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Sidestepping the rock and the hard place: The private avoidance of prosocial requests

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HIGHLIGHTS

- People avoid prosocial requests, even in private contexts and at a personal cost.
- Both those who would comply or refuse when directly asked avoid prosocial requests.
- Results suggest that a desire to act selfishly sans self-reproach drives avoidance.

ABSTRACT

For some, facing a prosocial request feels like being trapped between a rock and a hard place, requiring either a resource (e.g., money) or psychological (e.g., self-reproach) cost. Because both outcomes are dissatisfying, we propose that these people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests, even when they face these requests in private, anonymous contexts. In two experiments, in which participants' anonymity and privacy was assured, participants avoided facing prosocial requests and were willing to do so at a personal cost. This was true both for people who would have otherwise complied with the request and those who would have otherwise refused the request. This suggests that anticipatory self-reproach motivates people to avoid prosocial requests, regardless of whether or not this self-reproach would have been strong enough to cause them to comply with a direct request. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for prosocial behavior and the maintenance of moral self-regard.

Keywords:
Prosocial behavior
Self-interest
Morality
Decision making
Avoidance

1. Introduction

While checking out at the grocery store, walking down the street, or shopping online, people frequently confront requests to donate to charitable causes. Given how important these requests are for raising money for charity, it is no surprise that researchers have examined people's responses to direct prosocial requests. Some people gladly comply because they have altruistic or other-oriented motivations to help (e.g., [Batson & Shaw, 1991](#)), and others easily refuse because prosocial behavior is unimportant to them (e.g., [Aquino & Reed, 2002](#)). Yet, there are people who do not belong to either of these camps and instead feel dissatisfied regardless of what they do. They may lament the resource costs that come with complying (e.g., time or money) or psychological costs (e.g., self-reproach) that come with refusing ([Berman & Small, 2012](#)). Given these anticipated costs, do these people

prefer to refuse or comply with the request? Researchers of prosocial behavior traditionally focus on these two options—to give or not. However, we suggest that some people prefer a third, often unobserved option—avoiding the request altogether.

1.1. Prosocial requests and self-reproach

People are motivated to maintain a sense that they are good and moral (e.g., [Aquino & Reed, 2002](#); [Blasi, 2004](#); [Miller & Monin, 2016](#)). Social cognitive theory and self-discrepancy theory both contend that people maintain this positive moral self-regard by behaving in ways that adhere to internalized moral standards ([Bandura, 1986](#); [Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996](#); [Higgins, 1997](#)). Both theories define self-reproach¹ as aversive thoughts and feelings of self-condemnation or moral worthlessness that arise when people feel

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¹ We use the term "self-reproach" in this article, but previous researchers have used the terms self-censure, self-blame, and self-condemnation to refer to the same phenomenon ([Bandura et al., 1996](#); [Higgins, 1987](#)).

that they have failed to act in accordance with personally accepted moral standards, which often manifests in agitation-related emotions such as guilt, remorsefulness, and uneasiness (Bandura et al., 1996; Higgins, 1997). These personal moral standards develop through socialization processes in which people witness and encode evaluative reactions to their own and others' conduct (Bandura et al., 1996). Once formed, these moral standards act as internalized guides that encourage moral or prosocial behavior because failing to do so ignites self-reproach (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001).

Thus, for those who have an internalized expectation of prosocial behavior, refusing a prosocial request creates a discrepancy between one's actions and one's desired self-image, inducing self-reproach (see Higgins, 1987). In order to avoid this self-reproach, people may comply with the prosocial request, even if they would otherwise prefer to refuse it (Lindsey, Yun, & Hill, 2007). Alternatively, people may refuse the request, but then suffer self-reproach for violating their internalized moral standards (Berman & Small, 2012; Dunn, Ashton-James, Hanson, & Aknin, 2010; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999). Therefore, although some of these people comply with the request to avoid self-reproach and some refuse the request and consequently feel self-reproach, both parties may experience facing a prosocial request as being trapped between a rock and a hard place; that is, they feel dissatisfied regardless of whether they comply or refuse.

