# Needs and Generosity: Does perception of needs influence donating behavior?

S. Bansal[1], M. Arora[2], I. Chauhan[3], A. Dahiya[4], S. M. Desai[5], G. Dhingra[6], S. Fatima[7], S. Gupta[8], J. Kapoor[9], I. Malik[10], D. Ramadurai[11], R. Repczuk[12], H. V. Singh[13], S. Yadav[14]
[1]*State University of New York at New Paltz*
[2]*Indira Gandhi National Open University, India*
[3]*K.R.Mangalam University, India*
[4]*Ashoka University, India*
[5,11]*King's College London, England*
[6,13]*Amity University, Noida, India*
[7]*Jain University, India*
[8]*University of Birmingham, England*
[9]*Delhi University, India*
[10]*SGT University, India*
[12]*Instituto de Psicologia Baseada em Evidências (InPBE), Brazil*
[14]*University of Delhi, India*

***Abstract*—Generosity is a key facet of prosocial behavior. While previous research has explored factors influencing generosity, limited studies have examined the interaction between the salience of personal needs and the perceived urgency of recipient needs. This study investigated how perceptions of a recipient's financial need and an individual's own financial concerns influence generosity (helpful behavior) in a hypothetical donation task. Participants (N = 120) were assigned to one of four conditions, where the perceived financial needs of a hypothetical recipient (high or low) and the salience of participants' own financial concerns (highlighted or not highlighted) were manipulated. We hypothesized that participants will be more generous when they perceive the other person as being in greater need, and when their own need is not highlighted. However, if the participant is reminded of their own personal need, their generosity will decrease. A two-way ANOVA revealed that participants donated significantly more when the recipient's financial need was high, regardless of whether their own financial concerns were highlighted. Furthermore, highlighting participants' own personal financial needs did not significantly affect donation amounts, contrary to our hypothesis. This suggests that personal financial concerns may not play as strong a role in generosity. This study highlights the role of perceived recipient need in prosocial decision-making, and suggests directions for future research, including real-world monetary incentives and stronger manipulations of personal financial concern.**

***Index Terms*—generosity, prosocial behavior, ANOVA, donation**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social psychologists have defined prosocial behaviour as any voluntary behaviour that is beneficial to society or to other people, and which does not directly benefit the agent but benefits others (Sanderson & McQuilkin, 2017; Twenge et al., 2007). Prosocial behaviour includes, but is not limited to, acts like cooperation, sharing, and helping, and has been linked to positive emotions and overall well-being (Helliwell et al., 2017; Manesi et al., 2017; Paulus & Moore, 2017). Generosity, a closely related concept, refers to giving resources (such as time, money, or effort) to others without expecting material rewards or reciprocation (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Therefore, generosity can be considered a subset of prosocial behavior, distinguished by its emphasis on resource-based altruism.

However, while all generous acts are prosocial, not all acts of prosociality qualify as generous. For example, being emotionally supportive or helping someone

gather papers that have been dropped is prosocial but may not necessarily count as generous unless there has been some considerable personal sacrifice (Grant & Gino, 2010). Generosity is likely to carry a moral meaning and typically accompanies altruism and selflessness (Nowak & Roch, 2007). However, data increasingly indicate that the two cons tructs are multidimensional and are under the aegis of cognitive, emotional, and contextual variables (Batson, 1991; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003).

**Perceived Need and Prosocial Responding**

The perceived need of the recipient is considered a prime motivator in prosocial behavior, especially in contexts such as charitable giving and donations. Particularly, individuals are more likely to help more when the perceived need of the recipient is great (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). However, mere knowledge that a person needs something is often not sufficient unless the need is psychologically tagged. This perceived need must be salient and emotionally compelling for generosity to occur (Basil et al., 2008; Small et al., 2007). While objective measures of perceived need play a role, it is the psychological interpretation—the *sense* that a recipient truly requires help—that triggers prosocial behavior (Basil et al., 2008).

From attribution theory, generosity is felt more when need is attributed to be uncontrollable or unfair (Weiner, 1980). Specifically, generosity is greater when the witness attributes misfortune to uncontrollable external agents such as illness or accident, but less when need is due to controllable self-caused factors such as inconsiderate decisions (Rudolph et al., 2004). Studies of philanthropic decisions demonstrate that givers are far less likely to contribute when recipients are viewed as blameworthy for their circumstances, and therefore deservingness concerns are a determining factor in being generous (Wang et al., 2021; Uhlmann et al., 2011).

