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Emily Rabe
Western Oregon University, erabe17@mail.wou.edu

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Perspective Taking, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior

Emily Rabie | Western Oregon University

Prior Research

- Studying ways to decrease the number of homeless individuals within the United States has become increasingly popular in current research (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016; Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010).
- Researchers have found empathy to be a strong motivator of prosocial behavior (Clark, Robertson, & Young, 2019; Farrellly et al., 2018; Oceja et al., 2014).
- Research also suggests that perspective taking instructions can be used to induce empathy and has been used to decrease bias and improve attitudes toward stigmatized groups (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Myers, Laurent, & Hodges, 2014; Shin, Stutzer, & Gutierrez, 2013).

Hypothesis

- **Hypothesis 1**: Participants asked to read a story about a homeless person with empathy inducing perspective taking instructions:
  - Will be more likely to donate money.
  - Will, on average, donate more money.

- **Hypothesis 2**: Participants asked to read a story about a homeless person and remain objective will report the opposite.

Method

- Participants were Western Oregon University psychology students recruited through SONA. One participants’ data was excluded from the study, bringing the total number of participants to 42.
- The survey was administered online through Qualtrics.

The Instructions

- **Objective**: “While reading the story try to remain objective in your feelings toward the homeless person in the story.”
- **Empathy**: “While reading the story try to imagine how you yourself might feel if you were in the same situation as the homeless person.”

The Story

- You are walking along the sidewalk when you notice a homeless person sitting to the side of the sidewalk on the grass. They are holding up a sign that reads “Anything Helps” and have a hat set on the sidewalk for people to place donations.

References

- Farrelly, M., & Bennett, M. (2019). Empathy leads to increased online charitable behavior when there is a perceived difference between the sender and the recipient. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 29(2), 260–266. doi:10.1037/cpr0000161
- Reference from Qualtrics.

Results

- There was a trend that the group primed with empathy (M=2.19, SD=1.68) donated more money compared to the objective group (M=2.38, SD=1.77); however, this result was not significant (F(1)=0.88, n.s.). Error bars represent standard error (Figure 1).

- A similar trend was observed for likelihood to donate money, specifically the empathy group was more likely to donate money (M=3.19, SD=0.77) compared to the objective group (M=2.92, SD=0.78); however, this trend, however, was also not significant (F(1)=1.42, n.s.). Error bars represent standard error (Figure 2).

Conclusion

- Both sets of data displayed trends supporting the hypothesis; however, there were no significant differences in amount willing to donate (Figure 1) and likelihood of donating money (Figure 2) between the two conditions.
- Contrary to previous research, these findings suggest that perspective taking instruction to induce empathy has an insignificant influence in motivating prosocial behavior.
- Further research is required to determine the effectiveness of using empathy inducing perspective taking instruction as a motivator of prosocial behavior toward the homeless.