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Charity Begins at Home? Investigating the role of national identity in donation preferences towards local, national and international charities

David Hart, Northumbria University

Introduction

Charities operate in an increasingly competitive environment for donations from the general public. Latest figures indicate there are over 164,000 registered charities in the UK, sharing a collective income of £64bn (UK Charity Commission, 2014). Around 70% of this income is shared between a small number of particularly large charities that are typically national or international in scope. This data does not include charitable organisations which exist in other parts of the world, which serve only to make the charitable environment more complex and competitive. Little wonder then that the general public can suffer from donor fatigue, a term used to describe their resistance to continual appeals for donations (Barnes, 2006).

Previous research has identified a wide range of factors influencing which charities people choose to donate to, including proximity to the cause / beneficiaries (Burgoyne, Young and Walker, 2005), the perception of what proportion of their donation will go to those in need or feelings of fear, pity and guilt (Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007). Whereas some people donate in order to feel good about themselves, others will do so in anticipation of some form of tangible or intangible reward (for example, social approval: Sieg and Zhang, 2009). Past work has also identified that race and ethnicity may be relevant factors in the decision of where to donate. Individuals with a more nationalistic viewpoint may have a higher propensity to donate to those charities serving people from their own ethnic groups. Indeed, those with strong racist tendencies are less likely to give to charities in general (Wolpert, 1995).

At the same time, the issue of giving to less advantaged parts of the world through overseas aid has become an increasingly fraught issue. In the UK, emerging political parties (typically with more nationalist, anti-EU ideological positions) are questioning the amount of aid offered to other countries at a time where austerity policy is impacting on the provision of local public services. Possibly in response to such criticism, the UK Government is planning to end all overseas aid given to India in 2015 (The Telegraph, 2012). However the issue of giving to other countries remains a regular point of debate, which naturally also applies to individual donations to charities as well as overseas aid.

The concept of national identity, which refers to an individual's sense of feeling towards their own nation, may therefore be a relevant concept in understanding attitudes towards donating to local, national and international charities. National identity has been widely accepted as composing of two dimensions: nationalism, which refers to a blind love of country and negative evaluations of out-groups (Coryn, Beales & Myers, 2004), and patriotism, a more critical and inclusive form of national attachment (Blank and Schmidt, 2003).

The current study has two main objectives. Firstly, it aims to investigate the impact that individual levels of nationalism and patriotism have on intentions to donate to different types of charities. This is a particularly ripe area for study given that English people have been found to approach the notion of national identity with trepidation for fear of accusations of ethnocentrism (Condor, 2000). Secondly, the study seeks to explore if attitudes towards two related political factors (current economic austerity policy and overseas aid allocated by the

government) impact on donor behaviour to charities. The intention here is to understand if spending decisions made by government subsequently influence the behaviour of individual donors. It is hoped that the findings of this study will add to the existing knowledge on how donors allocate resources to different type of charities and therefore have significant implications for charities looking to attract and retain donors.

Local, National and International Charitable Donations

A number of academics have argued that race and racial group loyalty are important factors in understanding how people choose to donate to charity (Fong and Luttmer, 2009). Despite this, many studies “do not consider how membership of groups, and in particular national groups, impact on individuals’ donations to charity” (Stevenson and Manning, 2010, p. 250), instead focusing on other demographic factors such as age, gender and income. A review of the existing literature suggests that most previous attempts to understand this subject have come from the field of economics, with relatively little done from a marketing perspective.

A central concept in the decision to donate to local, national or international charities is distance. Research by Dalton *et al.* (2008) in New Zealand found that whilst respondents agreed that poverty was a more extreme problem in Africa than it was in their own country, local poverty was more relevant to them, could be witnessed first-hand and was therefore more worthy of immediate help. Here, the authors argued that geographical distance from the beneficiary was synonymous with emotional distance: “The sense of obligation associated with helping those nearest ‘home’ did not preclude helping overseas, rather it served to prioritise an order for providing help” (Dalton *et al.*, 2008, p. 500). Bekkers (2010) notes that when donating to local causes the impact of this was more easily identified, which may help donors to achieve the ‘warm-glow’ feeling from helping others (Sieg and Zhang, 2009). Whereas local donations can be seen in action (Stevenson and Manning, 2010), donors are more sceptical of international charities with larger marketing and administration costs and feel that local charities are in greater need of donations to survive (Hall *et al.*, 2013). Donors may as a consequence choose to contribute to the local community that they grew up in (Vu, 2012); indeed their mere participation in community life may put them in direct contact with those in need (Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007).

