



Hypothetically Helpful: Motivated Reasoning, the Ideal Self, and Prosocial Decisions

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Abstract

Research into moral decision making often relies on hypothetical situations, but do these reflect real behaviours? Perspectives on motivated reasoning argue that people tend to reach desirable conclusions about the self (for example, that they are a moral person) but this is somewhat limited by reality. We posited, then, that hypothetically should increase (a) helping intentions and (b) belief these intentions reflect the ideal self. Three between-subject experiments tested these hypotheses. As predicted, in Studies 1 and 2, participants intended to help a charity more in the hypothetical than in the real condition. Moreover, people who intended to help in the hypothetical (vs. intended helpers in the real) gave more positive reasons for helping and viewed their decision as more idealistic (Study 2). In Study 3, hypothetical-real differences were stronger when the task was made more effortful (vs. less effortful). In the high effort condition only, hypothetical helpers (vs. real helpers) rated the decision as more idealistic. These results were not due to differences in concrete thinking (Study 2), time spent reading the instructions (Study 3) or a lack of information about the tasks (full context was given in all conditions across all studies). Theoretical and methodological implications are discussed.

Keywords: Charity; Morality; Psychological Distance; Self-Discrepancy; Social Cognition