felt about expressing emotions in their notes to Sarah and John. We used three items adapted from measures of subjective norms designed to capture perceptions of social approval (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). We asked, "While writing the email, to what extent did you consider expressing compassion, but held back because you were concerned about..." The items were "Looking unprofessional," "Looking unpolished," and "Looking foolish" ($\alpha = .90$ for Sarah and $.78$ for John).

Results

Means and standard deviations by condition appear in Table 1.

Sarah scenario

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, an independent-samples *t*-test showed that managers in the economic schema condition expressed less compassion to Sarah ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.17$) than managers in the control condition ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(48) = -2.03$, $p < .05$. To examine whether empathy mediated this effect, we followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal steps.

First, our prior analyses showed that the independent variable (the economic schema manipulation) influenced the dependent variable (compassion). Second, we tested whether the independent variable influenced the mediating variable (empathy). An independent-samples *t*-test showed that managers in the economic schema condition reported lower feelings of empathy toward Sarah ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .71$) than managers in the control condition ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .90$), $t(48) = -2.03$, $p < .05$. Third, we examined whether the mediating variable predicted the dependent variable while controlling for the independent variable, and whether the effect of the independent variable decreased after adding the mediating variable. We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis of compassion (the dependent variable) on the economic schema manipulation (independent variable, Step 1) and empathy (mediating variable, Step 2). When we entered empathy, the effect of the economic schema manipulation on compassion decreased from $\beta = -.28$, $t(48) = -2.03$, $p < .05$ to a non-significant $\beta = -.19$, $t(47) = -1.40$, $p = .17$. In this analysis, empathy was a significant predictor of compassion, $\beta = .32$, $t(47) = 2.28$, $p < .05$, and variance explained in compassion increased significantly by 9% to $r^2 = .17$, $F(1,47) = 5.21$, $p < .05$.

We completed the test of mediation by using a bootstrap procedure (Stine, 1989) to test whether the sizes of the indirect effects of the economic schema manipulation on compassion through the mediators of empathy and perceived unprofessionalism were significantly different from zero. We started with the coefficients from our regression analyses and utilized a bootstrap procedure to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals based on 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample, as

Table 1
Experiment 1 means and standard deviations by condition.

Condition	Sarah Scenario			John Scenario		
	Compassion	Empathy	Perceived unprofessionalism	Compassion	Empathy	Perceived unprofessionalism
Economic schema	2.81 (1.17)	2.48 (.71)	1.28 (.48)	2.83 (1.34)	3.99 (.89)	2.26 (1.39)
Control	3.50 (1.22)	2.95 (.90)	1.49 (1.05)	3.79 (1.65)	3.85 (.90)	1.58 (.81)

recommended by methodologists and statisticians (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The size of the indirect effect from the full sample was $-.22$ ($-.47$ for economic schema \rightarrow empathy $\times .46$ for empathy \rightarrow compassion), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ($-.01, -.65$). Thus, in support of Hypothesis 2, reduced feelings of empathy mediated the negative effect of the economic schema on compassion.

However, there were no significant differences between conditions in the perceived unprofessionalism of expressing emotion to Sarah, $t(48) = -.90, p = .37$. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported in this scenario.

John scenario

Also consistent with Hypothesis 1, an independent-samples t -test showed that managers in the economic schema condition expressed less compassion toward John ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.34$) than managers in the control condition ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.65$), $t(48) = -2.24, p < .05$. To examine whether perceived appropriateness mediated these effects, we followed the procedures described above. Independent-samples t -tests showed that managers in the economic schema condition perceived expressing emotions as significantly more unprofessional ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.39$) than managers in the control condition ($M = 1.58, SD = .81$), $t(48) = 2.16, p < .05$. In a hierarchical regression analysis, when we entered perceived unprofessionalism, the effect of the economic schema manipulation on compassion decreased from $\beta = -.31, t(48) = -2.24, p < .05$ to a non-significant $\beta = -.22, t(47) = -1.56, p = .13$. In this analysis, perceived unprofessionalism was a significant predictor of compassion, $\beta = -.31, t(47) = -2.22, p < .05$, and variance explained in compassion increased significantly by 9% to $r^2 = .18, F(1,46) = 4.92, p < .05$. Using a bootstrap procedure, the size of the indirect effect from the full sample was $-.28$ (.69 for economic schema \rightarrow perceived unprofessionalism $\times -.41$ for perceived unprofessionalism \rightarrow compassion), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ($-.01, -.62$). Thus, in support of Hypothesis 3, increased perceptions of unprofessionalism mediated the negative effect of the economic schema on compassion.