To deal with this dissatisfying situation, social cognitive theory has pointed to various sociocognitive tactics people employ to minimize the self-reproach that comes from behaving self-interestedly (see Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996). For instance, people can justify their self-interested behavior by denying responsibility for their actions, construing them as serving a worthy end, or minimizing their magnitude or likelihood of causing harm (Bandura et al., 1996; Exley, in press). But there may be another tactic people employ before ever facing this dissatisfying decision. We propose that people are motivated to simply avoid prosocial requests, allowing them to sidestep prosocial behavior without suffering self-reproach. We further suggest that the motivation to avoid prosocial requests is strong enough for some people that they will endure a personal cost to do so.

1.2. Motivated avoidance of prosocial requests

Previous research has demonstrated the appeal of avoidance of prosocial requests, but has suggested that it is not self-reproach, but fear of public censure that motivates this avoidance behavior (DellaVigna, List, & Malmendier, 2012; Flynn & Lake, 2008; Pancer, McMullen, Kabatoff, Johnson, & Pond, 1979). For instance, shoppers were found to avoid an entrance at a grocery store when a volunteer was asking for donations in front of it, resulting in lower donations than when volunteers were stationed at all entrances to the store (Andreoni, Rao, & Trachtman, 2011). However, people did not avoid the entrance when the volunteers were stationed in front of it, but did not explicitly ask for donations. Moreover, in the dictator game, in which participants must allocate \$10 between themselves and a recipient, many participants avoid the decision by exiting the game with \$9.00, leaving the recipient with nothing, so long as the recipient would never be informed about the game. However, if their decision is private (i.e., the recipient would not know the source of any money they received), people do not exit the game, many preferring to allocate all \$10.00 to themselves (Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006).

If it were only a desire not to appear selfish to others that motivates the avoidance of prosocial requests, then it would seem unlikely that people would be motivated to avoid these requests in private, anonymous contexts, in which prosocial requests are becoming increasingly common (e.g., online shopping). Indeed, the results from the Dana et al. (2006) have lead some to conclude as much (Cain, Dana, &

Newman, 2014). However, self-discrepancy theory would suggest otherwise because, in contrast to social reproach, the threat of self-reproach is not lower in private contexts. Indeed, this theory contends that people are the most vulnerable to self-reproach (e.g., guilt, self-condemnation) when they have transgressed a personally accepted moral standard (Higgins, 1987). Moreover, refusing to help a charitable organization may implicate one's internalized moral standard more than refusing to give to a peer in an economic game because charitable organizations are more "deserving" of assistance than peer recipients (Eckel & Grossman, 1996). Indeed, people face greater self-reproach when refusing requests made by prosocial organizations than by for-profit organizations, because prosocial organizations are regarded as deserving of help (Berman & Small, 2012; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999). Thus, if self-reproach underlies people's motivation to avoid prosocial requests then people should be motivated to avoid prosocial requests, even in private, anonymous contexts.

2. Overview of Studies

We conducted two studies to test the prediction that people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests in private contexts. We further assess whether people would incur a personal cost to avoid these requests. Finally, we assess whether both people who would otherwise comply and people who would otherwise refuse these requests when directly asked to give are similarly motivated to avoid these requests. To ensure decisions would be made in a private context, all responses were anonymized such that the participants' responses could not be linked to their identity. Moreover, the potential recipients of donations (i.e., charitable organizations) were unaware of the participants' decision to donate to them. Finally, participants completed studies from their own computers instead of in the physical presence of researchers (in contrast to Dana et al., 2006). For all studies we do not exclude any data, and we report how we determined the sample size and all the manipulations and measures we used.

3. Study 1

Study 1 tests whether Internet users would forgo a real, desirable opportunity to earn extra money to avoid confronting a direct prosocial request.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Given uncertainty about effect size, we adhered to the suggestion of using at least 50 participants per condition (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2013), and chose to collect 100 participants per condition. Data were not analyzed until data collection was complete, resulting in 200 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (65% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.14$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.68$). To ensure a private, anonymous context, participants took this study online using their own electronic devices and provided no information about their personal identity.

