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Charitable giving and social comparisons: The role of attention in asymmetric joint-donation tasks

Charitable requests often ask many potential donors to give to a specific donation cause. However, the presence of other donors can lead to social comparisons among donors and influence their self-perception. We systematically investigated the role of attention in these comparisons using a joint-donation task. Participants were presented with asymmetric joint-giving scenarios, in which two donors with unequal resources decide how much to donate to a recipient. In Study 1, we varied the order in which information about the other donor's and the recipient's resources was presented. In Study 2, we used eye-tracking to measure participants' attention to their own resources as well as to those of the other donor and the recipient. Results show that the order of comparisons matters: Participants donated more when they saw their own and the other donor's resources first, with the recipient's resources being the last piece of information. In Study 2, participants donated more when their last fixation in the trial was on the recipient's resources. Additionally, more frequent transitions between their own and the recipient's resources increased donations, while transitions between their own and the other donors' resources did not. These patterns were stronger the more needy the recipient was. While research has shown that upward social comparisons can lead to increased giving, the current findings highlight that people are not only sensitive to the presence of other donors and their resources, but also consider the neediness of the donation recipient.

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