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Tainted Altruism: When Doing Some Good Is Evaluated as Worse Than Doing No Good at All

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Abstract

In four experiments, we found that the presence of self-interest in the charitable domain was seen as tainting: People evaluated efforts that realized both charitable and personal benefits as worse than analogous behaviors that produced no charitable benefit. This *tainted-altruism* effect was observed in a variety of contexts and extended to both moral evaluations of other agents and participants' own behavioral intentions (e.g., reported willingness to hire someone or purchase a company's products). This effect did not seem to be driven by expectations that profits would be realized at the direct cost of charitable benefits, or the explicit use of charity as a means to an end. Rather, we found that it was related to the accessibility of different counterfactuals: When someone was charitable for self-interested reasons, people considered his or her behavior in the absence of self-interest, ultimately concluding that the person did not behave as altruistically as he or she could have. However, when someone was only selfish, people did not spontaneously consider whether the person could have been more altruistic.

Keywords

morality, social cognition

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People often criticize charitable efforts that provide personal gains. For example, consider the fate of Daniel Pallotta. His company, Pallotta Teamworks, handled major fund-raising drives for causes such as research on AIDS and breast cancer. Pallotta's company raised more than $305 million for various charities over the course of 9 years (Kristof, 2008). However, Pallotta's company was not a charity—it was a for-profit organization, and Pallotta himself earned nearly $400,000 per year. When this information became public, Pallotta faced an outpouring of criticism, and his company soon collapsed. Moreover, Pallotta's exit from charitable fund-raising resulted in a loss of revenue for many of the charities with which he worked. He reported, for example, that donations from one annual fund-raiser dropped from $71 million to $11 million (Kristof, 2008).

Although some people might insist that Pallotta's share of the proceeds was simply too large, or that his profits came at the cost of charitable earnings, the experiments we report here indicate that people have a more general bias against the very notion of seeking personal gains from charity. Indeed, the studies reported here found that even when no direct trade-off was present, people evaluated charitable actions that were "tainted" by personal benefits as worse (less moral, ethical, etc.) than equivalent self-interested behaviors that produced no charitable benefit.

One could interpret this as an instance of blurring the boundary between the sacred and the profane (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). For example, several researchers have proposed a fundamental distinction between social-communal relationships, which are based on demonstrating genuine concern for other people, and market-exchange relationships, which are based on a stricter cost-benefit analysis (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993; Fiske, 1992; Goffman, 1959). Consistent with this

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proposal, previous research has found that people are reluctant to accept monetary compensation for tasks that are perceived to be social favors (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Heyman & Ariely, 2004). In addition, even subliminal reminders of money can lead people to engage in a number of antisocial behaviors, such as reduced helpfulness toward other people (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006).

In sum, there seems to be an important psychological distinction between charity and profitability; hence, there are many reasons to think that people may criticize charitable efforts that also provide personal gains. However, it is unclear why such efforts may be perceived as worse than doing no good at all.

We propose that this effect is related to the accessibility of different counterfactuals: When people consider a charitable effort that also realizes a personal benefit, there is an inherent contrast between charitable behavior and selfish behavior. People consider the same behavior as it might occur in the absence of self-interest and ultimately conclude that the person (or organization) did not behave as altruistically as he or she could have. As a result, observers are likely to rate the target negatively. However, when someone is only selfish, only one type of behavior is present. In this case, people do not spontaneously consider whether the person could have been more altruistic; as a result, they do not view the agent negatively. We predicted, therefore, that actions that produce both charitable and personal benefits will be evaluated as worse than equivalent self-interested behaviors that produce no charitable benefit. We refer to this as the *tainted-altruism effect*.

We tested this prediction across a range of contexts. Experiment 1 was an initial demonstration of the effect. In Experiment 2, we replicated the effect in the context of a hiring decision. In Experiment 3, we tested the specific proposal regarding counterfactual reasoning. In Experiment 4, we examined whether this effect results from explicit use of charity as a means to an end or merely from the presence of profitability alongside charity. These experiments were conducted over a 1-year period from April 2012 to March 2013, and 10.3% of the participants were involved in at least two experiments.