**Empathy and other moderating variables effecting prosocial behavior**

Empathy is a key emotional process linking perceived need and charitable action. The *empathy-altruism hypothesis* predicts that empathetic concern produces prosocial behavior to relieve others suffering irrespective of self-benefit (Batson, 1991). The more the perceived need, the more empathic the reaction—a pattern illustrated in experiments showing more donations when recipients' struggle is vividly communicated (Batson et al., 1981). Remarkably, empathy can even override responsibility attributions—when donors empathize strongly with recipients, they will donate even if recipients are partly blamed for their situation (Lee et al., 2014).

Although perceived need takes priority, several other variables modulate prosocial responses. Emotional salience—e.g., *the identifiable victim effect*—strongly enhances generosity (Small et al., 2007). Donors' beliefs about the *efficacy of their contribution* also shape generosity; individuals are more likely to give when they believe that their donation will have a tangible impact (Cryder et al., 2013). Further, social norms have a strong influence: donations are higher when donors believe that peers expect or do the same. Individuals also have a tendency to associate sharing with happiness from a tender age (Paulus & Moore, 2017). Cross-cultural studies suggest that people are more inclined to give to members of their own social group, highlighting how group identity influences generosity (Duclos & Barasch, 2014). Personality traits also play a role; agreeableness and honesty-humility, for example, have been linked to greater generosity in economic games (Zhao et al., 2016). However, when financial stakes are high, generosity may follow different patterns (Dwyer et al., 2023).

It is important to factor in that these studies are hypothetical and may not apply to real life scenarios. It remains unclear how applicable these studies are in the real world, given the heterogeneity among studies and the fact that the stakes involved are often low (Dwyer et al., 2023). In addition, a question that remains unanswered is whether one's own financial concerns or the needs of the hypothetical recipients influences how generous one would be during money allocation games.

**The present study**

The present study sought to bridge this gap and examined how individuals' own financial concerns and recipients' financial needs influenced generosity in a charity task. The research question was as follows:

How do perceptions of another person's need and personal financial concerns influence generosity? There were two independent variables (IVs): perceived needs of the recipient (high or low) and salience of personal needs of the respondents (highlighted or not highlighted). The dependent variable (DV) was the amount of money from a hypothetical study bonus that respondents were willing to donate. It was hypothesized that respondents would be more likely to donate more when recipients' financial needs were high, but when their own personal financial concerns were not highlighted.

Specifically, this study aims to examine how perceptions of another person's needs and personal financial concerns influence generosity. By investigating both the psychological and economic dimensions of giving, this research seeks to further understand when and why individuals choose to be generous.

## II. METHODS

### Sample

The data of 120 participants (74 female; 46 male) was included in the final analysis. Figure 1 summarizes the gender distribution, country of origin, and financial background of the participants. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling by trained research interns across various countries. Each intern collected responses from 4–6 participants through in-person sessions conducted in educational and community settings. Participants were not compensated monetarily but were debriefed about the purpose of the study. Ethical guidelines for informed consent and voluntary participation were followed.

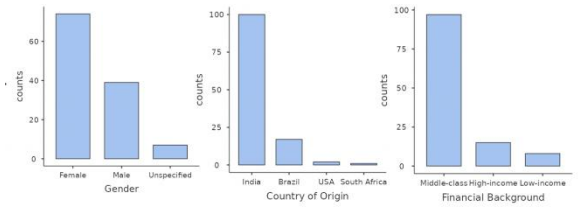


*Figure 1: Demographic details including gender, country of origin, and financial backgrounf of sample*

### Design and Procedure

The experiment employed a 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design, with two independent variables: personal need salience (highlighted vs. non-highlighted) and recipient need (high vs. low). The dependent variable was the amount of a hypothetical $100 bonus participants were willing to donate to a person described in a vignette. The study was conducted in person using Qualtrics software, with instructions delivered by the experimenters in a standardized script to ensure consistency across data collection sites.

Firstly, participants confirmed consent (see Appendix A). Following this, they provided demographic details, including age, gender, country of origin, and self-rated income background (low-income, middle-class, or high-income). Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two personal need salience conditions. In the highlighted condition, participants were prompted to reflect on their own financial circumstances through three open-ended questions: (1) "Have you ever struggled to afford something essential? Describe your experience," (2) "What are your current financial concerns, if any?" and (3) "How do financial challenges impact your daily decisions?" These questions aimed to activate personal financial need salience. In contrast, participants in the non-highlighted condition answered neutral questions unrelated to financial concerns: (1) "Describe your recent trip to a grocery store," (2) "What are your favorite activities during your free time?" and (3) "What kind of music or movies do you enjoy?"