Prior research has explored the reasons why some people may be hesitant to give to international charities over local alternatives. Responses appear to be either an intrinsic view of charitable giving (“a moral obligation to look after co-nationals” as termed by Stevenson and Manning, 2010, p. 254), or negative perceptions of the countries being donated to. For example, donations are less likely if the problems are viewed as being on such a scale that a single donation could not provide meaningful help (e.g. poverty, Radley and Kennedy, 1992), or if there was the perception that the country itself had caused the problems it was now facing or was powerful enough to resolve these themselves (Stevenson and Manning, 2010). Equally, if there has been a history of strained political or economic relations between two countries, this may make donors less likely to provide financial support (Hull, 1988).

National Identity

Given the clear relevance of race in decisions on how people donate to charity, the concept of national identity appears to be a potentially useful concept to explore. Defined here as the intensity of feelings and closeness toward one's own nation (Blank, Schmidt & Westle, 2001), recent work on national identity has increasingly advocated the existence of two distinct forms of national attachment. Whilst one aspect of national identity can be seen as a blind, militaristic and obedient attitude towards the state, an opposing aspect may question and

constructively criticise it. These two opposing forms of national identity have been described using various terms but here will be referred to as ‘nationalism’ and ‘patriotism’ respectively (Blank & Schmidt, 2003). Whilst these concepts are correlated (e.g. feelings of both nationalism and patriotism increased in the US after the World Trade Center attacks: Coryn, Beales & Myers, 2004), they have been shown to be distinct dimensions of national identity (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) that can be deemed as ‘divisive’ and ‘inclusive’ respectively (Vida, Dmitrovic & Obadia, 2008).

According to Schatz, Staub and Lavine (1999), nationalism can be characterized by an allegiance to a country without question of its values, and an intolerance of any criticism directed towards it. This somewhat more stubborn attachment to one’s country results in negative evaluations of other countries and ethnic groups (Coryn, Beales & Myers, 2004). It is this form of national identity that results in a desire for dominance over other countries (Nathanson, 1993) and has been viewed as potentially destructive and inherent in many fascist dictatorships. Patriotism refers to an allegiance towards one’s country that still allows a critical stance towards the governing regime. Blank and Schmidt (2003, p. 292) noted that constructive patriots do not place as high an emphasis on national identity as nationalists, and are willing to support their nation’s aims unless they are “no longer in accord with the convictions of humanist values”. Such patriotism results in a love of and care for a nation and its interests, and a willingness to make sacrifices for that country (Van Hooft, 2009).

It would appear logical to assume that individuals who score highly on measures of both nationalism and patriotism will in turn display preferences for charities that serve beneficiaries within their own nation. This seems a particularly logical argument in the case of nationalists, who are often wary of the threat posed from other countries (McFarland, 2005). However, patriots are willing to support their nation’s aims unless they are “no longer in accord with the convictions of humanist values” (Blank and Schmidt, 2003, p. 292), and such values may in turn result in them lending their support to charitable causes outside of their home country. Furthermore, in the current age of economic austerity, it will be interesting to see how attitudes towards decreased government spending impact on charity choice. Public opinion towards austerity measures has become increasingly negative since they were first implemented in 2010 (Borges et al., 2013). This has subsequently impacted on how the general public view overseas aid – there is increased scepticism about the effectiveness of international aid programmes, especially in light of local spending cuts (Glennie, Straw and Wild, 2012). Such factors may have an impact on not only general propensity to donate to charity, but also preferences for those that serve local, national or international beneficiaries.

Proposed Method

The current study will adopt a quantitative approach, utilising a large scale survey administered online in 2015. It is hoped that the researcher can engage a number of charities in the research project, allowing the survey to be electronically distributed to regular donors. In terms of sampling, the aim is to target those individuals who are actively donating to different types of charities at the time of completion. The survey itself will include items on nationalism and patriotism (which will be taken from the previous work of Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989 and Blank and Schmidt, 2003), and will also include items designed to measure attitudes towards political austerity and overseas aid. Finally, the survey will also seek to measure propensity to donate to local, national and international charities, which will incorporate the construct of emotional distance (Dalton *et al.*, 2008).

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