Experiment 1: Between- Versus Within-Subjects Comparison

In Experiment 1, we tested the tainted-altruism effect as well as the extent to which people explicitly endorsed it. Participants read about a target whose behavior was motivated by self-interest. One group of participants read that the self-interested behavior resulted in a charitable benefit, whereas another group read that the behavior resulted in a neutral benefit. A third group of participants evaluated both scenarios.

Method

Participants were 162 adults (mean age = 35.7 years; 53% female, 47% male) who were recruited from an online subject pool maintained by a private university. In all studies, we included only the participants who took at least 20 s to read the vignette(s) and respond to the items. This was predetermined to be the minimum amount of time necessary to read through the materials. In this study, an additional 11 adults completed the survey but failed to meet this requirement.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In two (between-subjects) conditions, they read a brief vignette. The vignette described a man who, in order to gain a woman's affection, spent several hours per week volunteering at her place of work. One group of participants read that the woman worked at a homeless shelter (charitable-benefit condition), whereas another group of participants read that she worked at a coffee shop (neutral-benefit condition). Both vignettes stated that although the man's intentions were self-interested, he nevertheless did a good job at helping out (at either the homeless shelter or the coffee shop). Participants in the third (within-subjects) condition read both vignettes.

In all conditions, participants then rated the target (or targets) along two separate measures. The first measure assessed the target's morality. Participants rated how ethical he was (1 = *completely unethical*, 9 = *completely ethical*), how moral he was (1 = *completely immoral*, 9 = *completely moral*), and the extent to which they approved or disapproved of his actions (1 = *definitely not*, 9 = *definitely so*). Responses to these items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .92$) and were averaged to create a single measure of morality. The second measure assessed the perceived benefit of the target's actions. Specifically, participants rated the actions in terms of "how beneficial" they were (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very beneficial*), and the extent to which they "made the world a better place" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much so*). Responses to these two items were also highly correlated ($r = .66$, $p < .001$) and were averaged to produce a single measure of benefit.

Results

We first compared ratings across the two between-subjects conditions. Participants judged the target to be significantly less moral when he volunteered at the homeless shelter ($M = 4.75$, $SE = 0.28$) than when he volunteered at the coffee shop ($M = 5.62$, $SE = 0.26$), $t(100) = 2.27$, $p = .025$. In addition, they rated the agent's actions as equally beneficial when he volunteered at the homeless shelter ($M = 6.33$, $SE = 0.24$) and when he volunteered at the coffee shop ($M = 5.83$, $SE = 0.28$), $p = .18$.

However, in the case of the within-subjects presentation, participants rated the targets to be equivalent in morality (*M*s = 5.11 and 5.33), and they rated the target's actions to be significantly more beneficial when he volunteered at the homeless shelter ($M = 6.46$, $SE = 0.25$) than when he volunteered at the coffee shop ($M = 4.90$, $SE = 0.27$), $t(59) = 4.67$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of the first study were consistent with the hypothesized tainted-altruism effect. Participants evaluated a self-interested behavior that produced a charitable benefit as less moral than an equivalent self-interested behavior that produced no charitable benefit. In addition, the two scenarios were not rated differently in terms of their overall benefit to society when they were presented between participants. However, when they were evaluated simultaneously, participants did rate the charitable behavior as more beneficial, which suggests that, to some extent, participants recognized the inconsistency in rating doing some good as worse than doing no good at all.

Experiment 2: Sacrificing Social Benefits

In Experiment 2, we tested whether the tainted-altruism effect extends to participants' behavioral intentions. We examined whether people were willing to forgo the opportunity to earn more money for a charity if the person raising the money also earned a substantial profit.

Method

Participants. Ninety-three adult participants (mean age = 31.7 years; 62% female, 38% male) were recruited from the same online subject pool and were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions. An additional 21 adults participated but were excluded from the analyses because of failure to meet the study criteria, as described later in this section.

Participants in the charity condition were asked to imagine that they were the head of a large charitable organization and were in charge of selecting a promoter for an upcoming fund-raising event. They then read about Daniel P., whose organization "handles the planning, promotion, and execution of major fundraising drives to raise donations for charity." However, they also learned that

> Daniel P.'s organization is a for-profit company. After all of the organizational costs have been settled, he and his staff take a percentage of the remaining funds. Therefore, the more money that is earned for the charitable cause, the more profits go to Daniel P. and his staff.