Following this initial manipulation, participants received a second experimental manipulation in the form of a vignette describing a hypothetical individual named Alex—a gender-neutral 21-year-old student. Participants were randomly assigned to read either a high recipient need or low recipient need version of the vignette. Participants in the high recipient needs condition received the following scenario—"Imagine you meet Alex, a 21-year-old student who has been struggling financially. Alex comes from a low-income family and has lost his part-time job recently. They have been unable to afford basic necessities like food and rent. They are currently relying on small loans from friends and are anxious about how they will make ends meet. They have been skipping meals and cutting down on essentials just to get by". Participants in the low recipient needs condition received the following scenario – "Imagine you meet Alex, a 21-year-old student who has some financial difficulties but is managing. Alex comes from a middle-class family and sometimes must budget carefully to afford

entertainment or extra purchases, but their essential needs like food and rent are covered. They occasionally look for ways to save money but do not feel financially strained".

After reading the vignette, participants completed the generosity task, where they were informed that they had received a hypothetical participation bonus of $100. They were asked to indicate how much of that amount they would be willing to donate to Alex. This decision was recorded using a digital slider ranging from $0 to $100.

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, two manipulation check items were administered immediately after the generosity task. Participants rated (1) how financially struggling they perceived Alex to be, and (2) how concerned they were about their own financial situation while making the donation decision. Both items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 7 ("extremely").

At the conclusion of the session, participants were debriefed regarding the purpose of the study and the existence of multiple experimental conditions (see Appendix B).

### Analysis

The data was analyzed using a two-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the main effects of personal need salience and recipient need, as well as their interaction on the amount donated. Independent samples *t*-tests were used to assess the success of the personal and recipient need manipulations based on responses to the manipulation check items.

## III. RESULTS

The results from the ANOVA indicated that there was a significant main effect for perceived need, F (1, 116) = 20.89, p <.001. Participants in the high-need condition donated more ($M$ = 67.5, $SD$ = 23.6 when personal needs were highlighted; $M$ = 55.5, $SD$ = 33.9 when personal needs were not highlighted) than those in the low-need condition ($M$ = 35.9, $SD$ = 18.8 when personal needs were highlighted; $M$ = 41.5, $SD$ = 30.5 when personal needs were not highlighted).

There was no significant main effect of salience of personal needs on amount donated, $F$ = (1, 116) = .42, $p$ = 0.52. Furthermore, the effect of the interaction of perceived need and salience of personal needs approached significance, $F$ (1, 116) = 3.13, $p$ = 0.07. This indicates that while perceived need of the recipient influenced the amount of money participants donated, their own personal financial needs did not.

Table I summarizes the amount of money donated in the 4 conditions.

*Table 1 Amount of money donated by participants during the generosity task*

| Perceived Need | Salience of Personal Needs | N | Mean | Median | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High | Highlighted | 29 | 67.5 | 70 | 23.6 |
| | Not Highlighted | 32 | 55.5 | 50.0 | 33.9 |
| Low | Highlighted | 34 | 35.9 | 30.0 | 18.8 |
| | Not Highlighted | 25 | 41.5 | 30 | 30.5 |

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, participants were asked to rate how financially struggling they perceived Alex (the recipient) to be on a 7-pointer scale. As expected, those in the high-need condition (M = 5.69, SD = 1.26) saw Alex as needing more help than those in the low-need condition (M = 3.68, SD = 1.25). This finding suggests that the manipulation of recipient need was successful and perceived as intended by participants.

Participants also rated how much they were thinking about their own financial situation. Those in the "highlighted" condition (M = 3.21, SD = 1.57) reported slightly higher awareness of their personal financial needs compared to those in the "not highlighted" condition (M = 3.16, SD = 1.56). However, this difference was minimal, indicating that the manipulation intended to increase personal financial salience may not have had a substantial impact on participants' self-focus during the task.

## IV. DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to understand whether financial needs—both of the recipient and donor—affects generosity, operationalized in terms of hypothetical

monetary donation. In line with expectations, those p articipants who read a high-need recipient vignette donated

more compared to those provided with a low-

need situation. This finding is in line with previous research that shows individuals are more likely to be prosocial when the recipient's suffering is made salient and morally engaging (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007; Lee, Winterich, & Ross, 2014). Highlighting the recepients need often elicits empathy and perceived urgency, leading to more generous behavior (Batson, 1991; Andreoni, 1990).

