A Beggar, Self-Awareness And Willingness To Help

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Abstract

The present field experiment examines the relationship between self-awareness, violation of personal space and helping behavior. A beggar asking for alms on the streets. To induce the first experimental condition, the state of objective self-awareness, the beggar had a mirror at chest height, suspended from a string round his neck. In the control condition, in place of the mirror, the beggar held a similarly dimensioned piece of cardboard in the same position. Both mirror and cardboard bore the message "A FEW PENNIES THANKS." As concerned the second experimental condition, the beggar either stood still waiting for people to come up to him, or walked toward the people as they approached, thereby entering their personal space. The results show that anxiety caused by the violation of personal space interacts with the self-awareness in determining the helping behavior.

Key words: self awareness, personal space, willing to help

Résumé

Cette étude de terrain a pour objectif d’étudier la relation entre la conscience de soi, la violation de l’espace personnel et le comportement d’aide en rapport avec un mendiant qui demande l’aumône par la rue. Pour construire la première condition expérimentale qui consistait à induire un état de la conscience objective de soi, le mendiant portait un miroir sur sa poitrine, tenue par un lacet autour de son cou. Dans la condition contrôle, en lieu et place du miroir, le mendiant tenait un carton de mêmes dimensions et dans la même position. Aussi bien le miroir que le carton affichaient le message suivant : « Quelques pièces s’il-vous-plait ». Dans la seconde condition expérimentale relative à l’entrée dans l’espace personnel, le mendiant pouvait soit attendre que les gens se dirigent vers lui, soit aller vers les personnes qui s’approchaient de lui, rentrant ainsi dans leur espace personnel. Les résultats montrent que l’anxiété causée par la violation de l’espace personnel interagit avec la conscience de soi sur le choix du comportement d’aide.

Mots Clés: conscience de soi, espace personnel, comportement d’aide
INTRODUCTION

Self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) looks into social processes using the idea of discrepancy reduction. In a sense self-awareness theory is a theory of the super ego: People carry with them numerous, culturally-derived standards or values, many of which are relatively universal, such as honesty or taking care of others in need. Others are more personal, such as possessing conservative, capitalistic values versus socialistic values. The theory indicates that these standards remain latent until the individual becomes self-aware, and that in the self-reflective state, individuals become attentive to possible discrepancies between their standards and behaviors. With respect to past or present behaviors, this implies that self awareness brings the person into a self-evaluative mode (see Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973), and regarding future behavior, implies that the person will increase his/her efforts to bring behavior into line with the salient standard (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval, Silvia & Lalwani, 2001; Gibbons, 1990; Wicklund, 1975; Wicklund & Eckert, 1992). In the arena of pro-social action, this means that self-awareness should move a person to help more – to manifest altruism – a thesis that has seen some empirical support (Duval, Duval & Neely, 1979; Gibbons & Wicklund, 1982).

Experimental studies of self-awareness in the field, to date, have been rare. Research by Scaffidi, Isgrò, Wicklund & Boca, (2006), for example, have studied the relation between self-focused attention and perspective-taking plus altruism in a field situation, in which the pro-social performances would occur naturally, free of the implicit expectations of the laboratory.

In 1950 Horney observed that the influence of self-related attention on pro-social behavior could be considered as a relationship between some personal insufficiency, with attempted compensation, and empathy for people in need. In this sense, individuals self-doubting or with the desire to verify and confirm themselves are those insensitive to social cues.

Certainly, there is experimental evidence for this idea if we translate Horney’s term "neurosis" into the short-lived crises that can be induced experimentally.

In the field of perspective-taking, for example, Gollwitzer and Wicklund (1985) demonstrated that individuals are less able in perspective-taking when overwhelmed with personal concerns, such as compensating for a failure concerning one’s ego. Steins and Wicklund (1996) confirmed that adults do not succeed in perspective-taking when they are involved in a conflict with the person whose perspective is to be understood.

On the contrary, induction of self-awareness in those that are not anxious or concerned with personal problems (neurosis, in Horney’s lexicon) increases visual and conceptual perspective-taking (Stephenson & Wicklund, 1983) and enhances helping actions (Gibbons & Wicklund, 1982).

