

Perceived donation behavior and cooperation intention: The mediating role of motivation attribution and perceived hypocrisy

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Abstract. Individuals who participate in anonymous donations generally describe themselves as altruists when speaking of their donating. However, the inconsistency between words and deeds may lead to different cooperation intentions when perceived by others. This study examines the effect of perceived donation behavior (true goodness vs. hypocrisy; direct vs. indirect) on willingness to cooperate, where motivation attributions play a mediating role while perceived hypocrisy is not significant in predicting cooperation intention. The findings suggest that the effects of different perceived donation behaviors on willingness to cooperate differ significantly, and the effects of motivation attributions on cooperation intention are similar for the same type of perceived donation behavior (true goodness and hypocrisy). By comparing the four donation behavior situations, this paper provides practical insights into how people can reasonably engage in prosocial acts of kindness, such as donations in the Chinese cultural context, based on differences in their assessments of donor motivation, hypocrisy, and the strength of their willingness to cooperate.

Keywords: perceived donation behavior; motivation attribution; perceived hypocrisy; cooperation intention.

1. Introduction

Social norms promote that everyone should help the disadvantaged as much as possible. Given this preference, people tend to present an altruistic self-image by engaging in various social activities, typically participating in donations [1]. A donation is an act of freely giving money or items to individuals or non-profit organizations with non-interest involved [2]. In donation situations, some people genuinely donate large sums of money to show their altruism, while others “do one thing and say another,” that is, avoid exposing their low-level donations by claiming high amounts or judging others to show their altruism.

The above two cases correspond to the moral behaviors derived from the concepts of true goodness and moral hypocrisy, respectively. True goodness is the outward manifestation of an individual's inner goodness or true motivation to do good [3]. Nevertheless, good deeds like donating may draw suspicion. Although our society advocates altruistic behaviors, altruists, according to certain studies [4], are not always regarded favorably and may even face punishment from others since motives matter in diverse situations. Accordingly, this study hypothesized that different perceived donation behaviors lead to differences in people's intention to cooperate with this donor in the future. People's motivation attribution regarding others would mediate between perceived donation behavior and willingness to cooperate with that person.

Berman and Silver [5] found that people are likely to speculate altruists are driven by self-interest and interpret their altruistic behaviors as having a hidden purpose. To avoid adverse motive speculations, people are more inclined to cover up good deeds, for instance, through “white lies”. Broomfield defines a ‘white lie’ as a false statement made by a liar in the interest of the listener, with the full understanding that telling the truth will bring a negative reaction to the listener and vice versa [6]. White lies not only serve to avoid harm but also to alleviate social embarrassment as well as to promote and improve social functioning [7]. White liars are thus considered more ethical and trustworthy than honest people [8, 9]. Here, the author hypothesized that people might have higher cooperation intentions with white liars compared with whom directly state their altruistic behaviors.

Unlike true goodness, direct moral hypocrisy refers to the separation between an individual's professed moral standards and his/her actual behavior, as evidenced by the fact that an individual's actual good deeds fall far short of his/her professed moral standards [10, 11], whereas indirect moral hypocrisy focuses on differences in moral judgments between oneself and others, such as the phenomenon of judging others' behavior more harshly when one does the same moral behavior as others [12, 13]. A previous study indicated that hypocrites are more likely to act immorally on purpose than those who act unethically but do not condemn others for doing so since they acknowledge the wrongness of their behavior, as seen by their condemnation [14]. Based on the idea of “intentionally immoral”, the author assumed that people might be less willing to cooperate with hypocrites than with liars, and perceived hypocrisy can mediate the relationship between perceived donation behavior and cooperation intention.

To investigate whether different perceived donation behaviors elicit different levels of cooperation intentions, we used a donation situation rather than the dictator game situation typically used in previous studies because the former can better reflect daily life. Crucially, these four typical perceived donation behaviors have not been considered simultaneously and their effects have not previously been studied in detail. Scholars have long focused on factors impacting individual moral behaviors in different situations. For example, in the donation situation, Fu explored whether the presence of a stranger and his/her true or hypocritical behavior could inhibit individuals' moral hypocrisy [15]. But few studies have considered the impact of perceived others' donation behaviors on individuals, especially from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, for instance, individuals' future intention to cooperate with these people. Research object switches from the influences of different perceived donation behaviors to the effects caused by different perceived donation behaviors in this study. From this perspective, the impact of the explored perceived donation behaviors on willingness to cooperate has more practical value, which is beneficial for people to choose behaviors that are more conducive to enhancing others' intention to cooperate with them based on the study findings.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

243 undergraduate students were recruited through an online crowdsourcing platform in mainland China (www.wjx.cn) and were randomly assigned to one of four post-donate situations corresponding to different donation behaviors within a 2 (Direct vs. Indirect) $\times$ 2 (True goodness vs. Moral Hypocrisy) between-subjects design. The gender-balanced subjects (female = 126, 51.90%) corresponding to each of the four situations are 63, 65, 59, and 56, respectively. The average age of the participants was 20.06 years (SDage = 1.35; range: 18–22). The sample size was determined before any data analysis.