However, contrary to our prediction, salience of participants personal financial needs did not significantly influence donation. While it was hypothesized that participants primed to reflect on their own financial own struggles would donate less compared to those who had not been similarly primed, the data revealed no statistically significant effect. Additionally, manipulation check scores suggest that this prime may not have sufficiently increased self-focus to influence decision-making. One explanation may be that the abstract character of the task (provision of a fictional $100) diluted the psychological significance of participants' own economic status, so that it became less salient during decision-making. Additionally, as established by past studies, empathy for others in need may sometimes prevail over self-centered considerations, especially when the other's suffering is construed as severe or disproportionate (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Cialdini et al., 1997).

Furthermore, the lack of significant interaction effect between perceived need and personal financial salience was unexpected but telling. While perceived need alone exercised a strong effect, the absence of interaction suggests that donor self-concern may not always come into play as a moderator in presence of salient need cues. This could suggest a threshold model of prosocial decision-making, wherein sufficiently high recipient need dominates donor self-interest—especially in low-stakes, hypothetical choices.

These findings also strike a chord with broader debates in prosocial behavior research regarding the conflict between altruism and self-interest. Some theoretical frameworks, for example, the arousal: cost–reward model (Piliavin et al., 1981), emphasize the role of *cost-benefit analysis* in explaining helping behavior, suggesting that individuals are more likely to help when the perceived rewards (e.g., relief from personal distress or social approval) outweigh the costs. On the contrary, other theories have argued for a more internalized, affectively based response to need. For example, Batson's empathy–altruism hypothesis (2011) posits that empathic concern rather than calculation drives prosocial behavior. According to this view, individuals help others not out of self-interest but because, in seeing someone else suffer, most especially when the other's need is salient and highly humanized, they genuinely experience empathic feelings. Our findings validate the latter: recipient need appears to activate generosity regardless of small self-focused primes.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One important limitation of the present study is the reliance on hypothetical donation tasks. While useful for experimental control, they may not capture the psychological richness or affective valence of actual donation decisions. Future research could utilize behavioral economic games with real cash rewards to more closely approximate actual giving. The manipulation employed to induce participants' own financial concerns also may need to be revised. Qualitative measures or physiological markers (e.g., skin conductance, heart rate variability) can be used to test whether or not such primes prove effective in the future.

Of note also is the demographic composition of the sample, which included participants from a variety of national and economic backgrounds. Such diversity adds to ecological validity but may also add variance in financial norms and perceptions of need. Cross-cultural differences in prosocial norms and definitions of financial strain could be explored in follow-up research to establish the boundary conditions of these effects

## V. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on generosity by showing that perceived recipient financial need has a robust influence on prosocial behavior, even under conditions in which donor self-interest is subtly activated. While the personal needs manipulation was not significant, the extremely strong impact of recipient need underscores the role of perceived deservingness and moral salience in

motivating generosity. These findings have implications for policy interventions and philanthropic messaging aimed at increasing prosociality: highlighting specific and urgent needs may be more successful than an appeal to generalized moral duty.

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**Conflicts of Interest**: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

APPENDIX A

CONSENT SCRIPT

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring generosity and prosocial behavior that will take **25 minutes to participate**. Your participation is **voluntary**, and you may withdraw at any time without consequence. You will be required to participate in a short activity assessing prosocial tendencies in which you will be answering a few questions. Your responses will remain **anonymous** and used solely for research purposes. I would especially like to highlight that we are not collecting any identifiers and the responses you fill cannot be traced back to you. There are no known risks associated with participation. While there are **no direct benefits** associated with participation, your input will contribute to understanding human behavior. **Do you wish to participate?**

APPENDIX B

DEBRIEFING SCRIPT

Thank you for participating in this study! The **purpose** of this research was to examine how generosity is influenced by perceptions of another person's need and by personal financial considerations.

You were asked to make decisions about how much money to share with another individual under different conditions. The **research design** was that participants were allocated to either reminded of their own financial needs or were given a neutral prompt. Then they were presented with the situation of a person, Alex, who was either financially needy or stable. Post that all participants were given an option to donate a part of their hypothetical $100USD bonus prize.

Our **hypothesis** predicts that participants will be more likely to donate more when the recipient need is high but personal need is not highlighted. We are interested in understanding whether people tend to be more generous when they focus on others' needs and whether reminders of personal financial concerns reduce generosity.

Your responses will contribute to a broader understanding of prosocial behavior and the psychological factors that influence generosity. Please note that there were no right or wrong answers—our goal was simply to explore patterns in decision-making. Please feel free to **ask any questions or concerns**. Additionally, we kindly ask that you do not share details about the study with others who might participate, as prior knowledge could influence their responses.

Thank you again for your time and contribution to this research!

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