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Group identity and charitable contributions: Experimental evidence☆

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ABSTRACT

We conduct a laboratory experiment in which subjects do a real effort task to generate money with the possibility of donating part, all, or none of that money to a charity. We vary whether the task is done individually or in groups, and whether the donation –which is made privately and individually– is either transferred as a single individual donation or added to the rest of group members' contributions and thus, transferred as a group donation. Our results indicate that doing the task in groups increases the intensive and extensive margins of charitable giving for both individual and group donations. Results also show that donating as part of a group has an effect on the amount donated only when group identity was previously enhanced.

1. Introduction

Charitable organizations exist to support and raise funds for a wide variety of causes. Apart from the organizations that are government funded, the rest depend on the generosity of the general community. Particularly, according to Giving USA report, the largest source of charitable giving came from individuals at over $280 billion, or 70% of total giving in 2017. It was still the greatest source of giving in 2018, although it decreased to 68%. Benefits from charitable contributions go from supporting organizations that offer goods and services around the world, to also encouraging people to provide more help for those in need, which would create a society with a larger social capital and much less likely to be divisive (Charness and Holder, 2018).[1] Hence, encouraging philanthropic activities has become a very important issue.

Different alternatives have been proposed to increase charitable contributions both in the lab and in the field.[2] One possibility is for fundraisers to start a campaign where potential donors receive some sort of information before they contribute. This information can be presented in the form of total previous contribution (List and Lucking-Reiley, 2002), individual contributions made by other donors (Croson and Shang, 2008; Shang and Croson, 2009), or the share of people who contributed in the past (Frey and Meier, 2004). This sequential giving has been found to be very effective in boosting donations.

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[1] For a discussion, see Putnam (2000).

[2] For a detailed review of the literature, see Kagel and Roth (2019)

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A second option would be to give incentives to donors to contribute more by letting these contributions generate some sort of gift. Results regarding the effect of this type of incentive are not conclusive. While there is some evidence of more people donating when they have the opportunity of winning a prize (Landry et al., 2006), other papers find lotteries not to have significant effect on contributions (Morgan and Sefton, 2000; Dale, 2004).

Finally, a third strand of the literature focuses on matching contributions and how this affects donor's behavior. Similar to the case of the lotteries, the findings are not conclusive: While some authors find a positive effect of matching on donations (Karlan and List, 2007; Eckel and Grossman, 2008; Martin and Randal, 2008), there is also some evidence against it (Rondeau and List, 2008; Karlan et al., 2011; Huck and Rasul, 2011).

This paper explores one particular dimension that, despite being quite effective in promoting prosocial behavior in other settings, has received little attention in the charitable giving literature: Group identity. Related to giving, the effect of group identity on donors' behavior has been mainly analyzed from the perspective of in-group/out-group interactions. Specifically, it has been shown that people exhibit a greater charity and lower envy toward an in-group than toward an out-group match (Chen and Li, 2009). In the same vein, it has also been found that group membership has strong effects on the allocations chosen for in-group and out-group members (Billig and Tajfel, 1973).[3]

Charness et al. (2014) show, in a Public Goods Game, that a simple team-building exercise greatly increases the level of contribution to the group account regardless to whether subjects are matched to people from their own team or not, showing that positive feelings engendered by group identity spill over to other participants outside the group.[4] However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no paper that studies whether the positive spillover effect of group identity found in PGG would also be present in a situation in which people decide on the donation to an independent third party.

This paper aims to fill that void by studying whether there is a positive effect of enhancing group identity on the amount of money donated to a charity. We take this as a starting point for our experimental design. In our experiment, subjects participate in a real effort task that consists of solving anagrams for 12 minutes. In this task, there is a monetary reward for forming a sufficient number of words from a series of letters. Then, subjects move to a second activity in which they have to decide how much of the money generated in the first stage to donate to a charity.

