Empathy and preferences for welfare assistance

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Abstract

In this proposal we outline the design of and the pre-analysis plan for an experiment aiming at increasing support for redistributive policies in the USA. The intervention consists of a perspective taking task in which subjects write short essays about a fictional character facing financial hardship. Based on the psychological theory of perspective taking, we hypothesize that this task can shift redistributive preferences through reducing stereotypes and increasing affect towards poor people.

1 Background

One of the greatest puzzles in contemporary US politics is the inability of the current political system to counterbalance the massive rise of economic inequality in the recent decades (Bonica et al., 2013). While some scholars argue that low levels of redistribution in the USA are driven by the asymmetric infleunce of the affluent that prevents the implementation of policy helphing the poor (e.g. Gilens, 2012) others notice that poor or middle class citizens often do not support redistribtuive policies that would in fact represent their financial interests (Bartels, 2005).

Yet another stream of research identifies factors behind low levels of support for redistribtuion that are outside the realm of material self-interest. This body of research includes accounts highlighting the role of racism (Gilens, 1995), norms of fairness (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016), trust in the governments ability to address income inequality through welfare policies (Kuziemko et al., 2015) or perceptions about the deservingness of individuals receiving help from the government (Petersen, 2012)

This project seeks to contribute to this literature by exploring the role of empathy in public support for redistributive policies. In particular, we posit that one reason why middle class and affluent Americans tend to oppose welfare assistance is due to a disconnect between their own experience and the plight of poor people (Thal, 2017). On the one hand, this hypothesis is rooted in empirical research pointing to the rising income-based seggregation in the USA (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011) and its effects on how wealthy Americans perceive social problems (Thal, 2017). On the other hand, we build on social-psychological research connecting a lack of perspective taking – the coordination of one's perspective with the experiences of members of other groups (Dovidio et al., 2004, p. 1537) – with prejudice against the members of that group.

Our experimental study evaluates the effect of an intervention that uses an essay writing task to facilitate perspective taking with people living in poverty. Following a rich literature that has successfully deployed such interventions to improve attitudes towards marginalized

groups (Bruneau and Saxe, 2012; Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000; Simonovits et al., 2018; Vescio et al., 2003) here we seek to encourage perspective taking with people in poverty in order to shift preferences about redistributive policies.

Our theory suggests that one reason for the relatively low support for redistributive policies in the US is that large parts of society rarely consider the experiences of poor people. Accordingly, our intervention facilitates taking the perspective of an individual under financial hardship. It is reasonable to assume that the less likely a participant was to take the perspective of poor people before the experiment, the larger the effects of the intervention will be. Accordingly, our intervention may prove to be most effective among people (1) who are more affluent (2) do not consider themselves as poor and (3) have limited contact with poor people. In the limiting case, we clearly do not expect the treatment to have an impact on people who are experiencing economic hardship themselves.[1] Given that affluent people traditionally show low support for redistribution finding a larger treatment effect among them is of particular substantive relevance.

2 Hypotheses

H1. Perspective taking with people in poverty increases support for redistributive policies.

H2. The marginal effect of perspective taking with people in poverty on redistributive policies is larger among more affluent participants than among less affluent participants.

3 Experimental design

The study employs a between-subjects design in which treated participants are asked to write a series of short essays about a fictional person described in a vignette. The vignette depicts

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[1]This is analogous to perspective taking studies targeting prejudice against an ethnic minority only studying members of the ethnic majority.

a person (whose gender is matched to the participant) who has been a victim of a workplace accident and was laid of. Subjects in the control group are asked to write about a movie they watched recently. We estimate the effect of this stimuli on redistribtuive preferences by comparing the responses of subjects to a battery of questions measuring support for a broad range of welfare policies across those in the treatment and the control group.

3.1   Procedure

The study follows a standard experimental procedure. First, participants read the description of the study and sign a consent form. To reduce attrition and maximize informed consent, this page informs participants that they will be asked to write short essays as part of this study. Participants are assigned into treatment or control group in a double-blind procedure by the Qualtrics survey platform. Randomization is blocked by self-reported income status.

At the beginning of the survey, we measure trait empathy with the Emotional Contagion subscale of the Basic Empathy Scale in Adults (BES-A) (Carr et al. 2013) and a subjective assessment of income status. Next, we ask two questions about minimum wages, which are unrelated to the present study. Participants subsequently proceed to the experiment. After completing the perspective taking exercise or the control essay, participants are presented a distractor task, where they need to assess leadership status from facial cues in chimpanzees. This task is meant to purge short-term memory and thus make our estimates more conservative. After the distractor, participants answer outcome variables. We measure the main outcome of interest – support for redistributive policies – before measuring intermediate outcomes (affect and stereotypes).