However, there were no significant differences between conditions in empathy toward John, $t(48) = .56, p = .58$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported in this scenario.

Discussion

These results demonstrate that unobtrusively activating an economic schema can reduce compassion among working professional managers. They also provide initial evidence that activating an economic schema can reduce compassion by decreasing feelings of empathy and increasing perceptions of unprofessionalism. At the same time, however, these findings are subject to several major limitations. A key limitation is that the mediators did not operate in a similar manner across the two scenarios. In the first scenario, we found evidence of empathy as a mediator, but not unprofessionalism, and in the second study the reverse was true: evidence of unprofessionalism, but not empathy.

This was likely due to the qualitative differences between the scenarios themselves, which inadvertently created unfair compar-

isons (Cooper & Richardson, 1986) in each scenario for the experience of one—but not both—of the mediators. First, differences in empathy between participants are most likely to emerge in situations characterized by ambiguity (Batson, 1990). In the Sarah scenario, it was unclear whether Sarah was responsible for her plight of arriving late because she did not own a car. This ambiguity may have opened the door for the economic schema to reduce feelings of empathy for Sarah. In contrast, the John scenario may have created a stronger situation (Mischel, 1977): the transfer to Atlanta rather than the preferred location of Los Angeles was clearly not John's fault. As such, participants may have been more likely to empathize to some degree regardless of the schema activated, which is consistent with the higher means for empathy toward John than Sarah.

Second, differences in concerns about professionalism are most likely to emerge when communications are visible to an audience (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). In the Sarah scenario, since the meeting was occurring face-to-face, there was little risk that an audience would overhear the communication. This may explain the floor effect visible in the very low means for perceived unprofessionalism of expressing emotion to Sarah. Conversely, in the John situation, unprofessionalism was more of a concern because the communication was via email, which is a lasting, objective record of communication, carrying a greater risk than a dyadic conversation of being forwarded and shared with others (e.g., Maruping & Agarwal, 2004). This possibility of communications becoming visible to multiple audiences raises concerns about one's image (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Thus, the John scenario may have been structured to set the stage for unprofessionalism, but not empathy, to mediate the effect of the economic schema on compassion.

Alongside this issue was a second limitation of our first study: the fact that managers reported relatively low levels of empathy and perceived unprofessionalism overall across conditions, as well as low base rates of compassion. These patterns may be explained by the fact that we relied on low-involvement role-playing scenarios (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993), raising questions about whether the effects can be replicated in a more psychologically real, ecologically valid task in which participants believe that their messages will actually be delivered to victims of bad news.

Experiment 2

Our second study addresses these issues. To address the first concern, we created a highly involving and ostensibly real situation (Greenberg & Eskew, 1993) that would create conditions for participants to experience both empathy and unprofessionalism at the same time. This situation entailed having participants write letters conveying bad news that they believed would actually be delivered to a group of students. Moreover, to demonstrate that the effects of the economic schema were not an artifact of the Scrambled Sentence Task, we also used a different manipulation of the economic schema.