We vary two factors in a 2×2 design. One factor is whether group identity is enhanced by having people to perform the anagrams task in groups or individually. The second factor concerns the procedure to donate the money to a charity (individual donations are either aggregated or not). Note that the donation decision is always made individually, the only difference being that subjects in the "aggregated donation" treatments are told that their individual donations are to be grouped before sent to the charity. However, in all cases the donations are decided individually and are completely anonymous.

Our results are intriguing. We find that enhancing group identity using a group task positively affects the proportion of people donating, as well as the amount donated to charity. In particular, the percentage of people not donating anything is significantly lower when the anagrams task is performed in groups (0% and 2.78% for aggregated and individual donations, respectively) than when participants do the anagrams task individually (the respective percentages are 17.14% and 19.44%). Average donations are found to be larger under the group identity condition (£5.05 and £3.22 for aggregated and individual donations, respectively) than when the anagrams were solved individually (the respective figures are £2.97 and £2.44).

Results also show that donating as a group has an effect on the amount donated only when group identity was previously enhanced (contributions go from £3.22 when they are made individually to £5.05 when they are aggregated). However, there is no effect of the group donation if the group identity was not salient.

The closest paper to ours is that by Charness and Holder (2018) that finds that team competition for matching funds increases charitable contributions even when the groups were randomly assigned. Although group membership plays a role in explaining subjects' behavior, Charness and Holder (2018) focus on the effect of group identity in a team competition environment; as opposed to ours, which complements the previous findings by showing the effect that enhancing group identity *per-se* has on donations, without any sort of competition required for group identity to work. We simply look at the pure effect of group identity on charitable giving.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we explain the experimental design. We state our main hypotheses in Section 3. Section 4 shows the main results and provides some discussion. We conclude in Section 5.

2. Experimental design and procedures

2.1. Experimental design

The experimental design consists of four treatments: The *Identity-Aggregated-Donation* treatment, the *Identity-Individual-Donation* treatment, the *No-Identity-Aggregated-Donation* treatment, and the *No-Identity-Individual-Donation* treatment. All

[3] Reducing social distance has also been found to be effective in fostering donations (see, for example, Eckel and Grossman (1996); Branas-Garza (2006); Charness and Gneezy, 2008; and Bohnet and Frey (1999)).

[4] Weng and Carlsson (2015), Cadsby and Maynes (1998), and Solow and Kirkwood (2002) also study the effect of a pre-task activity on contributions to a PGG. However, these papers only consider the case in which participants in the PGG are matched with the same participants that they did the previous task. Martinangeli and Martisson (2020) show that group identity affects cooperation in a Public Goods Game, but they do not use a previous task to induce identity.

four treatments had two different stages. First, subjects would generate an amount of money by solving anagrams for 12 min (Charness et al., 2014). Then, subjects would move to the second activity in which they would have to decide how much of the money generated in the first stage to donate to a charity. We designed the experiment with the two stages to make the donation decision more meaningful. Subjects were not just endowed with a fixed amount of money that they had to divide; instead, they earned that money by doing a real effort task.

In the *Identity-Aggregated-Donation* treatment (*IAD*, hereafter), upon arrival to the lab, each of the six participants in each session picked a label from an opaque bag containing numbers between one and six. Subjects who picked an odd number were assigned to the "orange" group, whereas even numbers were assigned to the "green" group. The room was divided into two aisles with the right side of the room being the location for the "orange" group and the left side for the "green" group.[5]

Members of each group sat together, and each group was handed only one set of instructions.[6] The task consisted of creating words from a number of letters. Each group was handed an anagram and its three members had 4 min to solve it together. After the time was over, the experimenter collected the anagrams sheet and handed a new one. This process was repeated for a total of three anagrams.[7] The group would be paid £1 per correct word if the total number of words found by the group (including the three anagrams) was below 24. If 24 or more correct words were found, the group would receive a fixed amount of £54. The money generated would be split equally among all members of the group, regardless their contribution to the anagrams task. The level of difficulty was set to be low enough so every group got to receive the maximum amount of £54. We chose to use this payment system to make sure that there was no heterogeneity in the endowments for the donation stage. Note that during the first stage subjects did not know what was the task that they would have to perform afterwards.