A power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.7 indicated that the required total sample size was 82 to detect a medium main effect (e.g., effect size $|p| = .3$) in correlation analysis, with power = .80 for $\alpha = .05$.

2.2 Procedure

Demographic variables included age, grade, gender (male = 0 and female = 1 coded as a dummy variable), and socioeconomic status (SES), which included parents' occupations and annual family income.

A pre-experiment survey was done before the formal one, which included demographic information and socioeconomic status, followed by the main scenario that will be presented to the formal subjects later. Thirteen undergraduates homogeneous with the formal experimental subject group were recruited in the pre-experiment. The results drew the average donation amount for the group of undergraduates with a disposable amount of 1,000 yuan obtained as 325.70 yuan. Under the same premise, undergraduates considered donations below 53 yuan to be low in general.

In all conditions, participants read the same description of donation, but after this foundation background, participants were randomly divided into four different post-donation situations containing four different donation behaviors and were requested to finish the further question which focus on motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention.

Following is the description for the basic scenario of this donation:

This donation is intended to raise money to help build a Village Hope School, and the fundraising is done anonymously within each class. The amount of money at the disposal of all students was 1,000 yuan, and students could choose to donate 1,000 yuan or less, and any money left over after the donation would go to the individual. Through the pre-survey, it was known that the average donation amount for college students was 325.7 yuan with a total disposable amount of 1,000 yuan.

Then, classmate A shared 53 yuan (a generally low-level donation) or gave away everything (an excessively high-level donation) in post-donation situations which did not involve false descriptions.

In the direct true goodness situation, the scenario continued with: *You chat with your classmate A about this donation. A said that he/she donated 1,000 yuan, which was excessively more than the amount of money donated by others.*

In the indirect true goodness situation, the scenario instead continued as follows: *You chat with your classmate A about this donation. A said your classmate B had donated 53 yuan, which is pretty much enough. But after this conversation, you overhear that A has donated 1000 yuan, which is much more than the amount of money donated by B and others.*

The scenario continued as follows in the direct hypocrisy situation: *You chat with your classmate A about this donation. A said that he/she donated 1,000 yuan. But after this conversation, you overhear that A donated 53 yuan, which is far less than the amount he/she stated.*

Following the donation situation, the scenario went on in the indirect hypocrisy condition: *You chat with your classmate A about this donation. A said your classmate B had donated 53 yuan, and A criticized B for donating too little. But after this conversation, you overhear A also donated 53 yuan, the same amount as B.*

For each post-donation situation, participants were requested to imagine that they belonged to this class in which donations were possible and normal. All donations are made anonymously, which to a certain extent avoids social comparisons within the group and makes the amount of each person's donation more in line with his/her original intentions. Two members of the class were mentioned in these post-donation situations: classmate A (whom participants would later evaluate) and another classmate B (whom participants would not evaluate), both of whom were described as complying with the situations. After reading each situation, participants rated A on Likert scales from 1 to 7 in terms of motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention. To measure these variables, subjects evaluated A on motive (e.g., "What do you think is the motivational bias contained in A's donation of 53 yuan?", the scale ranged from self-interest to altruistic), hypocrisy (e.g., "Do you think A is hypocritical?", the scale ranged from hypocritical to not hypocritical), and cooperation willingness (e.g., "Are you willing to select A as your teammates for an assignment that needs to be accomplished by two students a group in the future?", the scale ranged from unwilling to willing).