Method

Participants, design, and procedures

Eighty undergraduates at a private university in the Northeast U.S. volunteered to participate in this study. They were 55% male,

66% freshmen, 23% sophomores, 6% juniors, and 5% seniors. We manipulated economic schemas by using a storytelling exercise adapted from Reed, Aquino, and Levy (2007). We gave all participants a list of nine stimulus words and asked them to use these words to write a story, which is designed to make the concept implied by the words psychologically accessible and salient. The stimulus words differed across the two conditions to make economic schemas salient or not. In the economic schema condition ($n = 40$), the stimulus words emphasized economic logic: economically rational, logical, fiscally responsible, efficient, profitable, self-interested, cost-benefit analysis, businesslike, and professional. In the control condition ($n = 40$), the stimulus words were neutral: book, car, chair, computer, desk, pen, street, table, and trashcan. Following Reed et al. (2007), to prevent participants from ascertaining the true purpose of the study, we introduced the research as a study of people's handwriting styles as they tell stories.

After participants had finished writing the story using either the economic schema words or the control words, we asked them to read a memo about a recent development at the university's business school. The memo stated that the school was facing financial hardships and would need to take away \$3000 scholarships from three of its six honors thesis students. The memo stated that the students "do not yet know that they are losing their scholarships and may not be able to write honors theses as a result." The memo then explained that a committee was seeking peers to help draft a letter delivering news to the scholarship students:

The Undergraduate Scholarship Committee must now write letters to the scholarship recipients delivering the news. They are seeking input and guidance on the letter from current students, as research shows that letters from peers are most effective in delivering the news. We are now asking you to write a letter communicating the bad news to the students and then answer some questions. The Committee members will draw from your letters when they write the letter to the students.

Participants then wrote a letter to the scholarship students delivering the bad news.

Measures

Compassion expressed. We asked two undergraduate research assistants to code the letters for compassion by rating the extent to which participants expressed compassion to the scholarship students on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 = not at all and 7 = very much. The two raters demonstrated excellent reliability, $ICC(1) = .82$, $ICC(2) = .90$, $p < .001$.

Feelings of empathy. We used Batson's (1987) six-item adjective scale to measure participants' feelings of empathy toward the victims, including "sympathetic" and "softhearted" ($\alpha = .92$).

Perceived unprofessionalism. We assessed the extent to which participants felt that expressing emotion in the letter was inappropriate using the three items from the previous study, modified to match the task: "I felt that it would look unprofessional to share my true feelings in the letter," "I wanted to express more compassion, but I was worried that it would make me look foolish", and "It would reflect poorly on me if I said what I really felt in the letter" ($\alpha = .80$).

Results and discussion

Means and standard deviations by condition appear in Table 2. In support of Hypothesis 1, an independent-samples t -test showed that participants in the economic schema condition expressed less compassion in the letter ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.84$) than participants in

Table 2

Experiment 2 means and standard deviations by condition.

Condition	Compassion expressed	Feelings of empathy	Perceived unprofessionalism of expressing emotion
Economic schema	5.90 (1.84)	4.54 (1.20)	4.21 (1.53)
Control	6.63 (.93)	5.11 (1.24)	3.43 (1.55)

the control condition ($M = 6.63$, $SD = .93$), $t(78) = -2.22$, $p < .05$. To assess whether feelings of empathy and/or perceived unprofessionalism mediated the effects of the economic schema on compassion, we followed the same steps as in the previous experiment, adjusted to include two mediators.

First, our prior analyses showed that the economic schema manipulation reduced compassion. Second, an independent-samples t -test showed that participants in the economic schema condition reported lower feelings of empathy ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.20$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(78) = -2.06$, $p < .05$. An independent-samples t -test also showed that participants in the economic schema condition perceived expressing emotions as more unprofessional ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.53$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(78) = 2.27$, $p < .05$.

Third, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis of compassion on the economic schema manipulation (independent variable, Step 1) and feelings of empathy and perceived unprofessionalism (mediating variables, Step 2). As displayed in Table 3, when we entered the two mediators, the effect of the economic schema manipulation on compassion decreased from $\beta = -.24$, $t(78) = -2.22$, $p < .05$ to a non-significant $\beta = -.13$, $t(76) = -1.15$, $p = .25$. Compassion was significantly predicted both by feelings of empathy, $\beta = .23$, $t(76) = 2.09$, $p < .05$, and perceived unprofessionalism, $\beta = -.26$, $t(76) = -2.36$, $p < .05$.