Finally, participants are debriefed about the goals of the study, offered factual information about redistributive policies in the US and provided a list of free resources in case they find themselves struggling in life. The latter materials are intended to reduce any negative effects in the very unlikely case that some participants feel unwell after taking the perspective of a person under financial hardship.

3.2 Stimuli

The wording of the vignette is as follows:

John (Kate) is 35 years old and he (she) has lived alone with his (her) son Tim and daughter Lily since his ex-wife (her ex-husband) has left him (her) a few years ago. John (Kate) always had a regular job, but he (she) has recently been the victim of a serious work-related injury and was subsequently laid off. He (She) is very motivated to get back to work again but his (her) injury and the anxiety he (she) suffers from makes it very difficult for him (her) to find a job. Despite receiving some assistance from the government, John (Kate) struggles to cover daily expenses such as food, bills, and medication and simply does not have enough money to pay his (her) ever-increasing rents. His (Her) landlord now said that they need to move out at the end of the month unless he (she) pays the two months' rent he (she) owes. John (Kate) is often worried about the future of his (her) family and blames himself (herself) for not being able to provide for his (her) children the life and opportunities they deserve.

Now please spend a minute to imagine a day in the life of this individual as if you were that person, looking at the world through his eyes and walking through the world in his shoes. Try to think about how you would feel if you were in this situation.[2]

Subsequently, participants received three prompts and were asked to write 3-4 sentences about each.

1. Now please write a few sentences about your thoughts. In particular, please explain how you would feel if you were in this situation!

2. Now please write a few sentences about what you think you would be most stressed or anxious about in this situation!

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[2]This wording follows established prompts in the literature (Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000).

3. Finally, what would you tell your children if they said that it was unfair that their life is so much harder than their friends' at school?

Several features of this task enhance perspective taking. First, the vignette offers a vivid description of the struggles of an individual under financial stress. We relied on deservingness cues to signal that the target is an unlucky and not a lazy person. Second, we match the gender of the target with the gender of the target to make it easier to imagine their situation. Third, we follow the literature in giving instructions to first imagine the life of the target individual (Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000). The survey was programmed to force respondents to stay on the page for at least 60 seconds, preventing speeding through the exercise. Fourth, the three prompts focus on the emotional experience of the target, further encouraging feelings of compassion to arise. Altogether, we believe that the treatment encourages participants to consider life from the perspective of a person under severe financial hardship and is likely to enduce positive feelings towards this person and attenuate negative feelings.

Participants in the control condition are asked to write an essay about a movie they watched lately. This placebo exercise has two main goals. First, it is designed to reduce confusion and potential demand effects by giving a (neutral) essay writing exercise to participants in the control condition. This is important because instructions at the begining of the survey and in the consent form emphasize that participants will be asked to write essays. Participants who consent to take part in a survey involving essays, but are not asked to write essays may become suspicious and start guessing the goal of the study. Second, the placebo essay is designed to reduce fatigue asymmetries between the treatment and control groups.

The wording of the essay writing exercise in the control condition is as follows:

Now please write a few sentences about a movie you watched lately. In particular, please tell us why did you decide to watch it, what was it about, what you liked or disliked about it and whether you would recommend it to your friends.

Please try to write 8-10 sentences.

3.3 Dependent measures

3.3.1 Policy preferences

The main outcome of interest is a battery of ten questions tapping support for redistributive policies. The survey items come from a variety of sources including Brown-Iannuzzi et al., (2015) and Broockman (2016) as well as some items developed and tested through extensive pilots. The survey questions are worded in the form of policy proposals and respondents are asked to indicate their positions to each on a labelled 5-points scale with response options "Strongly agree", "Rather agree", "Neither agree, nor disagree", "Rather disagree" and "Strongly disagree". Pilots suggested that these survey items capture a single underlying dimension and exhibit sufficient inter-item reliability.

The list of items are provided below:

1. Federal spending on aid to poor people should be cut.

2. The federal income tax should be abolished even if this means the poor pay more in taxes than the rich.

3. The government should play no role in paying for families' education expenses.

4. Public services for low income individuals should be cut in order to cut federal income taxes for people who make more than $200,000.

5. The federal government should pay for all necessary medical care for all Americans living on very little income.

6. The federal government should pay for the college education for students coming from low income families.

7. The federal government should provide affordable housing for families in need.

8. The wealthy should be taxed at a higher rate than the middle class.

9. The government should not pay for individuals' health care. Those who cannot afford health care themselves should turn to their families and private charity for help.

10. The government should provide every American a universal basic income amounting to $1,000 a month, which would be paid for by raising taxes on individuals earning more than $150,000 a year.

