

The effect of the word “love” on compliance to a request for humanitarian aid: An evaluation in a field setting

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In 14 bakeries we tested the effect of different messages associated with a fundraising solicitation. An opaque moneybox was placed near the cash register with a message explaining on a first line that the solicitation was for a humanitarian project for African children conducted by students. On the second line the words “DONATING = LOVING” (loving condition), “DONATING = HELPING” (helping condition), or no inscription (control) appeared. The second line was changed each day and for each bakery according to a random distribution. Results showed that more donations were made in the loving condition compared to the two others, whereas there was no difference between the helping and the control conditions. The results are explained using the spreading activation theory.

Keywords: Priming; Loving; Altruism.

Many techniques used to gain compliance with fundraising requests have been described in the social psychology literature (for a review see Pratkanis, 2007). A large number of these techniques use sequential requests such as the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) or the door-in-the-face technique (Cialdini et al., 1975). Others show that some verbal expressions have the ability to increase donations. Adding the phrase “even a penny will help” to a standard plea addressed to participants in face-to-face interactions, in mass mailings, and on donation boxes has been shown to increase the number and the amount of charitable donations (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Perrine & Heather, 2000; Reingen, 1978;

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Weyant, 1984). Further techniques use ingratiation techniques such as flattery (Dunyon, Gossling, Willden, & Seiter, 2010), incidental similarity (Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004), or mimicry (Van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, & Van Knippenberg, 2004). Others use nonverbal behaviors displayed by the donation solicitor such as tactile contact (Kleinke, 1977), smiling (Solomon et al. 1981), or gazing (Kleinke, 1980). The objective of the experiment presented here was to test the efficacy of a word-priming technique on receptivity to a funding request.

PRIMING CONCEPT AND INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOR

Research on priming has demonstrated that the activation of a concept can exert an influence on subsequent information processing or behavior. Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) found that participants primed with words related to the elderly stereotype (e.g., *traditional, retired*) walked more slowly than those of a control group when leaving the experiment. They also found that participants primed with the concept of rudeness interrupted the experimenter more quickly and more frequently than did participants primed with the concept of politeness. In the same way Banaji, Hardin, and Rothman (1993) found that participants exposed to sentences describing stereotyped behavior of dependence (e.g., *can't make decisions*) rated a female target who performed identical behavior as a male target as more dependent; whereas after exposure to stereotyped behavior of aggression (e.g., *threatens other people*), participants rated a male target as more aggressive than a female target.

To explain the means by which mental representations can shape social behavior, theorists have hypothesized mental structures consisting of interconnected information or attributes. The main assumption is the *spreading of activation*, the activation of one concept being assumed to spread along a network of meaningfully associated information. Activating the concept of gender, for example, would bring into play the implicit knowledge structure of gender-linked traits, stereotypes, and norms of behavior.

PRIMING THE CONCEPT OF LOVE TO ACTIVATE HELPING BEHAVIOR

Despite these advances in the field of priming and automatic social cognition, few attempts have been made to test the influence on social behavior of an automatic activation of the “cognition of love” defined by Lamy (2011) as all the cognitions activated with the concept of love. This lack of interest is very surprising given the fact that love is an important concept across human cultures and history.

In a natural setting, Lamy, Fischer-Lokou, and Guéguen (2008) asked participants in the street to recall a memory involving love or a piece of music they had appreciated. Afterwards participants met another confederate who asked them for money. Results showed that inducing the idea of love had a significant positive effect on compliance to the request for male passersby who were asked for help (giving some money “to take the bus”) by a female confederate, but not for female passersby. Fischer-Lokou, Lamy, and Guéguen (2009) recently confirmed these results. They found that passersby who were induced to recall a memory of love agreed more favorably to give directions and spent more time giving directions to a confederate than participants who were induced to retrieve a piece of music they loved. Again they found that more help was observed in the love condition with male passersby who interacted with a female confederate. In the same way, Lamy, Fischer-Lokou, and Guéguen (2009) observed participants’ reactions toward a confederate who inadvertently dropped a stack of compact discs when they were near each other. They found that participants were more helpful when they were induced to recall a memory involving love 2 minutes before.

In these later studies participants were asked to recall a memory of love before their helpfulness was tested. However, research has found that such effects can be reached by means of an automatic activation of love in the absence of any direct reminiscence of love or conscious awareness of love scripts.

In a recent study by Lamy, Fischer-Lokou, and Guéguen (2010) male passersby were asked by a female confederate to indicate the direction of Saint Valentine Street or Saint Martin Street. Several meters away the participant encountered a second female confederate who asked for help, pretending a group of four disreputable-looking male confederates had taken her mobile telephone and refused to give it back. It was found that participants primed with the cognition of Valentine helped the female confederate get her mobile back more frequently than those primed with the cognition of Martin.