We completed the test of mediation by using the bootstrap procedures described in the previous experiment. For empathy, the size of the indirect effect from the full sample was $-.15$ ($-.57$ for economic schema \rightarrow empathy \times .27 for empathy \rightarrow compassion), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ($-.02, -.40$). For perceived unprofessionalism, the size of the indirect effect from the full sample was $-.19$ (.78 for economic schema \rightarrow perceived unprofessionalism \times $-.24$ for perceived unprofessionalism \rightarrow compassion), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ($-.04, -.44$).

Thus, in support of Hypotheses 2 and 3, reduced feelings of empathy and enhanced perceptions of the unprofessionalism of expressing emotions mediated the negative effect of the economic schema on compassion expressed.

Discussion

These results demonstrate the unique contributions of the two mediating mechanisms. At the same time, however, these results are subject to a potential limitation: that empathy and perceived unprofessionalism may be consequences, rather than causes, of compassionate behavior. According to self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), people infer their attitudes by observing their behaviors. Thus, the economic schema may be reducing compassion through other mechanisms, and when participants see that they have expressed little compassion, this may cause them to interpret and report low empathy and high concerns about professionalism.

To rule out this alternative explanation, we conducted an additional study in which we counterbalanced the order of our

Table 3
Experiment 2 mediation analysis.

	DV: feelings of empathy		DV: perceived unprofessionalism		DV: compassion (Step 1)		DV: compassion (Step 2)	
	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Condition (0 = control, 1 = economic schema)	-.23	-2.06*	.25	2.27*	-.24	-2.22*	-.13	-1.15
Feelings of empathy							.23	2.09*
Perceived unprofessionalism of expressing emotion							-.26	-2.36*

Notes: The two mediators together increased variance explained in compassion significantly by 10% to $r^2 = .16$, $F(2,76) = 4.68$, $p = .01$. When we entered perceived appropriateness in Step 2 and empathy in Step 3, perceived appropriateness increased variance explained in compassion significantly by 5% to $r^2 = .11$, $F(1,77) = 4.78$, $p < .05$, and empathy increased variance explained significantly by an additional 5% to $r^2 = .16$, $F(1,76) = 4.38$, $p < .05$.

* $p < .05$.

measures, assigning half of our participants to report their feelings of empathy and perceptions of unprofessionalism before they took any action. Additionally, in this third study, we also tested Hypothesis 4, examining whether the effect of the economic schema on compassion is moderated by the consequences of the bad news, such that when these consequences are not economically relevant, the impact of the economic schema on compassion will be attenuated.

To test this hypothesis, we varied the consequences of the bad news, asking participants to tell victims that they were losing financial scholarships or losing a spot on a university soccer team. Finally, we measured compassion in a different way in this third experiment: as the amount of time that participants would take to meet with the recipients of bad news. Although past work on interactional justice suggests that deeply engaging compassionate treatment is often welcomed by recipients of bad news (Brockner, 1994; Margolis & Molinsky, 2008), it is also possible that some recipients prefer a less psychologically intense form of compassion, which might simply involve the performer showing concern by spending more time with them, which communicates that they are valued. Indeed, past research suggests that taking additional time to meet with the victim of bad news reflects feeling of compassion and provides greater opportunities to understand the victim's distress and offer help (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998).

Experiment 3

Method

Participants, design, and procedures

The participants were 137 undergraduate economics students at a private university in the Northeast US. They were 51% male, 3.6% freshmen, 33.6% sophomores, 32.1% juniors, and 30.7% seniors, having taken an average of 3.35 economic courses ($SD = 2.89$; all had taken at least one previously).

We used a 2 (schema: economic, control) \times 2 (consequences of bad news: economic, non-economic) factorial design with both factors varied between subjects. We manipulated the economic schema with a shortened version of the Scrambled Sentence Task from Experiment 1. All participants unscrambled 15 sentences; in the control condition, all 15 sentences contained neutral words, and in the economic schema condition, ten of the sentences contained economic words.