3.1.2. Procedure

Participants first participated in a two-minute unrelated study that involved viewing an article about electric bicycles in exchange for \$0.25. At the end of that study, they read that they had an opportunity to participate in an additional five-minute study in exchange for a bonus payment of \$0.50. All participants read the same, detailed description of the study. They learned that this additional study would involve answering a few questions about Thanksgiving and writing a paragraph about whether and how they celebrated it or what they did instead. We chose this topic because the study happened to be conducted on Thanksgiving morning. Moreover, we sought a task that everyone

on mTurk could complete, but that was not so trivial that everyone would choose to complete it.²

Participants were then randomly assigned to a Prosocial Request condition or a Control condition. In the Prosocial Request condition, participants read, "At the end of the study, you may choose to keep the bonus payment of \$0.50, or donate it to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital." In the Control condition, they read, "At the end of the study, your bonus payment of \$0.50 will be processed." Participants who chose to complete the additional study then completed the study as it was described. Participants in the Prosocial Request condition who completed the study were asked whether they would like to donate (donations were actually paid to St. Jude's Research Hospital). The dependent variable was whether participants chose to participate in the additional study.

3.2. Results

In the Control condition, 93 of 101 participants chose to complete the bonus study (92.08%, 95% CI: [86.81, 97.35]). Thus, as intended, participants found it desirable to complete this additional study. However, in the Prosocial Request condition, when people knew they would be faced with the option to donate their bonus, only 82 of 99 participants completed the study (82.83% [75.40, 90.26]). That is, over twice as many participants avoided the study in the Prosocial Request condition compared to the Control condition (17.17% vs. 7.92%); this difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 3.91, p = .048$, Cramer's $V = .14$ [.001, .273]. Ten of the 82 participants in the Prosocial Request condition who completed the study donated; those in the Control condition were not asked to donate.

3.3. Discussion

Study 1 shows that some people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests, even if this avoidance comes at a cost. Although earning an extra \$0.50 was a desirable opportunity, some participants avoided this opportunity when they anticipated facing a request to donate that money upon receiving it. This indicates that some people find it aversive to confront a prosocial request, even when there are no social repercussions for refusing it.

In Study 1, we could not determine whether participants who avoided the additional study in the Prosocial Request condition would have complied with or refused the request had they been directly asked. That is, when facing a prosocial request, some comply because they anticipate feeling self-reproach if they were to refuse, whereas others refuse and consequently suffer self-reproach. We contend that both would-be compliers and refusers are motivated to avoid the request, as avoidance allows them to refuse the request without self-reproach. Study 2 allows us to address this contention.

4. Study 2

Study 2 tests whether both people who would comply with a direct prosocial request and people who would refuse a direct prosocial request prefer instead to avoid facing prosocial requests, even if this avoidance comes with a personal cost. We also test whether the opportunity to avoid a prosocial request leads to less prosocial behavior.

² Although conducting the study on (and about) Thanksgiving was incidental to our hypotheses, it may have affected overall rates of giving. Thinking about gratitude may have made participants more likely to give, or it may have made participants less likely to give because they felt that they had already been charitable. While we do not find it likely that the day interacted with our manipulation, Study 2 was conducted on a normal weekday, which should address this concern.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

We first collected 400 participants, at which point we observed a trending effect, and added 100 participants per condition to complete data collection, for a total of 604 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (63% male, $M_{age} = 31.32, SD_{age} = 10.90$, payment = \$0.50).

4.1.2. Procedure

Participants read that they would be evaluating task materials for future studies. They would select which one of four tasks they wanted to complete. Three of the four tasks were relatively appealing (rating a singing audition for "The X Factor," reading an excerpt from the book "Bossypants" by Tina Fey, and rating a celebrity gossip article), and one of the tasks was relatively unappealing, but its completion would help a non-profit organization. Participants learned that for this prosocial task they would, "Read and provide feedback on informational pamphlets meant to increase awareness of poverty in Africa for a study in collaboration with a volunteer organization." They also read, "This task requires a fair amount of focus and attention to detail. However, your feedback will provide useful and meaningful feedback to the non-profit organization with whom the lab is partnering for this particular study."