After the first task was over, participants sat separately and individually received the instructions for the second part. For the second activity, subjects had to decide how much -if something- of the money generated in the first stage to donate to *Doctors Without Borders* (*DWB*, hereafter).[8] Just to be sure that all participants had, at least, a minimum knowledge about the charity, we provided some brief information about its goals and projects in the instructions (see Appendix A for the complete instructions). Subjects were also informed that the final amount sent to *DWB* would be the sum of all the individual donations in the group. To avoid peer pressure, subjects donated individually and no information regarding individual donations was released during or after the experiment.

Given the nature of the task, to ensure complete anonymity in the donation stage we followed a double-blind procedure. Each subject received an envelope and participants were told to introduce the money that they wished to donate out of their own £18.[9] Then, they would place the envelope in a box located at the exit of the room when leaving the experiment.

The *No-Identity-Aggregated-Donation* treatment (*NIAD*, hereafter) was similar to *IAD* with the only difference being that the subjects participated individually in the anagrams task. In this case, subjects sat randomly around the room and the three anagrams were handed individually to each participant who would be paid £0.5 per correct word if the total number of words found (including the three anagrams) was below 15 and a fixed amount of £18 for those who found 15 or more correct words. As in the previous case, we made sure that the difficulty of the anagrams was such that there was no heterogeneity in the endowments for the donation stage. So, all participants earned £18.

For the second stage, subjects were handed an envelope to make the donation. The process was exactly the same as in *IAD*, including the envelopes marked in orange or green. Also, similar to *IAD*, subjects were informed that the final amount sent to *DWB* would be the sum of all individual donations made by members of the "group" that shared the same color and that all donations would be individual and completely anonymous.[10]

After making their decision, subjects would place the envelope in a box in their way out when leaving the lab.

In the *Identity-Individual-Donation* treatment (*IID*, hereafter) the procedure was similar to *IAD* except that for the second part of the experiment subjects were explicitly informed that each individual donation would be sent to *DWB* with no reference done to a group or aggregated donation.

In the *No-Identity-Individual-Donation* treatment (*NIID*, hereafter) both the anagrams task and the donation were made individually.[11]

[5] Note that the layout of the room prevented people from different groups to see each other. So, interaction between groups was non-existent.

[6] We considered that giving only one set of instructions per group would make the group task more salient.

[7] The reason behind having three anagrams per group instead of only one, was that we wanted participants to spend at least 10 minutes together in order to enhance group identity. We considered that starting a new anagram every 4 minutes would make subjects more engaged, avoiding (or, at least, reducing) the possibility of losing interest after a few minutes.

[8] This charity was chosen because it is generally well known to people.

[9] To be able to identify which donation belonged to which group while maintaining the anonymity of the donor, envelopes were marked on the top corner with the color of the group (either orange or green).

[10] Note that in this case, as the anagrams stage was played individually, groups could be perceived as more artificial and less meaningful.

[11] However, and to keep the conditions of the donation the same across treatments, in *IID* and *NIID* treatments envelopes were marked on the top corner with one color (either orange or green) although those colors did not have any meaning for subjects in the second stage in these treatments.

2.2. Procedures

The experiment was conducted at the University of Exeter with 144 participants, who were recruited using the online recruitment system ORSEE (Greiner, 2015). We conducted 24 sessions (6 per treatment) with 6 subjects in each session. No subject participated in more than one session. On average, each person received £18 for a session that lasted 45 min or less.