We then presented participants with a situation in which they had to deliver bad news with either economic or non-economic consequences. The economic consequences scenario was adapted from Experiment 2: two students were losing their financial scholarships, and participants needed to communicate the bad news to them. The non-economic consequences scenario still required the delivery of upsetting news, but it had no financial implications. Participants played the role of the university's varsity soccer coach,

who would be cutting five walk-on players from the soccer team. These players were not formally recruited, and although they worked hard during the offseason and played well during the pre-season, they were not competitive enough to earn one of the limited spots on the team.

After participants read either the scholarship or soccer scenario, they completed a measure of compassion and of our mediating mechanisms. We counterbalanced the order of the two sets of measures, randomly assigning half of the participants to report their feelings of empathy and perceptions of unprofessionalism before they responded behaviorally, and the other half to respond behaviorally first and then complete the measures of mediating mechanisms, as in the previous experiments. If the effects were robust even when participants completed the mediators before they had the opportunity to express compassion, this would rule out the rival explanation from self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) that our mediators are a consequence rather than a cause of compassion.

Measures

Compassion. We measured compassion by asking the participants to imagine that they were going to deliver the bad news to one of the students in person. "Your task is to communicate that message in a face-to-face meeting with one of the students. You have a busy schedule, but can fit the meeting into one of the following time slots." Building upon past work suggesting that compassion is a function of time spent with the victim of negative news (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998), we asked participants to indicate how much time they would dedicate between 0 and 75 min, with more time indicating more compassion expressed.

Feelings of empathy. We measured participants' feelings of empathy toward the victims using three items from Batson's (1987) adjective scale, including "sympathetic" and "moved" ($\alpha = .75$).

Perceived unprofessionalism. We measured participants' perceptions of the inappropriateness of expressing emotions using three items from the previous studies, including "I wanted to express more compassion, but I was worried that it would make me look..." The items were "unprofessional," "unpolished," and "foolish" ($\alpha = .74$).

Results and discussion

Means and standard deviations by condition appear in Table 4. A 2 \times 2 ANOVA with compassion as the dependent variable indicated no significant main effect of the schema prime, $F(1, 133) = .29$, $p = .59$, a significant main effect of the consequences of the bad news, $F(1, 133) = 8.74$, $p < .01$, and a significant interaction effect of the schema prime and the consequences of the bad news, $F(1, 133) = 4.41$, $p < .05$. To interpret this interaction effect, we conducted simple effects. The economic schema significantly

decreased compassion when the bad news had economic consequences, $F(1,133) = 3.95$, $p < .05$, but not when the bad news had no economic consequences, $F(1,133) = 1.43$, $p = .24$. When participants had to convey that students would be losing financial scholarships, activating their economic schemas significantly reduced the amount of time they were willing to spend with a student by more than 5 min (see Table 4). However, when participants had to convey that students would be cut from the soccer team, activating their economic schemas did not significantly influence the amount of time they were willing to devote. These patterns replicated when we controlled for measurement order, which had no significant main effect on compassion, $F(1,129) = .02$, $p = .89$, nor any two-way interaction effects with the schema manipulation, $F(1,129) = .81$, $p = .37$) or the consequences manipulation, $F(1,129) = .45$, $p = .50$, nor a three-way interaction effect with the schema and consequences manipulations, $F(1,129) = .11$, $p = .74$.

To examine the mediating mechanisms, we conducted 2×2 ANOVAs. With empathy as a dependent variable, there was no significant main effect of the schema prime, $F(1,133) = 1.58$, $p = .21$, a significant main effect of the consequences of the bad news, $F(1,133) = 24.78$, $p < .001$, and a marginally significant interaction effect of the schema prime and the consequences of the bad news, $F(1,133) = 3.41$, $p < .07$. Simple effects showed that the economic schema significantly decreased empathy when the bad news had economic consequences, $F(1,133) = 5.86$, $p < .05$, but not when the bad news had no economic consequences, $F(1,133) = .28$, $p = .60$. Once again, measurement order had no significant main or interactive effects.

