

Causes and consequences of missed opportunities for prosociality: Introduction to Research Dialogue

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When people decide whether to perform a behavior, they typically base their decision on how the behavior will make them feel the extent to which a behavior will maximize their own utility. In addition, in instances in which the behavior may involve an interpersonal interaction, people will also base their decisions on how their behavior will be perceived by others. Unfortunately, people often make systematic errors in forecasting their own affect (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) and forecasting how others will think and feel (Epley & Eyal, 2019; Epley & Waytz, 2010).

In the target article for this Research Dialogue, Kumar and Epley (2023) explicate some unfortunate consequences of these misperceptions, in particular, how miscalibrations in perceptions of the affective outcomes of prosocial acts may result in missed opportunities to connect with others, a phenomenon they refer to as *undersociality*. In their review of their emerging program of research on undersociality, they document across numerous studies that people often have chances to engage positively with others through simple behaviors such as expressing gratitude and appreciation, giving compliments, and engaging in kind acts but are reluctant to do so because they systematically underestimate the positive effects these simple behaviors will have on recipients. Undersociality is unfortunate because, as Kumar and Epley also show in their research, engaging in even small prosocial acts makes both the giver and the recipient feel better, and perhaps even more unfortunate given that feelings of loneliness and lack of social

connection have been steadily increasing in recent years and are at all-time highs (Shrum et al., 2023).

In the first commentary on Kumar and Epley's (2023) target article, Ratner et al. (2023) approach the issue of the benefits (vs. costs) of prosociality from a different direction. While acknowledging the apparent benefits of small, low-cost acts of kindness and social connection with others for both givers and receivers, they raise the question of just how much prosociality is optimal for givers' wellbeing and what the appropriate (and optimal) mix of other-oriented and self-oriented behaviors might be, particularly when the other-oriented prosocial behaviors may have nontrivial costs (e.g., giving up much-needed "alone time" to spend time with others). In doing so, they discuss possible factors that may influence the extent to which a prosocial, other-oriented consumption behavior will enhance or diminish consumer wellbeing, and relatedly, factors that influence consumers' decisions regarding whether to embrace or forego a prosocial, other-oriented opportunity at the expense of a self-oriented one.

In the second commentary, Silver and Small (2023) discuss how consumer research can potentially enrich both theory and application of Kumar and Epley's (2023) program of research on undersociality. In the first part of their commentary, they probe deeper into the question of why people may forego a small, low-cost prosociality opportunity, with a focus on the potential costs to the giver. They acknowledge that Kumar and Epley's

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Target article: Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley. Undersociality is unwise <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1336>

Commentary 1: Rebecca K. Ratner, Nicole You Jeung Kim and Yuechen Wu. When is sociality congruent with self-care? <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1335>

Commentary 2: Ike Silver and Deborah A. Small. On the wisdom and utility of (under)sociality: A consumer psychology perspective <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1333>

Response: Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley. Understanding undersociality: Intentions, impressions, and interactions <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1332>

research clearly demonstrates that the decision to forego an easy prosocial opportunity is driven at least in part by the giver's underestimation of the positive impact of the prosociality behavior on recipients. However, they also point out that there may be other considerations that inhibit prosociality, in particular, self-presentational and reputational concerns (e.g., paying a compliment to someone may be perceived by others as insincere and self-interested; asking for a favor may signal a lack of competence). In the second part of their commentary, Silver and Small discuss the implications of undersociality for the consumption domain of charitable giving and explicate several research questions on how the understanding of the misperceptions that drive prediction errors that underlie undersociality might be leveraged to increase the impact of charitable giving.

Finally, this Research Dialogue concludes with a response by Kumar and Epley (2023) to the two commentaries in which they raise additional research questions prompted by the observations and suggestions noted in the commentaries. They identify three areas of overlap that would be fruitful research avenues to pursue: (1) intentions of the giver when deciding whether to engage in prosociality, (2) anticipated impressions that may lead to undersociality, and (3) possible moderators of people's miscalibration between their expectations of the effects of prosociality and the actual experiences. Taken together, the target article, commentaries, and response provide a rich look at an emerging area of research that has important implications for consumer research.

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