To avoid people not trusting that the donations would be made to *Doctors Without Borders*, in all treatments subjects were offered the possibility of providing an email address to which they would receive an email with the confirmation that the donation was actually made through. Note that, given that the decisions were completely anonymous, the confirmation email that a subject would receive included the total amount transferred to *DWB* in that particular subject's session instead of his/her individual donation.[12]

3. Behavioral predictions

In this section, we focus on subjects' behavior in the second stage. Reactions to doing the anagrams task in groups may differ markedly. On the one hand, if induced group identity is enough to generate a general sense of community, then we should observe larger donations from participants in the group task. On the other hand, if group identity does not affect subjects' decisions (at least when these decisions do not involve somebody from subjects' own group), then donation levels should not be different from the case in which the task was done individually. Previous results show that group identity plays a role in increasing contributions in a Public Goods Game, even when subjects play the public goods with people different from those to which they share the identity (Charness et al., 2014). Based on these findings, we conjecture that enhancing group identity will also have a positive effect on donations to charitable organization. This will lead treatments in which the anagrams task is performed in groups to have more people donating and higher amounts donated than those in which the anagrams task was played individually, regardless on whether the donations are aggregated or not.

Hypothesis 1.1. *A larger proportion of subjects will donate in the second stage of the experiment in IID than in NIID. This will be also the case for the comparison IAD vs. NIAD.*

Hypothesis 1.2. *Average donations in the second stage of the experiment will be higher in IID than in NIID and will be also higher in IAD than in NIAD.*

What do we predict regarding individual donations compared to group donations? Just aggregating donations might induce a weaker (and more artificial) group identity. If this minimal group identity is strong enough, then aggregated donations should be larger than non-aggregated ones. The results found in Babcock et al. (2015) show that subjects are more apt to attempt an effort-intensive task when motivated as a team than when they are motivated as individuals. They conclude this is due to the evocation of guilt and social pressure. Following this intuition, and despite having a different environment, we consider that a similar effect can take place when it comes to donate to charity. The evocation of guilt can still hold even if there is no sort of shared information about others' donation, which would lead to larger amounts donated when aggregated than when they are not (even though all donations are done individually).

Hypothesis 2.1. *A larger proportion of subjects will donate in the second stage of the experiment in IAD than in IID. This will be also the case for the comparison NIAD vs. NIID.*

Hypothesis 2.2. *Average donations in the second stage of the experiments will be higher in IAD than in IID and will be also larger in NIAD than in NIID.*

4. Results

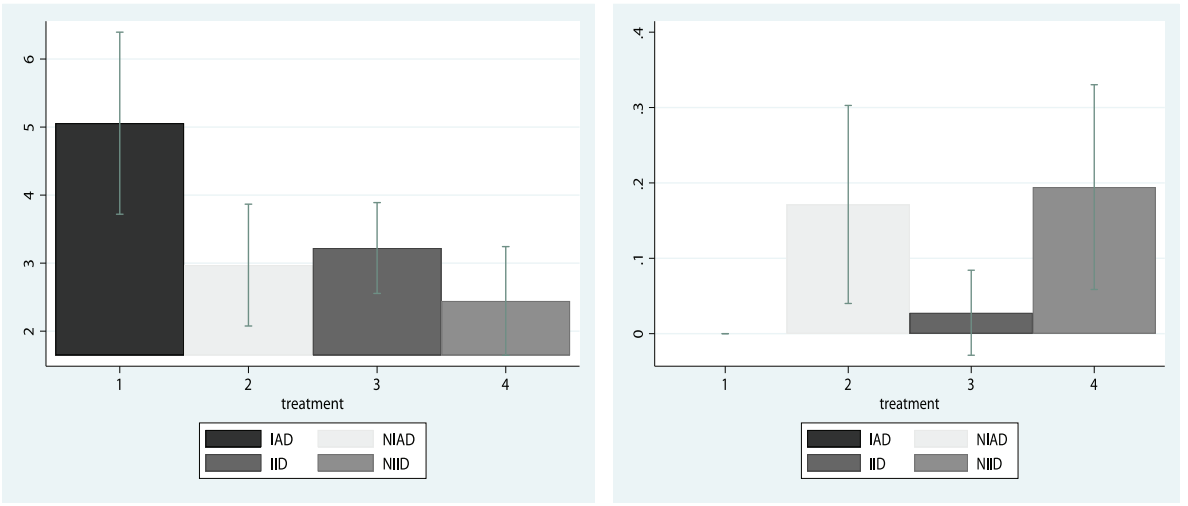
We first analyze the effect of group identity on two margins of charitable donations. On the extensive margin, we examine whether enhancing identity as a group works in encouraging agents to donate. On the intensive margin, we also study whether the real effort task played in groups increases the amount donated vis-à-vis the case in which the anagrams were solved individually. Second, we compare donations to a charity when donations are aggregated and when they are not. We make this comparison for two cases, when group identity was enhanced and when it wasn't salient. Note that given the nature of the experiment and the double-blind protocol followed, we do not have the donation linked to a particular individual, which will limit our analysis.