We manipulated the structure of participants' decision-making process in order to provide some participants with the opportunity to avoid deciding whether to complete the charity task. In the No Avoidance Opportunity condition, all four tasks were presented in a single columned list. The charity task was presented second in the list; the other three tasks were randomly assigned to the other three spots in the list (see Fig. 1). In contrast, in the Avoidance Opportunity condition, participants could avoid the prosocial task by removing it from their final choice set. Specifically, they were told that two different labs at the same university (the Marketing Research Lab and the Consumer Behavior Lab) each were pretesting two tasks. Participants first selected for which lab they would like to pretest materials. On the next page, they then selected which of the lab's two tasks they wanted to complete. Thus, participants in this condition had the opportunity to avoid deciding whether to complete the charity task by choosing the lab that was not pretesting it.

As shown in Fig. 1, similar to the No Avoidance Opportunity condition, participants in the Avoidance Opportunity condition saw all four tasks concurrently. However, the tasks were presented in two columned lists, pertaining to the two respective labs. Moreover, in this condition, the charity task always was presented in the same position in the list, just as it was in the No Avoidance Opportunity condition (see Fig. 1). We randomly paired the charity task with one of the three other tasks (i.e., the X-Factor clip, the excerpt from *Bossypants*, or the gossip column). We also randomly varied whether the Marketing Research Lab or the Consumer Behavior Lab was described as pretesting the prosocial task. We did this to ensure that the participants' desire to participate for a particular lab (e.g., the Marketing Research Lab) would not affect the results.

After reading the task descriptions, those in the No Avoidance Opportunity condition selected which task they wanted to complete. Those in the Avoidance Opportunity condition first selected for which lab to participate, and then selected which of this lab's two tasks they wanted to complete. Participants then completed the task that they selected for the sake of consistency with the cover story. Participants also completed the "Guilt-Negative-Behavior-Evaluation" subscale of the Guilt and Shame Proneness scale (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011) and the Self-Importance of Moral Identity scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002), which were included for exploratory purposes because they tend to be associated with moral character and prosocial behavior (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012; and for reviews Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

No Avoidance:
One choice set condition

Avoidance Opportunity:
Two choice set condition

| | Market Research Lab* | Consumer Behavior Lab* |
|--|--|--|
| Read excerpt of Tina Fey's book "Bossypants" [†] | Read excerpt of Tina Fey's book "Bossypants" [†] | Watch a singing audition for "The X-Factor" [†] |
| Proofread and provide feedback on a pamphlet for charitable organization | Proofread and provide feedback on a pamphlet for charitable organization | Read an excerpt from a popular gossip blog [†] |
| Watch a singing audition for "The X-Factor" [†] | | |
| Read an excerpt from a popular gossip blog [†] | | |

*Lab order randomized
†Task order randomized

Fig. 1. An example of how participants might have seen stimuli in the No Avoidance and Avoidance conditions in Study 2.

4.1.3. Dependent measures

4.1.3.1. *Prosocial choice.* Our primary dependent variable was whether participants chose to complete the charity task. We predicted that, when faced with a prosocial request that they could not avoid (i.e., when all choices were presented together), people would be more likely to behave prosocially than when they had the opportunity to avoid the request by choosing the choice set that did not contain the prosocial option.

4.1.3.2. *Avoidance of directly refusing the prosocial task.* This design allows us to test whether participants who ordinarily would not select the prosocial task would, even at the cost of foregoing a preferable option, also choose to avoid the lab containing the prosocial task in order to avoid directly refusing the prosocial task. That is, we expected that participants would be less likely to select "Random Task 1" (e.g., "Bossypants" in Fig. 1) in the Avoidance Opportunity condition, even if it was their preferred option, because selecting it would require them to first face the prosocial request (by selecting the lab containing the prosocial task), and to then directly refuse the prosocial request. Therefore, we expected that fewer people would choose the task paired with the prosocial task, so that they could avoid directly refusing the prosocial task. Thus, this design allowed us to test whether both people who would have given, and people who would have refused, prefer to avoid the prosocial request—the latter, at a cost to themselves.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Prosocial choice

We predicted that participants would be more likely to behave prosocially when they could not avoid a prosocial request than when they had the opportunity to avoid this request by choosing the lab that was not pretesting it. Indeed, participants in the Avoidance Opportunity condition were less likely (9.49% [6.15, 12.83]) than participants in No Avoidance Opportunity condition (15.86% [11.79, 19.93]) to select the charity task, $\chi^2(1, N = 604) = 5.50, p = .019, V = .095 [.012, .174]$.