Participants were instructed that their task was to decide whether they would hire Daniel's firm or an alternative promoter. They were then presented with a series of 10 binary hiring decisions. Each decision provided information about how much money could be earned for their charity and how much would go to either Daniel P. or the alternative promoter. For example, one decision was as follows:

> Option A: Your charity earns $1,100,000; Daniel P. earns $55,000.
>
> Option B: Your charity earns $1,000,000; other organizer earns $10,000.

The alternative promoter always charged a flat rate of $10,000, whereas Daniel's firm charged 5% of the amount generated for the charity. The information provided in the options ranged from both promoters generating the same amount for the charity (both $1 million) to Daniel's firm generating twice as much as the alternative promoter (see the Supplemental Material available online).

Participants in the corporation condition were presented with a nearly identical set of instructions and stimuli. However, they were asked to imagine that they were the head of a corporation, rather than a charity, and were planning a major fund-raising drive to raise seed money from investors. As in the charity condition, participants were presented with a series of binary choices between Daniel's firm (who charged more but potentially raised more) and an alternative promoter (who charged less but also raised less).

In both conditions, Daniel's firm operated on a for-profit basis, and all of the dollar amounts were identical across the two conditions. In addition, at the beginning of each trial, participants were presented with a choice in which the alternative promoter strictly dominated Daniel P.'s firm (i.e., charged less and earned more). This served as a comprehension check, and participants who failed this were excluded from subsequent analyses ($n = 12$).

After making these choices, participants in both conditions rated Daniel using the same morality and benefit measures as in the previous experiment.

Data analysis. We conducted the primary analysis by recording the point at which participants switched from hiring the alternative promoter to hiring Daniel's firm (recorded as the lower of the two values). Participants who chose the alternative firm, then Daniel's firm, and then the alternative firm again were excluded from subsequent analyses ($n = 9$).

Results

Results from this experiment indicated that participants in the charity condition were willing to forgo significantly more money (M = \$173,470, SE = \$48,161) than those in the corporate condition (M = \$59,090, SE = \$25,459), $t(91) = 2.10$, $p = .039$ (see Fig. 1). In addition, as observed in the previous experiment, participants in the charity condition rated the target as significantly less moral (M = 5.53, SE = 0.25) than did the participants in the corporate condition (M = 6.24, SE = 0.19), $t(91) = 2.22$, $p = .029$, and they rated his actions as equally beneficial across the two conditions (M = 6.00 for the charity condition and M = 5.72 for the corporate condition, $p = .38$).

Discussion

In this experiment, the presence of self-interest in a charitable domain (as opposed to a business context) made participants more willing to forgo the opportunity to make more money for the charity (roughly 11% of the potential earnings). In addition, participants in the charity condition rated the target as less moral than did the participants in the corporate condition, which suggests that participants did not generally view seeking profit as morally bad across both conditions (see Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011). This result is informative because it demonstrates that self-interest not only taints evaluations of prosocial efforts but also can change the decisions people are willing to make regarding them.

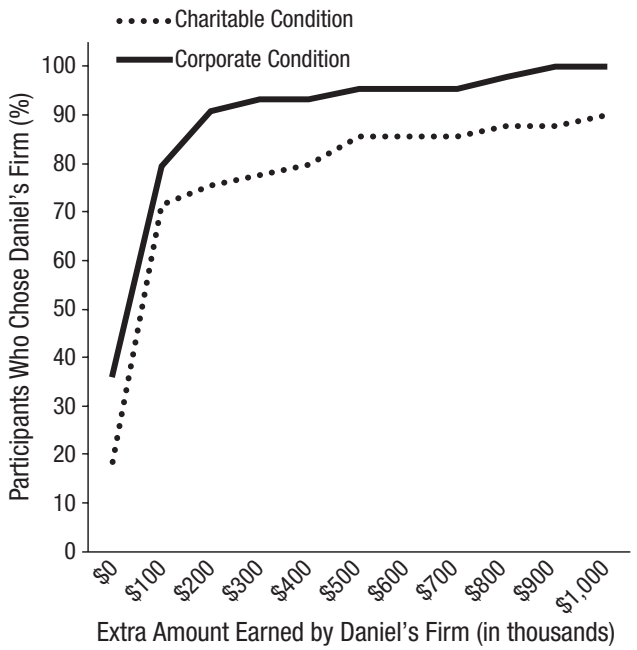

Fig. 1. Results from Study 2: percentage of participants who chose Daniel's firm as a function of the extra amount earned by Daniel's firm and experimental condition.