We define the dependent variable of our experiment as a simple average of the responses to the 10 survey items about redistributive policies standardized by the mean and variance in the control group[3]. We opt for this simple measurement strategy for clarity and because of the extremely high correlation of these measure with other versions estimated via factor analysis in our pilots.

3.4   Intermediate outcomes

Relying on the psychological literature on attitudes towards poor people, we identify two mutually reinforcing psychological mechanisms which could explain higher support for redistributive policies among people completing the perspective taking exercise (Petersen et al, 2012). First, we expect that by reducing the perceived distance between the self and the out-group, these people experience a positive shift in emotions. Accordingly, we predict that participants in the treatment group on average will have (1) higher thermometer ratings of poor people, (2) will experience more emotions inducing helping behavior (compassion, anxiety, distress) and (3) less emotions inhibiting help (anger, disgust, boredom) compared to participants in the control group. Second, we expect that by reducing the perceived difference between the self and the out-group, the perspective taking exercise reduces stereotypes about the poor. Accordingly, we expect that on average participants in the treatment group will rate poor people higher on (4) effort and (5) competence. Finally, (6) we expect to see a shift towards believing that circumstances beyond their control are to blame for a person's poverty and not a lack of effort.

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[3]We reverse the scoring for the questions where agreement indicates more conservative preferences

Below we provide the questions tapping into these measures.

Feeling thermometers

We would like to get your feelings toward some groups of people who have been in the news using something called the feeling thermometer. You can choose any number between 0 and 100. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel toward the group, the lower the number, the colder or less favorable. You would rate a group at the 50-degree mark if you feel neither warm nor cold toward them.

1. Elderly

2. People living in poverty

3. Black people

4. Disabled people

Emotions

We would like you to think for a moment about your emotions. How well each of the following words describe how you feel at the moment? ("A great deal", "A lot", "Somewhat", "A little" or "Not at all").

1. compassionate

2. anxious

3. upset

4. disgusted

5. angry

6. bored

Stereotype measures

In your opinion, how much effort people living in poverty make to change their lives for the better?

- Making a great deal of effort

- Making a lot of effort

- Making a moderate effort

- Making a little effort

- Making no effort at all

In your opinion, are most people living in poverty competent or incompetent?

- Extremely competent

- Somewhat competent

- Neither competent nor incompetent

- Somewhat incompetent

- Extremely incompetent

In your opinion, which is more to blame if a person is poor: lack of effort on his or her part or circumstances beyond his or her control?

- Definitely lack of effort

- Probably lack of effort

- Might be lack of effort, might be circumstances beyond control

- Probably circumstances beyond control

- Definitely circumstances beyond control

In order to construct a composite measure of stereotype we average responses to these 3 questions and standardize them with the mean in the control group.

3.5   Moderators

Our second hypothesis predicts that taking the perspective of poor people has a larger marginal effect on redistributive policies among more (vs less) affluent participants. We operationalize this hypothesis by estimating the conditional effect of the treatment after subsetting respondents according to their (1) subjective income status, (2) their self-reported household income and (3) an objective measure of affluence in the respondents' place of living. We note two issues here: first, while the moderating impact of each of these measures is implied by our theory, we have no way of teasing out the relative moderating impact of each. Second, we note that contextual income could pick up the moderating role of both individual income and the more indirect effect of local contact with poverty (see Thal, 2017)

First, we estimate the treatment effect conditional on participants' self reported income status. We argue that self-reported income status taps into people's perceived identity better than objective income measures. This identity in turn is more likely to accurately reflect whether participants are more or less likely to take the perspective of poor people in their everyday life. To measure subjective assessment of income status, we rely on the following question:

Which income group category do you think you belong to?

- very low income

- low income

- middle income

- high income

- very high income

To measure objective household income, we rely on the the household income data Lucid collects from respondents every three-months. This records the household income of the respondent on a scale with 24 points. The scale differentiates between people...

- with less than $14,999

- with an income between $15,000 and $99,999 in $5,000 increments

- with an income between $100,000 and $249,999 in $25,000 increments

- with more than $250,000

We recode this data to place each survey taker into quintiles in the national income distribtuion.

To measure how much contact people have with poor people, we merge the ZIP code of respondents' residence (collected by Lucid) with the United States Census Bureau's median household income estimates.[4]

3.6 Control variables

In our analysis, we adjust for some covariates in order to mitigate imbalances across treated and control groups. Thereby, we obtain more precise estimates of the treatmetn effect, to the extent that these covariates are related to the dependent variable.

- An indicator for college degree or higher

- Gender

- Age

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[4]https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_5YR_B19013&prodType=table, Retrieved on 2018.12.12.