4.2.2. Avoidance of directly refusing the prosocial task

We also tested whether some people who would ordinarily refuse the prosocial request would avoid directly refusing it, even at the expense of foregoing their most preferred task. To assess this, we calculated the expected percentage of participants who should have selected "Random Task 1" (i.e., the task that was paired with the prosocial task, e.g., "Bossypants" in Fig. 1). Given that the three non-prosocial tasks were randomly assigned to a position, people should have chosen each position at an equal rate (28.05% each, after subtracting the

expected rate of people choosing the prosocial task).³ However, our theory predicts that people would avoid choosing Random Task 1 because it was in the same lab as the prosocial task ("Lab 1"). Thus, in the Avoidance Opportunity condition, we anticipated that fewer participants than would be expected would choose Random Task 1. Accordingly, we found that, whereas 28.05% should have chosen Random Task 1 in the Avoidance Opportunity condition, only 16.27% [12.06, 20.48] chose it (see Fig. 2), $\chi^2(1, N = 295) = 20.28, p < .001, V = .26 [.15, .37]$. This 11.78% difference represents those who preferred "Random Task 1" over the two non-prosocial tasks in Lab 2, but did not complete it because they avoided "Lab 1" altogether. This drop was consistent for each task; that is, any task assigned to the "Random Task 1" spot was less likely to be chosen than baseline preferences from the control condition would predict (see Supplementary online materials for analyses). We elaborate on the interpretation of these results in the discussion.

4.2.3. Individual difference variables

Guilt proneness and internalized moral identity were both positively and significantly correlated with participants' tendency to choose the prosocial option (guilt proneness: $B = .24 [-0.03, .46]$, $SE = .11, p = .028$; internalized moral identity: $B = .48 [.15, .87]$, $SE = .18, p = .008$). There was no main effect of symbolized moral identity on prosocial choice, $B = .02 [-0.17, .21]$, $SE = .10, p = .85$. None of these variables moderated the results; see Supplementary online materials for analyses.

4.3. Discussion

In Study 2, participants who were given the opportunity to avoid a prosocial task did so, which led to less prosocial behavior and to fewer participants completing their desired task. That is, some people who would have completed the task when they were directly faced with it chose to avoid it when given the opportunity. We argue that, while they would have ordinarily completed the prosocial task to avoid self-reproach, the opportunity to avoid the option allowed them to indirectly refuse the request without making them feel bad.

Furthermore, others who were inclined to refuse the prosocial task still avoided the option, even if avoiding it meant they had to forgo their preferred task. To clarify, imagine a participant who would feel self-reproach for refusing to help the non-profit organization, but would still rather read Tina Fey's "Bossypants." When faced with the single choice set in Fig. 1, she simply chooses "Bossypants," and endures the self-reproach of rejecting the prosocial option. However, in the

³ Alternatively, expected values could be 1/3 of those who did not choose the prosocial task in the two choice set condition, which would be $(100-9.49)/3 = 30.14\%$; this only strengthens our effect.