2.3 Data analysis

G*power 3.1.9.7 was used to ensure the sample size and SPSS 26.0 was used to conduct the descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and mediating effects analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlation analysis for the main variables can be seen in Table 1. Gender and age were not identified as significantly correlated with the cooperation intention, except SES, which has a significantly positive correlation with cooperation intention ($r = -.25$, $p < .001$), thus set as the control variable in the subsequence address. In addition, the correlations

between both motivation attribution ($r = .48, p < .001$) and perceived hypocrisy ($r = .41, p < .001$) are positively correlated with the intention to cooperate.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations coefficients (n=243)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Gender	.52	.50	-					
2 Age	20.06	1.35	-.12	-				
3 SES	.00	1.00	.08	.05	-			
4 Motivation attribution	3.94	2.08	.04	-.08	.14*	-		
5 Perceived hypocrisy	3.81	2.04	-.04	-.01	.17**	.33***	-	
6 Cooperation intention	4.09	2.08	.05	.02	-.25***	.48***	.41***	-

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. SES = Socioeconomic Status

3.2 One-way ANOVA

A one-way ANOVA on motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention was conducted (see Table 2.). Results showed that there were significant main effects on motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention: F s (3, 239) ranged from 39.75 to 66.23 ($ps < .001$). That is, for different perceived donation behaviors, the scores of motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention were significantly different.

The post-hoc test showed that motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention scores in true goodness situations were significantly higher than in hypocrisy conditions ($ps < .001$). There was no significant difference between direct true goodness and indirect goodness of motivation attribution; Indirect true goodness's motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy, and cooperation intention's scores were significantly higher than direct hypocrisy and indirect hypocrisy ($ps < .001$); Direct hypocrisy was significantly higher than indirect hypocrisy on perceived hypocrisy ($p < .001$), while there was no significant difference in motivation attribution and cooperation intention.

Table 2. ANOVA results of motivation attribution, perceived hypocrisy and cooperation intention

Variables	Group	N	M	SD	
motivation attribution	1	63	4.90	1.86	$F(3, 239) = 39.75, p < .001$
	2	65	5.23	1.83	
	3	59	2.75	1.58	
	4	56	2.63	1.50	
Perceived hypocrisy	1	63	5.32	1.60	$F(3, 239) = 43.82, p < .001$
	2	65	4.49	1.80	
	3	59	2.92	1.83	
	4	56	2.25	1.27	
Cooperation intention	1	63	5.73	1.41	$F(3, 239) = 66.23, p < .001$
	2	65	5.08	1.81	
	3	59	2.69	1.69	
	4	56	2.57	1.16	

Notes: Group = perceived donation behavior, Group1 = direct true goodness, Group2 = indirect true goodness, Group3 = direct hypocrisy, Group4 = indirect hypocrisy (the same below).

3.3 Mediation Analysis

To test the mediating roles of motivation attribution and perceived hypocrisy in the relationship between perceived donation behavior and cooperation intention (see Figure 1), we coded perceived donation behavior as three dummy variables at first as perceived donation behavior is a categorical

variable with four levels. Besides, Gender, age, and SES were designated as control variables. All variables were standardized.

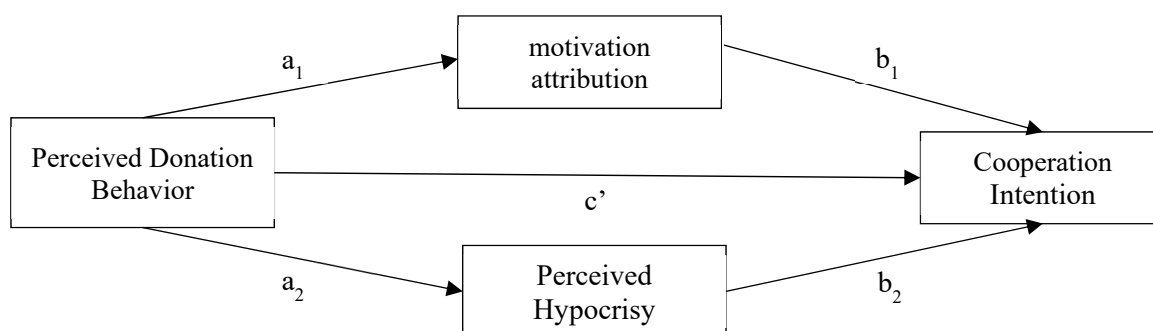


Figure 1. Multiple mediation model between perceived donation behavior and cooperation intention

