

GRAY MATTER

How to Get the Wealthy to Donate

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Wealthy people are selfish jerks. So are their children.

That is the implication, at least, of a batch of recent psychological studies. In a 2015 study, for example, preschoolers were told that they had earned enough tokens for “a really great prize.” They could keep the tokens for themselves or share the tokens with children at a local hospital who were too sick to come to the lab. Children from wealthier families kept more tokens for themselves.

Likewise, in 2010, researchers found that college students’ willingness to give to charity was tied to their wealth: Students from well-off families thought people should donate a smaller percentage of their annual income. And across a wide range of ages, wealthy adults tended to share less of what they had with others.

Why is this? One explanation is that because money allows people to achieve their own goals without depending on others, it cultivates a mind-set of self-sufficiency that is at odds with a charitable outlook.

Consider: If you don’t have much money, you have to ask your friends and family to help you move your belongings from one apartment to another — which means you will probably have to help them when they move. But if you have money, you are likely to leave your friends and family out of it and hire professional movers. Over time, such experiences enable wealthier people to more easily embrace notions of independence and personal control over life. Less affluent people, meanwhile, must stay attuned to others’ needs and goals in order to satisfy their own.

From the first years of their children’s lives, parents of different socioeconomic status prepare their kids for these different social worlds. As researchers have shown, wealthier parents tend to teach their children to stand out as individuals and pursue their own goals, while less affluent parents tend to teach their kids to prioritize the needs of the group. It’s no wonder the wealthy are less inclined toward charitable giving.

But what if we changed the way we talked about charity, so that it better resonated with how wealthy people think of themselves? Would they donate more? To find out, we conducted a series of studies, the results of which were published this month in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

In one experiment, we teamed up with a poverty-relief organization called the Life You Can Save. For three months, we manipulated the messages that appeared on its website to emphasize either common goals (“Let’s Save a Life Together”) or individual achievement (“You = Life-Saver”). We tracked the behavior of 185 website visitors whose annual income ranged from less than \$10,000 to more than \$2.5 million. When wealthier people — those with incomes higher than \$90,000 — were greeted by the message that framed charitable giving as an opportunity for individual achievement, they were significantly more likely to click “Donate Today” than when they encountered the message that stressed common goals.

We also conducted two similar experiments with about 900 people whom we recruited at museums in Chicago and Vancouver, British Columbia. Again, in these two studies, messages focusing on personal achievement led to increased donations among individuals with incomes higher than \$90,000.

And in a fourth experiment, which involved more than 12,000 alumni from an elite business school, donors gave approximately \$150 more on average when they were asked to “come forward and take individual action” than when they were asked to join their community and “support a common goal.”

When we first began these studies, we thought we could not just sway wealthy people’s behavior but also change their minds, persuading them to embrace communal values. We failed. In one study, for example, we asked participants to think about a major financial success they had experienced and to consider how factors such as their education or family contributed to their success. Wealthy participants inevitably emphasized their own hard work and talent.

By suggesting that charities might cater to wealthier people’s conception of themselves, our research may seem to miss the moral point of charity. But as the behavioral scientist Christopher Bryan has said, “We’re often so focused on getting people to do the right thing for what we think is the right reason, we forget we just need to get them to do the right thing.”

Indeed, what we usually think of as the right reason may simply be the most obvious reason from the perspective of people who are devoted to a cause. Rather than trying to make others see the world the way we do, it may be more effective to meet them where they are.

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