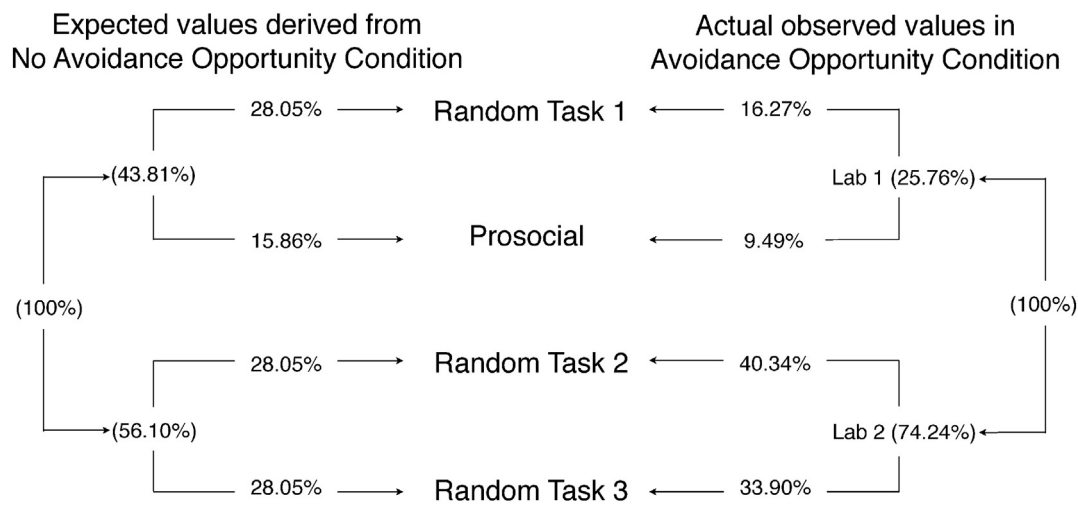


Fig. 2. The expected percentage of participants who should have selected each task from Study 2 (left), compared to actual percentages (right).

Avoidance Opportunity condition, to read “Bossypants,” she would be required first to select “Market Research Lab,” (hereby Lab 1) leaving her with two choices: “Bossypants” or the prosocial task. Choosing “Bossypants” directly over the prosocial task would be a more salient refusal of the prosocial task, causing heightened self-reproach. She may then avoid Lab 1 altogether and choose Lab 2, foregoing her preferred option of reading “Bossypants.” Indeed, given the expected rate of choice, “Bossypants” should have been chosen about 33.4 times in each random position; however it was only chosen 19 times when it appeared next to the prosocial task. Therefore, some participants chose either to read the gossip column or watch the singing audition (in Lab 2) even though they would have rather read the “Bossypants” excerpt (an effect that was consistent across tasks).

5. General discussion

We found that, in private contexts, many people prefer to avoid prosocial requests. This was true both for people who would have otherwise complied with the request and those who would have otherwise refused the request. This suggests that anticipatory self-reproach motivates people to avoid prosocial requests, regardless of whether or not this self-reproach would have been strong enough to cause them to comply with a direct request. We found further that charitable organizations received less help when there was opportunity to avoid their requests and participants forewent otherwise desirable opportunities (i.e., earning \$0.50 or doing a desirable task) to avoid these prosocial requests. Thus, avoidance led to suboptimal outcomes for both the participants and the charities. Finally, our results indicate that people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests even in the absence of anticipated social costs. In our studies, there was no way for either the experimenter or the charitable organizations to know who refused to give—yet we still observed avoidance. This implies that people not only avoid prosocial requests to sidestep negative judgment from others (see e.g., Andreoni et al., 2011; Dana et al., 2006), but also to avoid negative judgment from themselves.

5.1. Theoretical contributions and future directions

Our findings advance understanding about the ways in which people maintain a positive moral self-regard. Social cognitive theory’s approach to moral disengagement argues that people maintain a positive moral self-regard even in the midst of behaving in immoral, selfish, and unethical ways by employing cognitive tactics to justify their behavior (Bandura et al., 1996; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). The present results identify a behavioral tactic people use to

maintain a positive moral self-regard in the midst of behaving selfishly. By avoiding situations in which their moral character would be tested, such as a choice between donating money to charity or keeping the money, people act selfishly without harming their moral self-regard because they cannot fail a “moral test” that they never faced (cf. Miller & Monin, 2016).