Fig. 1 summarizes our findings. Fig. 1(a) plots the average individual's donations (errors bars represent 95% confidence intervals) made in each treatment. Fig. 1(b) focuses on a different dimension, representing the percentage of subjects donating zero to the charity.

4.1. Effect of enhancing group identity

We begin by studying the effect that solving the anagrams in groups has on subjects' decisions regarding their donation to *DWB*. We study this effect for both the intensive (percentage of people donating) as well as the extensive (average amount donated) margin.

[12] Note that two people provided their email address in the same envelope used to donate to the charity. Given that this would violate the double-blind procedure followed in this experiment, we removed these two observations from the sample when analyzing the data.



(a) Average individual donation (b) Percentage of subjects donating zero

Fig. 1. Individuals' behavior.

As shown in the right panel, the percentage of subjects who decided to donate zero to the charity when the anagrams task was done in groups is 0% and 2.78% when the donations were aggregated (*IAD*) and when they were not (*IID*), respectively. When the anagrams task was performed individually, the corresponding values are 17.14% (*NIAD*) and 19.44% (*NIID*). Differences are statistically significant for the case where donations were grouped ($z = -2.562$, $p = 0.010$, for a two-sided test for equality of proportions between *IAD* and *NIAD*) as well as for the case of non-aggregated donations ($z = 2.250$, $p = 0.024$, for a two-sided test for equality of proportions between *IID* and *NIID*). These results support our Hypothesis 1.1.

Turning into the amount donated, the left panel in Fig. 1 shows that these numbers are £5.05 (*IAD*) and £3.22 (IID) under the group anagram task; and £2.97 (*NIAD*) and £2.44 (*NIID*) when the group identity wasn't salient. This would mean that enhancing group identity with a real effort task before the donation increases the amount sent to a charity by a significant 70% ($z = 2.640$, $p = 0.008$; Mann-Whitney two-tailed test) when individual donations were aggregated; and by a significant 31.96% ($z = 1.996$, $p = 0.046$; Mann-Whitney two-tailed test) when donations were not grouped. These results are consistent with Hypothesis 1.2.

Result 1: *Enhancing group identity positively affects attitudes towards charitable donation in both the intensive and extensive margins.*

Note that the subjects who performed the task in groups had to find, on average, a lower number of words to earn £18 than those performing the task individually. Subjects having to exert a larger effort when the task is done individually, could make people in the No-Identity treatments more reluctant to donate money to the charity. In order to study whether the differences in donations are due to group identity or to a lower required effort level when the anagrams task is done in groups, we run a new treatment that is exactly the same as *NIID* with the only difference that participants would earn £18 if they found 8 or more correct words (this is the same as the average number of words participants in *IID* and *IAD* had to find to obtain £18). Results show that the percentage of subjects donating zero to the charity is 22.85% and the average amount donated is £2.18. These number are not significantly different from those in *NIID*: 19.44% ($z = 0.352$, $p = 0.725$, for a two-sided test for equality of proportions), and £2.44 ($z = 0.080$, $p = 0.936$; Mann-Whitney two-tailed test), respectively. This result seems to support the idea that group identity (rather than the effort level) is the main factor driving larger donations to charity.[13]

4.2. Effect of aggregating donations

In this section, we analyze subjects' behavior depending on whether the donation to the charity is aggregated or not. We will study both the intensive and extensive margins of individuals' decisions.