- Indicators for Black and Hispanic race/ethnicity (White/Other as baseline group)

- Partisanship: indicators for Republican, Independent, Democrat, with leaners included as partisans and supporters of other parties (without a leaning) as independents).

These demographic data are also provided by Lucid as part of profile variables.

4   Sampling frame and recruitment

We field our survey through Lucid, the largest US marketplace for online panels.[5] Participants sign up to become members of panels with Providers. These Providers contract with Lucid, who directs participants to purchasers (typically market research firms, but here us, the researchers). Participants are reimbursed by the Providers, typically with money or reward points.

There are several advantages to Lucid compared to other convenience samples:

- Most importantly Lucid reaches over 30 million unique respondents with over 1.5 million users going through the platform on a typical day.

- This large pool of respondents allows Lucid to quota sample participants. This ensures that the marginal distribution of various demographic charchteristics (age, gender, education, race and region) mirror population distributions.

- Lucid keeps track of several background variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, education, income, party ID, and ZIP code. Otherwise, participants are anonymous.

- Coppock & McClellan (2018) show that samples from Lucid replicate causal estimates from benchmark representative samples well. They also show evidence that 98% of participants recruited through Lucid take less than one survey per month. Thus, unlike MTurkers, Lucid respondents are not "professional experimental subjects".

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[5]This section introducing the Lucid platform builds heavily on Coppock & McClellan (2018, pp 7-8).

We will field the experiment to a sample of 3,500 subjects in the context of a multi-investigator project. Lucid charges \$1/subject and sets a maximum survey length. Thus, the size of the study was determined by the resource constrains of the collaborative team. That said, based on the results of our pilot study (N = 300, min. detectable effect = 0.22SD) we expect that to be able to detect a main effect in the range of 0.07 SD with 95% confidence with our proposed sample size.

5 Analysis

We implement two sets of empirical analyses. First, we are interested in the sample average treatment effect (SATE) which we estimate through regressions predicting the composite dependent measure with an indicator for experimental group. Second, we also estimate the conditional effect of the treatment for different income groups.

5.1 SATE

In our baseline specification, we estimate linear regression that predict our outcome of interest with an indicator for treatment group assignment as well as the following covariates:

- An indicator for college degree or higher

- Gender

- Age

- Indicators for Black and Hispanic race/ethnicity (White/Other as baseline group)

- Partisanship (indicators for Republican, Independent, Democrat, with leaners included as partisans)

- Self-reported income status (5-point scale, entered linearly)

We estimate the same specification for mediators variables/intermediate outcomes as well. For robustness checks we also report a bivariate specification without these covariates for each model.

5.2 Conditional effects by income

As we have explained above, we hypothesize to see larger treatment effects among more affluent participants and participants living in more wealthy neighborhoods. At the same time, the specific nature of this conditional relationship between the treatment effect and income levels is difficult to predict. It is plausible that there is a monotonic relationship between the two variables, where the treatment effect increases relatively stably. It is also plausible, however, that the relationship resembles a step function, where participants above a certain income level (who rarely consider the experience of poor people) see larger effects.

Accordingly, first we will conduct an exploratory analysis mapping the conditional relationship with data visualizations and using non-parametric regression techniques (Hainmueller et al., ND). We then proceed to hypothesis testing with a statistical model deemed most appropriate for the revealed pattern. We will report extensive robustness checks for alternative model specifications in the appendix of our paper.

5.3 Non-compliance, attrition and self-selection into the study

Non-compliance with the treatment in this experiment would entail that some participants pay limited or no attention to the vignette or the prompts and fail to provide meaningul responses to the short essay questions. Based on our pilot studies we found that most respondents either spent considerable time and attention to the treatment so we will restrict our attention to intent-to-treat effects that factor in the possibility of non-compliance.

A more problematic issue is attrition from the survey. During our pilot studies about 15% of subjects dropped out of the survey so that we could not observe their responses to the outcome questions. Attrition would bias our estimates if it was systematically related to

potential outcomes conditional on the pre-treatment covariates that we use to adjust our estimates. We will test for systematic attrition by running regression models predicting survey completion with the set of covariates we adjust in our regressions and their interaction with threatment assignment. To the extent that we can reject the null-hyothesis that attrition is unpredictable with such a model we will use the bounds proposed by Lee (2009).

A final issue concerns the external validity of our estimates. While Lucid recruits samples that approximate the marginal distribtuion of some selected demographic groups in the USA, this is by no means a probability sample. Because we remain agnostic about the distribution of possible – umeasured – moderators of the treatment effect in the sample relative to the population we present unweighted estimates which we will interpret as sample average treatment effects. We point out though that based on pilot studies we anticipate a sample that is diverse enough in terms of income – our moderating variable of interest – in order for us to estimate heterogenous treatment effects for income groups.

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