Although we contend that people are motivated to avoid prosocial requests because it allows them to behave selfishly without inciting self-reproach, questions remain about the specific affective experience that motivates the avoidance of prosocial requests in private. Self-discrepancy theory suggests that whether anticipated guilt or anticipated shame motivates avoidance depends on the specific self-discrepancy that these requests activate (see Higgins, 1987, 1999). Focusing on how refusing the request would violate the standards of close others, such as their parents (i.e., an actual own/ideal other discrepancy), likely leads to shame (Higgins, 1987; Piers & Singer, 1971). In contrast, focusing violating their own standards (i.e., and actual own/ideal own discrepancy), likely leads to guilt (Higgins, 1987). However, concerns about violating one’s own or others’ standards can be highly correlated (Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998), and the specific mapping of shame and guilt to these specific self-discrepancies has found only mixed support (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Tangney et al., 1998). Given that past research is equivocal on which discrete emotions form the affective core or self-reproach (see also Ausubel, 1955; Horney, 2013; Lewis, 1979; Piers & Singer, 1971), future work would benefit from assessing whether and how the experiences of different discrete emotions intensify or minimize the motivation to avoid prosocial requests.

We assessed guilt proneness and internalized moral identity as exploratory measures as a first attempt to assess who may be more or less likely to avoid prosocial requests. Both traits correlated positively with prosocial behavior, but neither trait moderated the effect of having an avoidance opportunity on this prosocial behavior. This may seem surprising; if feelings of self-reproach motivate avoidance behavior then one might expect people who are highly guilt-prone to be more likely than people who are less guilt-prone to avoid prosocial requests. However, trait guilt proneness is qualitatively different from state guilt. In fact, guilt proneness is positively associated with positive affectivity (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2012), negatively associated with state feelings of guilt, anger, and sadness (Cohen et al., 2012; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), and unrelated to the experiences of negative self-discrepancies (Tangney et al., 1998). Future research might assess shame proneness as a possible moderating individual difference. Unlike guilt proneness, shame proneness positively predicts the experience of self-discrepancies and the

aversive emotions these discrepancies produce (Tangney et al., 1998). Moreover, shame proneness is associated with avoidance behavior in general (see Tangney & Dearing, 2002 for review). Thus, highly shame-prone people may be particularly motivated to avoid prosocial requests.

Further work might also focus on when people are more or less motivated to avoid prosocial requests. Such work would help reconcile the present findings from previous work on the dictator game, which found that people avoided facing a self-other tradeoff only when their actions were public (Dana et al., 2006). As argued earlier, people may feel greater internal pressure to help charitable organizations than a counterpart in an economic game due to the inherent deservingness of charitable causes (Eckel & Grossman, 1996). Furthermore, perhaps in the dictator game, people do not feel self-reproach for fiscally depriving a peer, but instead give to avoid upsetting the peer (i.e., making him feel “cheated”). Thus, when recipients were ignorant of the game, participants behaved selfishly because they could do so without upsetting the recipients. As prosocial organizations are not “upset” by, or even aware of refusals of online requests, people likely feel self-reproach in prosocial contexts because they have not fulfilled a moral duty. The characteristics of a benefactor (e.g., a charity versus an unknown peer) may be one of many important contextual features that govern when people are more or less likely to avoid facing self-other tradeoffs in private contexts.

Finally, our work may have important implications for research and interventions aimed at increasing prosocial behavior. Whereas previous work has focused on how people remove the psychological costs from making self-interested choices (Berman & Small, 2012; Exley, in press), we know less about people who make prosocial choices when directly asked to do so. The fact that many of those who comply actually prefer to avoid the request altogether may reveal a critical wrinkle for organizations that seek to increase prosocial giving. Charities commonly incite feelings of self-reproach in order to increase compliance with prosocial requests, through such tactics as guilt appeals (Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). Whereas these tactics may increase compliance when people directly face the appeal (Hibbert, Smith, Davies, & Ireland, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2007), the present findings suggest that these same appeals may induce some to avoid the situation in which the prosocial solicitation is likely to occur. This may have important practical implications. For instance, when facing a donation request at checkout, online shoppers may abandon their carts to avoid giving a response. This would negatively affect the retailer, who is left without a sale, and the consumer, who is left without merchandise. We do not suggest that organizations cease their efforts; in fact, cause-related marketing often leads to more favorable brand perception (Nan & Heo, 2007). However, effective interventions might need to focus on decreasing the self-reproach associated with self-interested choices and reassuring givers that they made the right choice.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.01.011>.

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