Focusing on the percentage of people donating to *DWB*, Fig. 1(b) reflects that aggregating donations does not affect subjects' willingness to donate, leading to very similar percentages of people donating regardless whether there was a previous group task ($z = -0.993$, $p = 0.321$, for a two-sided test for equality of proportions between *IAD* and *IID*) or not ($z = -0.251$,

[13] As expected, differences between our new treatment and *IID* are also statistically significant. For the proportion of people donating zero to charity (2.78% vs. 22.85%) the two-sided test of equality of proportions gives $z = -2.542$, and $p = 0.011$. For the average amount donated, it increases by almost 48% (£3.22 vs. £2.18), and the two-tailed Mann-Whitney test gives $z = 1.870$, and $p = 0.061$.

$p = 0.802$, for a two-sided test for equality of proportions between *NIAD* and *NIID*). So, Hypothesis 2.1 is not supported by the data.

Looking at the average amount donated, results show that differences are statistically significant for the comparison between *IAD* and *IID* ($z = 2.247$, $p = 0.025$; two-tailed Mann-Whitney test) but these differences are not significant when we compare *NIAD* and *NIID* ($z = 1.014$, $p = 0.311$; two-tailed Mann-Whitney test). So, aggregating donations only seems to have an effect on subjects' behavior when there has been a previous task that makes the group identity more salient. Hence, we find only partial support for our hypothesis 2.2.

Result 2: *Aggregating donations does not affect attitudes towards charitable giving on the intensive margin and only increases the amount sent to the charity when the group identity was previously enhanced.*

5. Conclusions

This paper analyses whether a very simple team-building exercise affects subjects' attitudes towards charitable giving. We examine the intensive and extensive margin of donation decisions using a 2×2 design in which we vary whether there was a group exercise to enhance group identity prior to the donation stage and whether donations were aggregated. We employed a careful and clean double-blind experimental design to ensure full anonymity across subjects and with respect to the experimenter in order to avoid any sense of peer pressure. Thus, our results may well represent a lower bound for the effects we find, since peer pressure is present in most environments.

We find that when group identity is made salient, there is a positive effect on the attitudes towards donation from the point of view of both the intensive and extensive margin. However, aggregating donations had an effect on subjects' behavior only for the case in which the group identity was previously enhanced.

Note that our results show that just aggregating the donations does not have an effect on people choices unless group identity has been previously enhanced. Although Charness and Holder (2019) show that team incentives work in increasing charitable giving, in that case teams were competing for matching funds. In our experiment, it seems that just aggregating donations is not enough for people to feel reluctant to "let down the team". It also seems that artificial groups created just for the donation stage are not strong enough to induce a feeling of guilt and social pressure which has also been shown to affect subjects' decisions (Babcock et al., 2015).

To not overgeneralize our findings, it is important to point out the specific characteristics of the study that might affect the results. First, similar to Charness et al. (2014), identity in this paper is induced by using a team-building activity. Hence, it remains an open question whether different ways of enhance group identity would have the same effect on charitable donations. Second, it might happen that our group identity task generates a positive feeling that could affect donations (Kirchsteiger et al., 2006; Kessler et al., 2021). So, although the ultimate reason increasing giving in our experiment seems to be group identity, it could be that a potential warm feeling generated by the group task, acts as a mediator in our setting.[14]

Potentially, our findings have interesting implications for philanthropic activities. Our results suggest that bringing out a (minimal) sense of community is enough to highly increase donations. Charity campaigns could benefit, without falling into higher campaign's costs, from eliciting donations from groups that share some level of identity – *i.e.*, company, school, fraternity, etc. – as compared to promoting individual contributions.