The control variables are not listed in Table 3 to keep the results brief and clear. Baron and Kenny's [16] causal steps approach was used to test the mediating effect of motivation attribution and perceived hypocrisy in the relationship between perceived donation behavior and cooperation intention. Only the mediating effect of motivation attribution was significant: When direct true goodness was used as the reference group, the mediating effect of direct hypocrisy and indirect hypocrisy relative to direct true goodness was significant, and the indirect effects were -.16 and -.17, accounting for 12.30% and 13.14% of the total effect, respectively, while the mediating effect of indirect true goodness relative to direct true goodness was not significant; In cases where indirect true goodness was treated as the reference group, the mediating effect of direct hypocrisy and indirect hypocrisy compared to indirect true goodness was significant and the indirect effects were -.18 and -.19, contributing for 16.06% and 16.41% of the overall effect, respectively; When direct hypocrisy serves as the reference group, the mediating effect of indirect hypocrisy relative to direct hypocrisy was not significant. There was no significant difference in the mediating effect of motivation attribution in the same donation behavior types (either both true goodness or both moral hypocrisy), meaning that the effect of motivation attribution on cooperation intention was similar in the identical donation behavior situations.

Table 3. Path coefficients of causal steps' mediating effect

Paths	G1 as reference		G2 as reference		G3 as reference	
	B	SD	B	SD	B	SD
c ₁ : λ ₁ →cooperation	-.32*	.13	.32*	.13	1.46***	.13
c ₂ : λ ₂ →cooperation	-1.46***	.13	-1.13***	.13	1.13***	.13
c ₃ : λ ₃ →cooperation	-1.49***	.14	-1.17***	.14	-.03	.14
a ₁₁ : λ ₁ →attribution	.16	.14	-.16	.14	1.05***	.15
a ₁₂ : λ ₂ →attribution	-1.05***	.15	-1.21***	.15	1.21***	.15
a ₁₃ : λ ₃ →attribution	-1.13***	.15	-1.28***	.15	-.07	.15
a ₂₁ : λ ₁ →hypocrisy	-.41**	.14	.41**	.14	1.17***	.15
a ₂₂ : λ ₂ →hypocrisy	-1.17***	.15	-.76***	.15	.76***	.15
a ₂₃ : λ ₃ →hypocrisy	-1.49***	.15	-1.10***	.15	-.32*	.15
b ₁ : attribution→cooperation	.15*	.06	.15**	.06	.15*	.06
b ₂ : hypocrisy→cooperation	.02	.06	.02	.06	.02	.06
c' ₁ : λ ₁ →cooperation	-.34*	.13	.34*	.13	1.28***	.16
c' ₂ : λ ₂ →cooperation	-1.28***	.16	-.94***	.16	.94***	.16
c' ₃ : λ ₃ →cooperation	-1.29***	.17	-.96***	.17	-.02	.14

4. Discussion

When participants have further conversations about the amount of money donated by others after donation, do different perceived donation behaviors affect participants' intention to cooperate with them?

By focusing on a single paired behaviors comparison, previous researchers failed to fully discover the complex relationship between perceived behaviors and intentions to cooperate in multiple situations, including donation. To fill this gap, the authors extracted the definitions of two types of true goodness and hypocrisy divided by direct and indirect, respectively, based on the definitions of white lies [6] and moral hypocrisy [17]. Post-donation contexts explicitly corresponded to the definitions of four donation behaviors and were then used to distinguish how the perceived donation behaviors affect participants' intention to cooperate with another person.

In the present study, for different perceived donation behaviors, perceivers' cooperation intentions with that person were significantly different. More specifically, in the case of hypocrisy, people tend to ascribe more selfish motives to the donor and perceive him/her as hypocritical compared to the case of true goodness. Therefore, people have a lower intention to cooperate with hypocrites, as verified in this study. Previous research noted that when forecasting one's future behavior, people believe that motives serve as better indicators than behaviors [18]. This study echoes these previous results by demonstrating how crucial motives nature is in determining whether an act is altruistic or hypocritical. When evaluating good deeds, people go deeper into the underlying thoughts and motives, and individuals within the group are concerned not only with the fact that the donor has overdone it but also with why the donor has made such a decision [19].

The means for motivation attributions and perceived hypocrisy were below 4 implying that people's perceptions of all four donation behaviors were slightly biased toward self-interest and hypocrisy. In the context of hypocritical behavior, these results can be easily understood. However, true good-doers received negative assessments as well, which are possible due to "Bad moral attributions," contributing to the negative evaluation of overly generous behavior [20].

This study found that comparing the results derived from two true goodness donation situations, being perceived with higher altruistic motives but gaining lower cooperative intentions can co-exist. This result is different from previous studies, showing that although concealing good deeds aroused more selfless motivation attribution, the inconsistency between words and actions tends to undermine others' cooperation willingness with him/her. Though people can perceive the altruistic intentions behind hiding good deeds, they still prefer to cooperate with those who match words to deeds, even if their altruistic behaviors are beyond social norms. This discrepancy could be attributed that white liars may have "paternalistic motives," for instance, making decisions based on how to make others feel best, but may cause offense as it reflects a negative side view of the sharer's character and emotions toward the recipient [21]. People are reluctant to cooperate with people who may have negative perceptions of themselves, which can be speculated through this result.

