Halfway to the help is not halfway to the heart: Underestimating appreciation for partial help

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Abstract
It is normally assumed that helping behavior will lead to ideal outcomes. However, people frequently encounter real-life situations where they are only able to give partial help, through which the recipient’s goal is made closer yet not fully achieved. In five studies, we demonstrate that helpers underestimate the extent to which recipients feel grateful for partial help. The asymmetry arises from different focus in evaluation: Helpers attend to the incomplete outcome (vs. wholehearted intention) more than recipients do, leading helpers to expect that partial help is less appreciated.

Results

Study 1b: Online helping
Incentivized by getting a free exquisite album, PKU students asked friends for a favor to click like for a repost on WeChat Moments. Relative to the 120-like goal, each like is deemed partial help.

Participants (N = 125) recalled the fifth like they gave or received.

Study 2a & 2b: Asymmetric focus

2a MTurkers (N = 215) imagined a scenario from the perspective of helper or recipient.
- A ride-seeker, who usually commuted by bus and transferred twice, asked a colleague for a ride home. The ride-giver agreed to drive the ride-seeker to a bus station, from which the ride-seeker only needed to transfer once to get home.
- Participants underestimated how much a 1/120 like was appreciated when they thought from a helper perspective (M = 4.20, SD = 1.49) than from a recipient perspective (M = 4.87, SD = 1.72), t(123) = 2.24, p = .027, d = 0.42. The bias held when controlling for number of likes given and completion of 120-like goal.

2b Sixty unacquainted pairs of participants came to the lab for purportedly separate experiments.
- One participant was instructed to play a 2-person game, and thus had to ask another participant for help. The game was claimed to contain 3 rounds, but was interrupted at the end of 2nd round. Only help-recipients could earn bonus from the game.
- Add bonus allocation measure

Discussion
- Every little bit counts for people who receive help, but helpers tend to underestimate how much partial help is appreciated.
- Asymmetric focus on outcome versus intention partly explains the discrepancy between helpers’ and recipients’ evaluation. The bias reduces when outcome does not conflict with intention.
- The results may not hold for unsolicited help.

References