The self-focused attention established by the Duval and Wicklund procedures is not necessarily accompanied by worry or anxiety. The subjects exposed to these procedures were highly self-aware but were not particularly concerned about their worth or their personal problems. Under such a condition, self-focused attention tends to increase helping behavior. By contrast, in the experiments in which heightened self-consciousness led to a decreased willingness to aid others, self-awareness stemmed from the subject’s preoccupation either with his/her own merit or personal problems. Berkowitz’s (1972) discussion of self-concern is pertinent to this matter of self doubt. He noted that people’s doubts or uncertainty about self-worth might prevent their helpfulness from coming into play or could even lessen their empathy with those in distress. In line with this, Kidd and Marshall (1982) demonstrated that a high level of self-concern induced by negative thoughts about the self reduced compliance with a request for assistance.
Furthermore, according to Aderman and Berkowitz (1983), this self-concern could also intensify reactance so that the pressure they feel to come to the aid of those in need is more strongly experienced.

THE RESEARCH

This article reports an experimental investigation on the impact of self-directed attention on people’s willingness to help another individual, carried out in the field as opposed to a laboratory situation.

Data were collected in a natural setting. A fellow researcher, dressed like a homeless person, wandered around asking people for money. As he went about his begging, different experimental conditions were introduced. For the first two, using a mirror, he induced a state of self-awareness in people walking by – when asked for money people could see their own image reflected in the mirror. In the second two conditions, a cardboard sign was substituted for the mirror. The presence of the mirror is intended to induce self awareness in those passers by contacted by the experimenter; the cardboard represents a control condition. In our hypotheses, self awareness should promote altruistic behavior and thus enhance the amount of donation. However, this result should be moderated by self worry: participants concerned by their own personal safety should be less ready to give money to the beggar even when they are highly aware of themselves. As mentioned above, various studies have highlighted that, when a person is worried, when he/she experiences personal anxieties or feels to be under examination or evaluated by other people, the self-worry can inhibit altruistic behavior. This is probably because such individuals concentrate exclusively on themselves, paying little or no attention to the needs of others. Alternatively, this effect can be explained by the fact that the negative mood that springs from a state of self-worry interferes with altruistic responses (Aderman and Berkowitz, 1983; Berkowitz, 1972; Kidd and Marshall, 1982).

To manipulate self worry the presence vs. absence of violation of personal space have been introduced. In two experimental conditions the “beggar” asked money walking directly toward the passer by while in the other two conditions he stood still waiting for the passer by coming to him.

Personal space is defined as a movable, invisible barrier surrounding each individual (Aiello, 1987). Moving into one’s personal space can be viewed as a violation. Research on personal space suggests that people generally try to maintain a psychologically comfortable interpersonal distance and adopt coping mechanisms when their personal space is violated. Also, when one person invades the personal space of another, an enormous increase of tension level is registered (Bartholow, Fabiana, Gratton and Bettencourt, 2001; Hayduk, 1983; Sinha and Nayyar 2000; Uzzell and Horne, 2006).

In attempt to find out how and why people arrange and space themselves in carrying out their daily activities, a great deal of research has focused on reactions to personal space invasions (Armstrong, 1996; Evans and Howard, 1973; Geanellos, 2003). The uninvited and unwanted closeness of other has been shown to produce brawl or escape (Felipe and Sommer, 1966), heightened physiological reactions (Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, and Jost, 2006; Middlemist, Knowles and Matter, 1976), more reported discomfort and negative feelings (Efran and Cheyne, 1974) and less social responsiveness (Gifford and Sacilotto, 1993; Konecni, Libuser, Morton and Ebbesen, 1975).

When personal space is violated, as is often necessary in urban situations such as mass transit, waiting in lines, and close working quarters, people adopt coping mechanisms. The person holding a newspaper up on the bus is probably establishing a boundary. People in large cities tend to not look each other in the eye, maintaining at least that little bit of privacy. Office furniture is often arranged to enclose a small area that “belongs” to the person working there. People on an elevator will slightly shift their stance to face a different direction than the people around them.
When a person enters another's personal space, there are definite physical symptoms. "The violation of personal space increases tension levels enormously", says Robert Sommer (2002) who conducted research by going to parks and libraries and deliberately violating the personal space of innocent bystanders to see how they reacted. When people's space is trespassed upon, he says, "It provokes cathartic responses. They begin tapping their toes, they pull at their hair, they get completely rigid. It may not trigger a full-blown schizophrenic episode, but it's clearly not good for your health". Police investigators are taught to invade a suspect's personal space during questioning to gain a psychological advantage. "This is the way animal trainers tame lions", Sommer says. "By moving forward, moving back, constantly pushing the limits".