Had this been the case, both motivation attribution and perceived hypocrisy should have mediated the direct effect as hypothesized. But results showed that there was not a significant mediating effect caused by perceived hypocrisy. Dual process theory [22] can be supplemented to explain this unexpected result, individuals' perceptions do not participate in the regulation of intuitive determinations when making judgments about others because it has nothing to do with self-image. This leads to a tendency that their judgments are based on more demanding moral criteria, resulting in more 'hypocrisy' judgments about others. As a result, perceived hypocrisy does not significantly predict willingness to cooperate.

Indirect hypocrisy donation behavior was found to be perceived as more hypocrisy than direct hypocrisy donation behavior. Based on former research [23], the author indicated this is because direct statements are slightly more deliberate and can be suspicious, while indirect hypocrites condemn others, which creates a more misleading signal. Second, condemning others can, to some extent, damage the reputation of the condemned person. Also, condemning others creates a negative impression management effect on the condemned, yet hypocrites do not receive the same negative

influence despite having done the same act themselves (the same small donation) as the condemned, which can cause the subject to perceive an unfair social evaluation, therefore arouse higher hypocrisy evaluation among indirect hypocrisy donation behavior. Yet there were no significant differences between motivation attribution and cooperation intention compared to direct and indirect hypocrisy donation behaviors, that is, people perceived hypocrites' motivation as self-serving identically and thus had rather low-level cooperation intention with hypocrites. Selfish motivations indicate that an individual is only occasionally altruistic and might not be a trustworthy partner, which will reduce people's willingness to cooperate with that person.

In general, results clearly showed that being perceived as having high self-serving motivation could potentially decrease one's chance of being chosen as a partner in future cooperation. According to diagnosability theory [19], negative moral performance is more diagnosable than altruistic behaviors because the latter can be driven by diverse causes [24]. When it comes to China's unique cultural background, advocating low-profile good deeds and encouraging "to cast one's bread upon the waters," makes people more skeptical or opposed to some overt forms of good deeds. For altruists themselves, true goodness donation might assess negative motivation attribution. So, while encouraging selfless altruism and affirming the positive effects of moral role models, it is important to consider how to counteract the negative effects that true goodness may have on the prosocial person themselves and on others in the group. As a matter of fact, people hate deviations from the general rules of society out of an inherent need to uphold them. In a fundraising situation, all giver's behavior can break the norms of doing good, raise the general standard of donation, and may even lead to the 'involution' of donation in the group [4], which in turn may harm people's autonomy to do good and the happiness they derive from donating. Overly altruistic behavior is also disliked because it is detrimental to the harmony of interpersonal relationships and the sustainability of overall altruistic behavior. Therefore, if individuals want to increase others' intention to cooperate with them, they should make their outward motive as purely altruistic as possible. Therefore, the research suggests that obeying social norms and rules can theoretically lessen the burden of being identified as non-pure altruism, and moderate prosocial actors who avoid norm violation can be maximally credited.

Finally, some limitations should be mentioned. First, actual behaviors weren't assessed in this study, all information came from participants' beliefs and intentions. Second, the mediation analysis in this study only ruled out one of the possibilities of other mediators. Third, the long-term impact of a negative rating is unknown [4]: While donating large sums of money is less favored, it is unclear how long the effect lasts, and changes in willingness to cooperate are uncertain. At the same time, different cultures differ in their tolerance of behavior that goes against social rules, leading to cultural differences in people's tolerance of excessive generosity. These issues should be addressed in the future.

5. Conclusion

By integrating four typical types of perceived donation behaviors, this study focused on the impact of perceived donation behavior on cooperation intention. Motivation attribution is noted as a reliable predictor of willingness to cooperate. The current results highlight the importance of avoiding being perceived as selfish and hypocritical in donation situations which implies people who behave moderately can be perceived as rather good teammates to cooperate. Based on the limitations of this study, future studies need to test the real acts that should be compared among diverse cultural backgrounds, finding whether perceived moral behavior can have a profound impact on cooperation intention. Researchers should figure out other underlying influential factors that exist between perceived moral behavior and provide theoretical support about how to build a consolidated cooperation relationship.

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