The objective of the present experiment was to study the impact of a new, but more basic activation method that could induce love cognition and to evaluate its effect on a new dependent variable associated with a pro-social behavior. We decided to test the effect of the presence of the single word “loving” on people’s behavior. In the above-mentioned studies possible confounding effects are associated with helping behavior. Indeed, in these experiments it was found that the love-inducing variable led men to help a female confederate more favorably than a male confederate or that such a love-inducing variable was not effective with female participants. Thus, perhaps, the love-inducing method led to further interest for romantic relations for men than for women, which in turn led only men to help female

confederates more favorably. Indeed, participants were asked to recall a memory of a previous love episode that occurred in their own lives. Such reminiscence could increase motivation for further romantic relations. In the same way “valentine”, which was used as the priming concept in the study by Lamy et al. (2010), is clearly associated with romantic relationships, given the fact that Saint Valentine’s Day is the annual commemoration held on February 14 celebrating love and affection between intimate companions. Both types of priming information are clearly associated with romantic and intimate relationships, but not with general affection toward people. Thus it would be interesting to test the single effect of the word “loving” on people’s altruistic behavior without any other stimulus.

In this study donation boxes were displayed in bakeries with a message that invited customers to donate money for a humanitarian cause. In one condition the words “Donating = Loving” appeared. It was hypothesized that such an inscription would be associated with more compliance to the altruistic request.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were customers who anonymously put money into any of the 14 moneyboxes displayed in the bakeries participating in the fundraising operation; all the bakeries were located on the French west Atlantic coast in Brittany.

Materials

An opaque cubic box (15 centimeters per side), made of carton and with a slot in the lid, was used as the donation box. One side of the box carried a color photograph of a young African woman with an infant in her arms. The inclusion of the photograph was intended to increase the vividness of the action. Several studies have found that vivid information such as pictures lead people to pay closer attention to information and encourage them to donate money to humanitarian or nonprofit organizations (Gonzales, Aronson, & Costanzo, 1988; Perrine & Heather, 2000). Three informational signs were displayed, one at a time, on the lid of each moneybox. Each sign had the following message “Women students in business trying to organize a humanitarian action in Togo. We are relying on your support”. This sentence appeared on the top of the lid just above the coin slot. Just below the slot, further information signs appeared, according to the experimental condition: “DONATING = LOVING” (loving condition); “DONATING = HELPING” (helping condition); or no further words (control condition).

Procedure

The experiment was carried out in 14 bakeries from 7.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. (from 7.00 a.m. to 8 p.m. in 5 bakeries) every day for 2 weeks. The bakeries were located in two towns in Brittany near the west Atlantic coast of France (Lorient and Vannes). The test was conducted during the last 2 weeks of December 2010 to the second day of January 2011 when all the bakeries were open 6 days a week and closed on Saturdays (December 25 and January 1). The managers of the bakeries kindly consented to allow their bakeries to be used for conducting the experiment. The moneybox was placed near the cash register in each of the bakeries. Given the fact that the practice of collecting money for nonprofit organizations is common in French bakeries, care was taken not to solicit assistance from bakeries that were already involved in other fundraising campaigns.

According to a random distribution performed for each bakery, the three information signs manipulated were randomly distributed. The experimental condition selected was used throughout any single day. Given the fact that the observational periods lasted 12 days, each experimental condition was tested for 4 days in each bakery. Collaborators were instructed to come to the bakery at closing time, to collect money, and to change the lid of the donation box associated with the experimental condition selected for the following day. For each condition and each bakery per day, the collaborator was instructed to write on a form the amount of money found in the moneybox. Thus 56 money measures per experimental condition were available (14 bakeries \times 4 days), providing a total of 168 measures.

RESULTS

The dependent variable used in this experiment was the amount of money collected per day in each experimental condition and in each bakery. Data were analyzed with the help of a 3×14 analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the experimental condition as the within-participant factor and the bakeries as the between-group factor. No overall significant difference was found between the bakeries, $F(13, 42) = 1.07$, $p < .41$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and no interaction effect was found between the bakeries and the experimental condition, $F(26, 84) = 1.24$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Consequently data were pooled combined across bakeries (Table 1).

A main effect of the experimental condition was found, $F(2, 84) = 62.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$. Pairwise comparison using the Student's test for pair samples was used and revealed that the "loving" condition was significantly different from the "no inscription" condition, $t(55) = 10.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.79$, and from the "helping" condition, $t(55) = 8.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.09$, whereas no statistical difference was found between the "helping" condition and the "no inscription" condition, $t(55) = 1.63$, $p = .11$, $d = 0.44$.

TABLE 1
Average amount of money (euros) left by customers per day and per bakery

<i>Experimental condition</i>		
<i>Loving</i>	<i>Helping</i>	<i>Control</i>
1.04 € (0.28)	0.62€ (0.25)	0.54 € (0.22)

SD in parentheses.

DISCUSSION

The results found in this experiment carried out in a field setting confirmed our hypothesis that the word “loving” would be associated with greater altruistic behavior. This effect appeared to be strong given the high effect-size found in this study.