HYPOTHESIS

We expected that the anxiety originating from the violation of personal space would interact with self-awareness in determining the willingness to help. Thus, the "beggar" was expected to obtain a higher sum of money from those passers-by who were in a state of self-awareness and free from self-worry.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

A total of 94 people, equally distributed between the conditions, were contacted by the "beggar" during the experiment.

PROCEDURE

The "beggar" who conducted the research is one of the authors' coworkers. To resemble a typical beggar, he was dressed in a neglected fashion and wore a beard and long hair. To induce the state of objective self-awareness, the beggar had a mirror (40 x 40 cm.) at chest height, suspended from a string round his neck. In the control condition, in place of the mirror, the beggar held a similarly dimensioned piece of cardboard in the same position. Both mirror and cardboard bore the message "UNA PICCOLA OFFERTA GRAZIE" (A FEW PENNIES THANKS). This research was conducted on various streets in Palermo, in the road to the hospital and close to the railway station.

The begging procedure was carried out using two different methods. Firstly we wanted to create a situation in which the people walking by would see the beggar without feeling any embarrassment or apprehension. In this way, people would approach the beggar, feeling reassured and choose whether or not to give him money, as they may have given to others on previous occasions. The "beggar", therefore, stood still on the sidewalk holding the mirror (or on the cardboard) in such a way that the writing was easily visible to the passers-by.

In the second condition, the request for money was carried out in such a way that a feeling of apprehension and anxiety would be created. Thus, the beggar would go directly up to the people walking by to ask them for money.
For both conditions together, the experiment lasted for a total of 20 hours and was carried out on workday mornings.

**Experimental Manipulations**

**Self-awareness.** For the self-awareness condition, the “beggar” had a mirror hanging round his neck on a string at chest height. In the lower part of the mirror was written a message: "A FEW PENNIES. THANKS".

For the control condition, the “beggar” held a piece of cardboard in place of the mirror, corresponding exactly to the mirror in terms of dimension and message.

**Self-worry.** The request for money took place using two different methods. In the first, the beggar stood still on the sidewalk holding the writing on the mirror (or on the cardboard) in full view of passers-by. In the second, the beggar approached people walking by.

**Dependent Measures**

The dependent variable that was taken into consideration is represented by the money offered by the people walking by.

**Results**

Data collected were submitted to a 2 X 2 analysis of variance. The results evidence no significant main effect and a clear interaction between self awareness and anxiety (see tab. 1) The violation of personal space inhibit altruistic behavior but only when people are in a state of self awareness induced by the perception of their own image reflected in the mirror the beggar hold around his neck. Looking things from another point of view it can be said that self awareness does not inevitably bring to altruistic behavior. People may become aware of the difference between their condition and their own standard but engage in discrepancy reduction via altruistic behavior only when they are free from self worries. Self worries that in this study were induced through the violation of personal space.

We analyzed the cases where, in the self-awareness condition, people were more sensitive to offering money, independently of the condition in which such a request was made. Naturally we controlled the time the “beggar” spent asking for alms, ensuring that, by the end of the study, the hours for the two conditions were equivalent -- in total the “beggar” spent 20 hours begging with the mirror and 20 hours with the cardboard.

From the mean comparison of the money collected under the two different conditions, self-awareness versus control, no meaningful differences resulted ($M_{SA} = .28$ vs. $M_{Con} = .24$; $F(1, 92) = 1.52, p = n.s.$).

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1 Tried to check as much as possible the different experimental conditions and avoid that a difference in the number of the people walking by could affect results. Thus we realized all four experimental conditions always within two hours (30 minutes for each condition). For example, between 10.00 am and 12.00 am in a day could take place the following sequence: self awareness/ no personal space invasion; self awareness/ invasion personal space; low self-awareness / no space invasion; low self-awareness / personal space invasion. Of course, every day, the sequence of 4 experimental conditions were randomized.
Effect of the approach for the request on altruistic behavior

Moreover, we analyzed the cases where people were more sensitive to offering money when personal space was or wasn’t violated.

From the mean comparison of the money collected under the two different conditions a meaningful differences resulted ($M_{viol.} = .22$ vs. $M_{Con.} = .31$; $F(1, 92) = 6.48, p = .013$).