Experiment 3: Counterfactuals

In Experiment 3, we tested the mechanism of counterfactual reasoning. Specifically, we hypothesized that when someone benefits personally from behaving charitably (tainted altruism), observers spontaneously consider a counterfactual situation of giving for selfless reasons. However, we hypothesized that in a purely selfish case, observers fail to consider the counterfactual situation of donating to charity. Therefore, the target is perceived as less moral in the case of tainted altruism.

On the basis of this hypothesis, we predicted that providing information regarding an alternative state of the world should essentially reverse the effect: In the case of the charitable benefit, reminding people that the target could have not donated to charity should increase ratings of morality, whereas in the other case, reminding them that the selfish person could have donated money to charity should reduce ratings of morality. To provide a converging test of the mechanism, we asked participants directly about the counterfactual (i.e., whether the target behaved as charitably as he could have), and we expected that answers to this item would mediate the effect of condition on ratings of morality.

Method

Participants were 145 adults (mean age = 32.8 years; 64% female, 36% male) who were recruited from the same online subject pool as that used in the previous experiments and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (domain: charity, advertising) × 2 (counterfactual: present, absent) between-subjects design. An additional 7 adults completed the survey but submitted responses in less than 20 s (the same criteria as used in the previous studies). Data from these participants were not analyzed further.

In this experiment, participants read about a business owner who wanted to generate more business for his stores. To do so, he either donated millions of dollars to charity (charity condition) or invested millions in advertising (advertising condition). In the counterfactual conditions, participants also read the following text:

> Keep in mind that if he wanted to, Mulberry could have instead invested the money in advertising [donated the money to charity]. This would have also increased the reputation of his company, but none [all] of the money would have gone to charity.

Participants then used 9-point scales to indicate how ethical and moral they thought the target (Mulberry) was, how much they approved of his behavior, and how much they liked him. Ratings on these items were averaged to

form a single scale (α = .87). On a separate page, participants also rated whether the target "acted as altruistically as he could have" (1 = *absolutely not*, 9 = *absolutely*).

Results

A 2 × 2 analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction between domain (charity, advertising) and the presence/absence of counterfactual information, $F(1, 141) = 13.35$, $p < .001$. A series of planned contrast analyses indicated that, as predicted, when no counterfactual information was provided, participants evaluated the target more negatively when he donated money to charity ($M = 5.70$, $SE = 0.26$) than when he invested the same money in advertising ($M = 6.34$, $SE = 0.21$), $t(141) = 1.96$, $p = .052$. In contrast, when the counterfactual information was provided, the pattern of results reversed, such that participants rated the target more positively when he gave to charity ($M = 6.53$, $SE = 0.21$) than when he invested the same money in advertising ($M = 5.49$, $SE = 0.23$), $t(141) = 3.22$, $p = .002$. Moreover, within-domain comparisons revealed that the presence of counterfactual information increased ratings of the target in the charity domain, $t(141) = 2.50$, $p = .013$, but significantly reduced them in the advertising domain, $t(141) = 2.67$, $p = .009$.

We then conducted a bootstrap analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to determine whether agreement with the counterfactual item explained the effect on ratings of the target. The two-way interaction was used as a predictor variable, ratings of the target were used as the dependent variable, perception that the target "acted as altruistically as he could have" was the mediator, and the two main effects were included as covariates. This analysis indicated that agreement with the counterfactual item significantly mediated the two-way interaction, $b = 0.55$, $SE = 0.22$, 95% confidence interval = [0.21, 1.09].

Discussion

Results from this experiment provide support for the proposition that counterfactual thinking explains the effect. In the case of charity, presenting the counterfactual information (i.e., that the target could have *not donated* money) significantly increased ratings of morality. In the comparison case, however, presenting the counterfactual information (i.e., that the target could have *donated* money to charity) had the opposite effect. Moreover, agreement with the counterfactual item fully mediated morality ratings of the target.

