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Title
Does showing inequality make people more willing to redistribute income or donate to charity? An experiment with Singaporean students.

Abstract

Introduction
In their effort to raise awareness, development agencies and charity organisations often use short films and images showing the lives of people living in marginal conditions. They hope that the awareness of poverty, might change their attitude towards the poor. Nevertheless, we do not have much evidence that these films actually lead to behavioural changes. Are people more willing to give when they are confronted with people living in poverty? We explore this question with an experiment, conducted in the context of Singapore.

Description
This study investigates the relation between awareness of poverty and the willingness to redistribute income. We looked at two aspects of redistributing income: political preferences for redistribution (self-reported) and the willingness to donate (observed behaviour). According to the literature, both of these outcomes are driven by their social preferences – or the extent to which people value social equality. Social preferences have long been considered part of the intrinsic characteristics of an individual, but new insights and evidence have changed this perspective. Empirical studies show how these preferences can be affect by collective values (Corneo and Grüner 2002, Alesina and Ferrara 2005, Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln 2007) and that temporal emotional states (mood) can even affect these preferences (Capra 2004, Kirchsteiger, Rigotti et al. 2006, Capra, Lanier et al. 2010, Andreoni and Rao 2011). Although there is evidence that these preferences can be affected by external factors, there are no studies

We investigate this with an incentivized lab experiment, using a between-subjects design. Participants were students from the National University of Singapore with proficiency in both English and Mandarin. They were under the impression that this was a study about the use of language in film. Each participant watched a short film (in English) and was asked to provide the most suitable translation in Mandarin, to be used as subtitles. The film that the participants watched
could be one of three possible films; determined via a random procedure. Each participant watched one of three possible films. One film portrays the life of an 85-year old ice cream seller in Singapore that, despite his hard work, still struggles to survive financially. The other two films served as control condition. After the experiment they could decide to donate (part of) their reimbursement to a charity organisation.

We find that the film about poverty had a significant effect on the political preferences for redistribution. Those who received the treatment were more likely to support governmental intervention and redistributive policies than those in the control condition. The film appears to have a positive effect on donations, but this is not statistically significant. However, we observe heterogeneous effects when taking into consideration where the participants were born. All effects remain significant when controlled for mood.

In sum, this study provides evidence that showing inequality can affect people’s attitude towards redistributinal policies, but we find no conclusive evidence of this effect on donations.

**Keyword**

Giving, donations, redistribution, experiment, films