Appendix A. Experimental instructions

A1. Anagrams task instructions (group task)

Welcome to our experiment.

The experiment will be divided into two different activities. First, you will participate in the activity that is explained below. Once you finish it, you will receive the instructions for the second activity.

There are 6 participants in the session. These participants have been initially randomly subdivided into two groups of 3 subjects, each determined by the number in the label (odd numbers belong to "Orange Group" and even numbers to "Green Group").

The first activity involves creating existing words from a number of letters in order to generate money. Each group will be handed a sheet with some letters written on it. The group has 4 minutes to make as many words as possible with at least 3 letters. When the 4 minutes are over the group will receive another sheet with new letters and the former one will be removed. There will be a total of 3 different sheets with letters.

The money you earn will depend on the number of words found by your group. If your group finds a total of **24** words or more, your group will earn **£54**. If the group finds a total number of words smaller than 24, the group will make £1 per word found. The total amount generated will be divided equally among the members of the group.

Proper names are not allowed. Plurals are allowed. Verbal conjugation is allowed. You can use each letter as many times as this letter appears in the word sheet.

[14] We thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

A2. Anagrams task instructions (individual task)

Welcome to our experiment.

The experiment will be divided into two different activities. First, you will participate in the activity that is explained below. Once you finish with it, you will receive the instructions for the second activity.

The first activity involves creating existing words from a number of letters in order to generate money. Each person will be handed a sheet with some letters written on it. On your own, you have to make as many words with at least 3 letters as you can with these letters in 4 minutes. When the 4 minutes are over you will receive another sheet with new letters and the former one will be removed. There will be a total of 3 different sheets with letters.

The money you earn will depend on the number of correct words you achieved. If you find a total of **15** words or more, you will earn **£18**. If you find a total number of words smaller than 15, you will make £0.5 per word.

Proper names are not allowed. Plurals are allowed. Verbal conjugation is allowed. You can use each letter as many times as this letter appears in the word sheet.

A3. Donation stage instructions (group donation)

For the second part of the experiment you will still belong to the same group as in part 1 (either Orange or Green). In this second part, you will have to decide how much of the money that you obtained in the first part you want to donate to Doctors Without Borders.*

All individual donations within each group will be added and the resulting total amount of each group will be transferred to Doctors Without Borders.

You already received the money you made in the first part of the experiment. You have also received an empty envelope. Your task is to introduce in the envelope all the money you want to donate to Doctors Without Borders. Once you have introduced the money into the envelope, you just have to put the envelope inside the box that is located in the table close to the door and you can leave the experiment with the cash you kept for yourself.

To show that the money donated in the session has been actually transferred to the charity, we can send you an email with the receipt from Doctors Without Borders once the donation has been made. Please, provide your university email address as clear as possible to the experimenter if you want to receive proof of the transfer.

I want to receive proof of the transfer. My university email address is

*Doctor Without Borders is a medical and humanitarian international organization that provides help to the victims of natural or human disasters and armed conflicts without any kind of race, sex, religion, philosophy or political discrimination.

A4. Donation stage instructions (individual donation)

In this second part, you will have to decide how much of the money you obtained in the first part you want to donate to Doctors Without Borders. *

You already received the money you made in the first part of the experiment. You have also received an empty envelope. Your task is to introduce in the envelope all the money you want to donate to Doctors Without Borders. Once you have introduced the money into the envelope, you just have to put the envelope inside the box that is located in the table close to the door and you can leave the experiment with the cash you kept for yourself.

To show that the money donated in the session has been actually transferred to the charity, we can send you an email with the receipt from Doctors Without Borders once the donation has been made. Please, provide your university email address as clear as possible to the experimenter if you want to receive proof of the transfer.

I want to receive proof of the transfer. My university email address is

*Doctor Without Borders is a medical and humanitarian international organization that provides help to the victims of natural or human disasters and armed conflicts without any kind of race, sex, religion, philosophy or political discrimination.

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