Experiment 4: Ambiguous Intentions

Experiments 1 through 3 established that people rate individuals who do good for self-interested reasons as less moral than individuals who are selfish and do no good at all; in addition, providing relevant counterfactual information appears to reverse this effect.

However, one limitation of the previous studies was that the charitable benefit was always presented as the by-product of some other selfish intention. Therefore, it could be that this effect arises only in cases in which people or organizations explicitly use charity as a means to an end—that is, the agent behaves charitably only to achieve some other goal.

To address this possibility, we asked participants in Experiment 4 to evaluate a real-world prosocial cause, the Gap (RED) campaign. In 2006, Gap pledged 50% of the profits earned from the sale of certain (RED) products to fight the spread of infectious disease (HIV/AIDS and malaria). In this experiment, the key manipulation was whether the profit to the company (the 50% of profits *not* donated to charity) was highlighted.

This experiment included four conditions: In the control condition, participants were given information about the Gap, but no information about any charitable programs. In the altruism condition, participants read about the Gap and the (RED) campaign, but only the donation was stated (50% to charity). In the tainted-altruism condition, participants read about the Gap (RED) campaign, and both the donation and the profit to the company (the other 50%) were stated. Finally, in the counterfactual-information condition, after reading that the Gap (RED) raised money for charity and earned a profit, participants were reminded that the Gap did not have to donate *any* money to charity.

Our hypothesis was based on the previous results: Participants would view the charitable effort as tainted (by the potential for self-interest) and would therefore judge the company more negatively when information about profits was highlighted than when only the donation was highlighted. However, following the logic of Experiment 3, we predicted that when the relevant counterfactual information was provided, participants would rate the company much more favorably.

Method

Participants were 206 adults (mean age = 39.4 years; 62% female, 38% male) who were recruited from the same online pool as that used in the previous experiments and were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects conditions. An additional 8 adults participated, but submitted responses in less than 20 s (the same criteria as used in all of the previous studies). The information presented to participants was taken from Wikipedia.

In the control condition, participants read basic information about the Gap company. In the altruism condition, participants read the same information as in the

control condition along with a second paragraph that described the Gap (RED) campaign. In the tainted-altruism condition, participants read the same information as in the altruism condition as well as an additional sentence, which highlighted the profit to the company. Finally, in the counterfactual-information condition, participants read the same information as in the tainted-altruism condition, along with an additional sentence that reminded participants that the Gap did not have to donate any money to charity. (See the Supplemental Material for the full text used in each condition.)

Participants then rated the company along the following dimensions: moral, ethical, acceptable, altruistic, manipulative (reverse-coded), and selfish (reverse-coded). They also rated how much they liked the company, trusted it, and were willing to purchase its products. All ratings were made on scales from 1 (low) to 9 (high). The order in which the items were presented was randomized for each participant.

Results

A factor analysis with varimax rotation indicated that the dependent measures loaded onto three factors: liking (ratings of liking, trust, and willingness to purchase the company's products; $\alpha = .83$), morality (ratings of how moral, ethical, acceptable, and altruistic the company is; $\alpha = .87$), and manipulativeness (ratings of how manipulative and selfish the company was perceived to be; $\alpha = .63$). For each of these measures, we conducted a contrast analysis testing the prediction that ratings would be significantly lower in the tainted-altruism condition than in the control, altruism, or counterfactual-information conditions (see Table 1).

Liking. The contrast analysis comparing the tainted-altruism condition with the other three conditions was significant, $t(202) = 2.38$, $p = .018$. As we predicted, ratings were lower in the tainted-altruism condition ($M = 5.16$, $SE = 0.29$) than in the control ($M = 5.74$, $SE = 0.23$), altruism ($M = 5.91$, $SE = 0.24$), and counterfactual-information conditions ($M = 5.83$, $SE = 0.21$), which did not differ from one another.

Morality. For ratings of morality, the predicted contrast was also significant, $t(202) = 2.99$, $p = .003$. The pattern, however, was somewhat different, because ratings of morality were lower in both the control ($M = 5.86$, $SE = 0.19$) and tainted-altruism ($M = 5.93$, $SE = 0.24$) conditions compared with the altruism ($M = 7.12$, $SE = 0.19$) and counterfactual-information ($M = 6.91$, $SE = 0.19$) conditions.