Effect of self-awareness on altruistic behavior related to the approach for the request

For testing our main hypothesis we conducted a 2 x 2 (self-awareness x approach) ANOVA on the money collected that does not show any main significant effect. ANOVA shown a significant two-way interaction between self-awareness and approach type ($F(1, 90) = 16.79, p<.001$). Thus, it was demonstrated that those in a condition of self-awareness are likely to be more generous when alms are requested in a situation that makes them feel more "serene". As a reminder, this situation was realized via an approach in which the false beggar was standing still rather than in the condition when he approached people directly to ask for money.

**Table 1. Money collected by the beggar.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Violation of personal space</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>10.40</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>8.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tot.</td>
<td>12.60</td>
<td>12.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A separate comparison was effectuated considering the two procedures of asking money. In both cases the significant effect of the variable level of self-awareness emerged. As we can see in Table 2, in the reassuring approach (when the beggar was standing still on the sidewalk) people were more generous in the self-awareness condition compared to the control condition.

**Table 2 - Effect of self-awareness on helping behaviour when the beggar not violated personal space.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>.371</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.315</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$F(1,38) = 9.62, p=.004$

The results of the money collected when the “beggar” approached the people walking by are shown in Table 3. We note that in the self-awareness condition, people tended to give less money.
Table 3 - Effect of self-awareness on helping behaviour when the beggar violated personal space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.264</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>.134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F(1,52) = 5.61, p=.022

**DISCUSSION**

Generally, focusing attention on the aspects of the self, people find negative discrepancies and they react by attempting to reduce such discrepancies.

Since altruism focuses on values shared by most people, participants may have tried to reduce the tension caused by the discrepancy by behaving in accordance with such values. This is what happened to people walking by: Self-directed attention induced people to be more generous. Something else happened: People gave less money when the beggar was walking directly toward them. We believe that this result can also be interpreted through the literature in this area. The attempt to reduce the negative discrepancy provoked by self-directed attention, often leads us to a desire to improve ourselves by altruistic behavior. But, when a state of worry and anxiety prevails, self-awareness leads a person to focus even greater attention on such concerns. The consequence is that an individual’s altruistic feelings can decrease since he/she mostly focuses on him-her self and less on the needs of others. It is possible that a request for money while the beggar was walking toward the oncoming people created a state of surprise and anxiety in the subjects along with a feeling of being “threatened” (*What does he want from me?*) Perhaps, the beggar in doing so has trespassed the personal space of the people walking by, that is the area individuals maintain around themselves into which others cannot intrude without arousing discomfort (Hayduk, 1978). Moving into a person’s personal space can be viewed as a violation and thus as a source of stress. In fact, researches on the personal space have suggested that people, generally, try psychologically to keep interpersonal distances comfortable and when the personal space is violated, they adopt coping mechanisms. Also, when a person invades the personal space of someone else, tension levels increase enormously (Hayduk, 1983; Uzzell and Horne, 2006). In this case the attention focused on the salient aspects of self has probably dissuaded the concentration of the subject toward the request of help.

These data may also be relevant to notion that expectancy violations engendered by interaction partners would create more situational uncertainty and increase psychological threat as marked cardiovascularly, affectively, and behaviorally. Interacting with strangers can be stressful. During such interactions, individuals are simultaneously attending to their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, including self-presentation, self-regulatory, and impression management concerns, as well as trying to accurately perceive the characteristics of the person to establish conversational fluency, expectations, and social norms (DePaulo and Friedman, 1998; Gilbert, 1998; Gudykunst, 1984). To the extent that the stranger meets expectations, the interaction is likely to be routinized and predictable. However, when the stranger is unexpected or surprising in some way, routinized responses are likely to be disrupted and anxiety heightened (Hebl, Tickle and Heatherton, 2000).

**CONCLUSIONS**

The present study is an attempt to analyse experimentally the outcome of objective self awareness outside the walls of the lab, where it usually have been investigated. In a natural setting helping behaviour seems to depend on self awareness but other contextual variables also play a significant role. We manipulated
self worry using the violation of personal space and when this happens the effect or self directed attention vanish. Many other contextual factor that may make people feel uncertain or insecure or preoccupied for the future may challenge the altruistic behaviour strategy used to reduce self discrepancy. In sum the outcome of objective self awareness in real life may be more rare and difficult to observe compared to laboratory situation.

REFERENCES