Such results support previous research that shows an influence on helping behavior of an automatic activation of the cognition of love (Fischer-Lokou et al., 2009; Lamy et al., 2008, 2009). However, in the latter studies such cognitions were activated with the help of reminiscence of previous romantic events in the participants’ lives. In a more recent experiment by Lamy et al. (2010), simply the name of a street (Saint Valentine Street) was used to activate the same cognition and was found to be associated with an increase of further helping behavior.

In these later experiments the “love” evocation was performed in face-to-face interactions. In our experiment we found that evoking this concept seems to be efficient when the request was addressed simply with the help of an informational sign on which this concept was written. Given the high effect-size found here, we can conclude that evoking love is a powerful technique to enhance people’s altruistic behavior.

The question that now remains is why this effect occurs. Given the fact that the method used in this experiment did not permit testing possible mediators and that the literature on “love” activation is scarce, explanations remain speculative and need to be tested in further studies.

One possible explanation is that, congruent with the spreading activation theory (Bargh, 1994), the loving concept acts as a prime that leads to activation of further concepts associated with compassion, support, or solidarity that, in turn, lead participants to offer donations more favorably. Such an explanation is congruent with the results of previous studies on priming (Bargh et al., 1996; Zmack-Rugar, Bettrnan, & Fitzsimons, 2007) that, unfortunately, never tested “love” or words related to love as primes. However, we can state that the “love” concept probably primes further

concepts associated with compassion, support, or solidarity and leads people to act in a way that is congruent with these concepts. Thus it would be interesting to test in further experiments whether feelings of compassion, support or solidarity increase between groups of individuals who are exposed to a “loving” prime.

However, if the spreading activation explanation is plausible when considering the love prime, it does not explain why no effect was found with the “donating = helping” condition. Two possible explanations related with this lack of significance are possible.

First, this null effect could be explained by the reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974). This theory assumes that people feel free to do certain things. When these perceived freedoms are threatened, people are motivated to restore them. In our experiment “donating = helping” may have been perceived by the participants as a form of order to comply, which may have activated some reactance and led them to comply less favorably to the request. In French, “*donner*” means “to donate” but the same verb is also used when you want to order someone to do something. Thus in our experiment this verb was perhaps interpreted as an order to give money, which in turn led the solicited participants to perceive that his or her freedom of behavior was threatened or restricted. This negative feeling could explain why we found a significant decrease in compliance to the request compared to the control condition.

Second, it could be argued that the word “helping” was not sufficient to act as a prime word, which in turn led people exposed to it to donate. Indeed, in this study the word “helping” was perhaps redundant with the information already present in the message printed on the side of the box: “We are relying on your support”. This sentence clearly calls for donation and the word “helping” adds nothing else. This may also explain why the same amounts of donation were found than in the control condition. Accordingly, it would be interesting to replicate our experiment in a further study that excludes this redundant sentence.

The experiment was carried out during the Christmas period, which is clearly associated with goodwill, generosity, altruism, and giving. Thus replication at another time is now necessary.

However, this experiment has some practical interest. Fundraising is a significant means used by health or humanitarian organizations to obtain money for their operations. It would be interesting for them to test various primes in their communication to activate cognition associated with compassion, support, solidarity, and community relationships. Here we found that the amount of donations in the loving condition were double that of the two other conditions. However, considerable care should be taken in the choice of words. In this experiment we found that, compared to the control condition in which no prime was used, the word “loving” was

associated with an increase in the amount of donations, whereas the word “helping” was not. Thus it appears that it is important to test a word prime on actual behavior. Various pre-tests using an experimental design seem to be a good method by which to evaluate the efficacy of a prime.

Despite the shortcomings of our study, the results will no doubt be of interest to those involved in philanthropic planning and support assessment in the areas of corporate giving, nonprofit organizations, charitable foundations, and grants. Conducted in a field setting, the experiment demonstrates how a simple, low-cost intervention can increase charitable giving. In addition it is very easy to use the words “Donating = Loving” in different situations, such as with requests addressed by mail or electronic mail, in face-to-face interactions, or printed on a badge worn by a donation solicitor. The technique is also easy to replicate, and can be readily adapted to various fundraising solicitations and pro-social requests. Whereas further experiments are necessary to confirm these preliminary results, it will be interesting to explore more closely the behavioral effect associated with the “loving” condition. In the “loving” condition, in which more money was recovered from the donation boxes, we do not know whether more customers left money or the number of customers remained the same but with each customer leaving a larger amount of money.

In future studies replication with a video camera to count the number of people putting money into the donation boxes would be a way to evaluate more clearly why there was more money in the boxes in the “loving” condition. Indeed, video would enable us to evaluate whether people’s feelings and cognitions were actually activated by the word “loving.” While we found that the “love” prime was a robust method for enhancing altruism and helping behavior, the mediating factors connected with such behavioral changes still remain in question. More controlled laboratory experiments will be necessary to evaluate cognitive and/or emotional changes that may be associated with the “love” prime.

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