Manipulativeness. Ratings of the Gap as selfish and manipulative were consistent with the predicted pattern, but the contrast analysis was only marginally significant, $t(202) = 1.43$, $p = .15$.

Discussion

Results from Experiment 4 indicated that merely highlighting the potential for self-interest significantly undermined evaluations of a company's charitable efforts. This experiment is notable for a number of reasons. First, it was ecologically valid in that it assessed evaluations in a real-world context (an ongoing charitable program by a well-known company). Second, the effect itself was shown to be quite powerful in that a subtle manipulation (merely calling attention to the fact that the company also earned a profit, the *other* 50%) had an effect on evaluations of the company as well as participants' behavioral intentions (interest in purchasing their products). And finally, this experiment provides further support for counterfactual thinking as an explanation of the effect, because the salience of the profitability information was the critical factor that differed across conditions.

General Discussion

The experiments reported here demonstrate the existence of a novel psychological phenomenon: the tainted-altruism effect. In sum, we found that the presence of self-interest in the charitable domain was seen as tainting, such that people judged efforts that realized both personal and charitable benefits to be less moral than analogous self-interested behaviors that produced no charitable benefit. This effect was observed across a

Table 1. Mean Scores for Items Loading on Each Factor in Experiment 4

	Factor		
Condition	Liking	Morality	Manipulativeness[a]
Control	5.74 (1.65)	5.86 (1.33)	5.74 (1.80)
Altruism	5.91 (1.73)	7.12 (1.35)	5.49 (1.77)
Tainted altruism	5.16 (2.05)	5.93 (1.73)	5.14 (1.79)
Counterfactual information	5.83 (1.51)	6.91 (1.34)	5.46 (1.97)

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
[a]Higher numbers indicate more-favorable evaluations.

variety of scenarios, both real and hypothetical, and extended to evaluations of the target as well as participants' own behavioral intentions. Moreover, this effect did not seem to be driven by expectations that profits would be realized at the direct cost of charitable benefits, by the presence of deception, or by the explicit use of charity as a means to an end. Rather, this effect seems to be importantly related to the accessibility of different counterfactuals: When someone is charitable for self-interested reasons, people consider whether the agent might have engaged in the same charitable behavior without serving self-interest, ultimately concluding that the person did not behave as altruistically as he or she could have. However, when someone is purely selfish, people do not spontaneously consider whether the person could have been more altruistic.

Although we have identified the basic effect, several interesting questions remain for future research. For example, why does this asymmetry in counterfactual thinking exist? We suggest that it is due in part to the accessibility of different kinds of information. Indeed, Experiments 3 and 4 support this idea. However, the question still remains: Why is the "failure" of a person to act as altruistically as he or she could have interpreted negatively?

One explanation might have to do with the desire to predict other people's likelihood of being generous in the future. For example, people might place a premium on genuine altruism because it is highly predictive of future behavior. Alternatively, these effects might result from beliefs that are more culturally specific (e.g., identification with prototypes such as the "saintly do-gooder"). Or perhaps there is a more fundamental psychological principle at work. For example, recent studies have found that people react negatively toward religious and health-oriented organizations that seek profit (McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012), that people are likely to question the motives of wealthy philanthropists (Critcher & Dunning, 2011), that people seem to expect that genuine prosocial behavior precludes even unrelated personal benefits (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013), and that charitable donors with a personal connection to the cause are given less credit for their good works (Lin-Healy & Small, 2012). Perhaps all of these phenomena (including the tainted-altruism effect) result from the same underlying mechanism having to do with the negative evaluation of self-interest alongside prosocial behavior.

From an applied perspective, one might wonder about the types of framings that may attenuate or reverse this bias. Presenting counterfactual information seems to be one, but there may be many others. For example, changes in mind-set that lead people to focus more on the actual charitable gains (e.g., Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004) may also reduce or potentially reverse this effect.

In any case, the present experiments identify important conditions surrounding the evaluation of charitable behavior and suggest that in some cases, public assessments of charitable actions as genuine may trump any actual benefits realized from those efforts.

Author Contributions

G. E. Newman developed the study concept. Both authors contributed to the study design. Testing, data collection, and data analysis were performed by G. E. Newman. G. E. Newman drafted the manuscript, and D. M. Cain provided critical revisions. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

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