However, with perceived unprofessionalism as the dependent variable, there were no significant main effects of the schema prime, $F(1,133) = .19$, $p = .66$ or the consequences manipulation, $F(1,133) = 1.53$, $p = .22$, nor a significant interaction effect, $F(1,133) = 1.61$, $p = .21$. Since our manipulations did not affect perceived unprofessionalism, this was ruled out as a mediator.

Within the economic consequences conditions, empathy fully mediated the effect of the economic schema on compassion. When we entered empathy in a regression analysis, the effect of the economic schema manipulation on compassion decreased from $\beta = -.22$ to a non-significant $\beta = -.15$, $t(64) = -1.15$, $p = .26$. Compassion was significantly predicted by feelings of empathy, $\beta = .28$, $t(64) = 2.16$, $p < .05$. We completed the test of mediation by using the bootstrap procedures described in the prior experiments. The size of the indirect effect of the economic schema manipulation through empathy on compassion in delivering bad news with economic consequences from the full sample was -2.36 ($-.64$ for economic schema \rightarrow empathy \times 3.69 for empathy \rightarrow compassion), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ($-.42, -6.32$).²

General discussion

Taken together, our studies indicate that unobtrusively priming economic schemas decreases the compassion that individuals express to others, and that this effect is mediated by dampened feelings of empathy and heightened perceptions of the unprofessionalism of expressing emotions. We find convergent evidence for these effects across multiple studies using different

samples, tasks, manipulations, and measures. Together, these studies offer important insight into research on procedural justice, schemas, emotion expression, and prosocial behavior.

Theoretical contributions

Justice researchers have shown a growing interest in the experiences of performers called upon to deliver bad news (e.g., Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005; Wright & Barling, 1998). Our contribution to this line of work lies in documenting the impact of economic schemas on compassionate treatment. We show that the mere activation of economic concepts can be sufficient to dampen empathy and raise concerns about the unprofessionalism of expressing emotion, thereby discouraging individuals from expressing compassion to others. Our studies demonstrate how the simple and subtle activation of an economic schema can have a surprisingly significant impact on the degree of compassion.

Our research also contributes to the literature on prosocial behavior. Traditionally, research on prosocial behavior starts from the premise that people who express compassion expect to achieve a more favorable image in the eyes of others (e.g., Flynn & Lake, 2008; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). Our research suggests that the reverse may be true for individuals whose economic schema is made active. From an economic mindset, individuals feel concerned about “looking bad by doing good”; that is, from an economic point of view, they believe that prosocial, compassionate behavior will be perceived as unprofessional and inappropriate in the eyes of others. Thus, by enhancing perceptions of the potential costs of engaging in prosocial activity, the economic schema reverses traditional assumptions about the relationship between prosocial behavior and positive evaluations from others.

In doing so, our research offers a theoretical integration and empirical extension of knowledge about the processes through which economic concepts can reduce prosocial behavior. Researchers have identified both private, intrapsychic (Kay & Ross, 2003; Kay et al., 2004; Vohs et al., 2006) and public, image-related (Pillutla & Chen, 1999) mechanisms through which economic concepts can decrease prosocial behavior. However, little research has explored these two mechanisms in tandem or tested their joint contributions. For example, research suggests that economic frames can curtail prosocial behavior by shifting perceived norms (Pillutla & Chen, 1999), and our studies suggest that these frames may also operate by reducing the empathy that individuals experience for the people affected by their actions.

In addition, researchers have assumed that when the norm of self-interest is activated, empathy is maintained but image concerns prevent individuals from acting prosocially on their feelings of empathy (Holmes et al., 2002; Miller, 1999). However, these mechanisms have rarely been tested, and recent research calls into question whether these effects are in fact driven by the norm of self-interest or other economic concepts (Simpson, Irwin, & Lawrence, 2006). Our studies inform this literature by showing that activating economic concepts can reduce feelings of empathy, not only the willingness to act on these feelings. Further, we make an empirical contribution to this literature by extending beyond studies with undergraduate students (e.g., Frank et al., 1993; Gandal et al., 2005; Liberman et al., 2004; Vohs et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2011), showing that economic concepts can even influence the responses of professional managers. Moreover, our research also places an important boundary condition on the effects of the economic schema on compassionate behavior, demonstrating in Study 3 that the effect was limited to contexts in which the consequences of the bad news itself was economically relevant.

Finally, our studies contribute to work on emotion expression in organizations. A long line of research on emotion management

² We also conducted mediated moderation analyses to examine whether empathy mediated the interactive effects of the schema and the consequences of bad news on compassion, following the steps recommended by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). In a regression analysis, when we entered empathy, the coefficient for the interaction term decreased from $\beta = -.29$ to a non-significant $\beta = -.22$, $t(136) = -1.65$, $p = .10$. Empathy was a significant predictor of compassion, $\beta = .28$, $t(136) = 3.13$, $p < .01$. In a bootstrap analysis, the size of the indirect effect from the full sample was -2.03 ($-.66$ for the interactive effects on empathy \times 3.07 for empathy \rightarrow compassion), and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ($-.12, -5.38$).

Table 4
Experiment 3 means and standard deviations by condition.

Condition	Compassion expressed	Feelings of empathy	Perceived unprofessionalism of expressing emotion
Economic schema, financial scholarships (<i>n</i> = 30)	24.50 (9.22)	4.72 (1.05)	3.28 (1.48)
Control schema, financial scholarships (<i>n</i> = 35)	30.00 (15.00)	5.27 (1.11)	3.70 (1.51)
Economic schema, soccer team (<i>n</i> = 35)	22.71 (14.72)	4.16 (.94)	3.29 (1.24)
Control schema, soccer team (<i>n</i> = 37)	19.46 (7.80)	4.05 (1.06)	3.08 (1.47)

(e.g., Côté, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Zapf, 2002) and emotional labor (Grandey, 2003; Morris & Feldman, 1996) has documented the ways in which organizational and professional norms and display rules prohibit individuals from expressing emotions. Our research highlights another important influence on emotion expression that has not previously been documented: the mental schemas elicited by situational cues. In particular, our research highlights the importance of an economic schema in influencing what emotions are appropriate to express. Our results suggest that when individuals are in an economic mindset, they deem the expression of emotion as unprofessional and inappropriate, and fear that they will be perceived as foolish for outwardly expressing compassion and interpersonal sensitivity. Although organizational norms and practices have been featured in past work as the source of emotional control, our work highlights a psychological mechanism influencing emotional expression that can be turned on by subtle cues in the ambient environment.

Limitations and future directions

Our research must be qualified in light of several limitations that point to valuable directions for future research. The most noteworthy limitation is that our studies relied primarily on role-playing designs, maximizing internal validity at the expense of external validity (McGrath, 1981; see also Greenberg & Eskew, 1993). These studies took place in isolated experimental settings in which the impact of our economic schema primes may have depended on the absence of other cues to shape performers' responses. Future research might extend these findings and insights into field settings to enhance external validity. For example, researchers might conduct quasi-experiments in organizations where economic schemas are naturally activated, such as in a hospital that shifts its mission from caring for patients to maximizing profits (Weinberg, 2003). It is worth noting, however, that we observed consistent effects across the three studies merely by asking people to unscramble sentences and write stories. In organizational settings, signals cueing an economic schema may be even stronger. Although priming in experimental settings is low on external validity, one could argue that it was a conservative test compared to the more powerful and multifaceted economic cues that people are exposed to on a daily basis outside of the laboratory. Nevertheless, it will be important to examine the salience of economic schemas in different organizational settings.

Moreover, when delivering bad news in real organizational settings, the effects of our two mechanisms—empathy and unprofessionalism—will likely be far more pronounced than in a role-playing exercise. We found mixed evidence for these mechanisms with our experimental manipulations. In Study 1, we found evidence for both mechanisms, although in different scenarios. In Study 2, both factors worked in tandem to mediate the effects of the economic schema on compassion. Finally, in Study 3, empathy played a mediating role, but unprofessionalism did not, most likely because the outcome measure in that study – the amount of time

spent with the person – did not lend itself to professionalism concerns when delivering the message, as writing a note to participants did in Study 2. These results suggest that these two psychological mechanisms are not necessarily stable across all situations. Rather, whether they mediate the effect of the economic schema on compassion may depend on the nature of the news being delivered and the context in which compassion is expressed.

Moreover, with respect to generalizability, it is unclear whether the effects will extend to compassion expressed in person. We recommend examining how the economic schema influences face-to-face expressions of compassion, where verbal and nonverbal cues may be richer than in writing, a communication medium that often carries a narrower range of emotion (e.g., Maruping & Agarwal, 2004). In addition, it would be interesting to examine whether the effects of the economic schema extend beyond business situations to influence the compassion that medical professionals express in communicating serious health problems to patients or the compassion that military, police, and safety officials express in communicating information about accidents or deaths. We also feel it would be informative to examine how recipients react to the compassion expressed.

Future research can also enhance our understanding of the economic schema by testing a more complete and complex model of the relationship between activation of the economic schema and compassionate behavior. In the present study, we examined empathy and unprofessionalism as mediators of this relationship. However, it's possible that there are additional micro-mediators (Cook & Campbell, 1979) that mediate the effects of the economic schema on the two mediators that we examined in this study. For example, in describing the hypotheses of the present study, we explained how when the economic schema is activated, performers' perceptions will be heavily influenced by notions of rationality and efficiency, concepts that are not always in the forefront of their minds. Future research might test these micro mediators more directly and, in doing so, provide a more complex understanding of the relationship between the economic schema and compassion in organizational settings.

Future research might also strengthen the evidence for mediation by manipulating the mediators using blockage and enhancement designs (MacKinnon et al., 2007). For example, by experimentally varying opportunities for empathy (e.g., different levels of victim need and distress) and professionalism (e.g., public vs. private messages), researchers can examine whether preventing the mediators from operating reduces the effect of the economic schema on compassion, and whether activating the mediators strengthens the effect.

It may also be worthwhile for future research to investigate additional moderators that may counteract the negative effect of economic schema activation on compassionate behavior. For example, there may be conditions under which activating the economic schema elicits psychological reactance, motivating individuals to engage in prosocial behavior in direct and deliberate violation of the implied norms associated with the concept (Masor,

Hornstein, & Tobin, 1973). We may witness this type of reactance when strong personal values or occupational norms emphasize helping. Along these lines, recent research by Simpson and Willer (2008) suggests that individuals with prosocial or altruistic values may be less sensitive to the effect of the economic schema.

Another potential “antidote” to the economic schema might be the activation of other self-schemas such as the relational schema. For example, Pillutla and Chen (1999) found that when social dilemmas were relational rather than economic, people operated based on an implicit norm of cooperation, demonstrating greater willingness to contribute to a collective fund. Other studies have shown that relational schemas can enrich the processing of social information (for reviews, see Andersen & Chen, 2002; Baldwin, 1992; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O'Brien, 2006), which may open the door to empathy and focus attention on the recipient's well-being rather than on norms of professional conduct. To develop a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how schemas affect compassion, researchers should examine whether the relational schema directly increases compassion and serves a moderating role in buffering against the negative effects of the economic schema.

Conclusion

The necessity to deliver bad news is an unfortunate reality of organizational life, especially in an economic downturn. So too are persistent references to the economy. In this study, we examined the relationship between these two concepts, documenting how—and why—exposure to an economic schema reduces compassion when delivering bad news. The results of the present study are sobering in terms of the challenges of achieving compassionate and interpersonal treatment when delivering bad news. Nevertheless, the results provide a useful framework to help guide future research in this theoretically and practically important domain. It is our hope that future work can further elaborate the economic schema and, in doing so, discover ways to attenuate its detrimental impact on compassionate behavior.

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