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Brian P. Meier

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RESEARCH REPORT

Bah humbug: Unexpected Christmas cards and the reciprocity norm

Brian P. Meier

Gettysburg College

ABSTRACT

The reciprocity norm refers to the expectation that people will help those who helped them. A well-known study revealed that the norm is strong with Christmas cards, with 20% of people reciprocating a Christmas card received from a stranger. I attempted to conceptually replicate and extend this effect. In Study 1, 755 participants received a Christmas card supposedly from a more- versus less-similar stranger. The reciprocation rate was unexpectedly low (2%), which did not allow for a test of a similarity effect. Two potential reasons for this low rate were examined in Study 2 in which 494 participants reported their likelihood of reciprocating a Christmas card from a stranger as well as their felt suspicions/threat about the card and their frequency of e-mail use. Reciprocation likelihood was negatively correlated with perceived threat/suspicion and e-mail use. It appears that reciprocating a gift from a stranger in offline settings may be less likely than expected.

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The reciprocity norm refers to an expectation that people will help those who helped them (Cialdini, 2001; Gouldner, 1960). The norm reflects the idea “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” and is based on the fact that humans evolved in groups in which reciprocation was beneficial for survival (Trivers, 1971). Many studies have examined the reciprocity norm. For example, in early work by Regan (1971), participants in a study supposedly about aesthetics were more likely to buy raffle tickets from another participant if that participant first gave them a drink. Other research found similar results in that small gifts or help cause people to reciprocate by delivering an envelope (Burger, Horita, Kinoshita, Roberts, & Vera, 1997), completing an opinion survey (Jacob, Guéguen, & Boulbry, 2015), or helping co-workers (Deckop, Cirka, & Andersson, 2003).

In a compelling test of the norm, Kunz and Woolcott (1976) examined whether people would send a Christmas card to a complete stranger who sent them one. They sent 578 Christmas cards to strangers. The researchers manipulated four variables, card quality, sender social status, receiver social status, and urban/rural location in the United States. The return rate was greater for high quality cards, high sender social status, low receiver social status, and rural versus urban locations, but the noteworthy finding was the overall response rate of 20%. The reciprocity norm was so strong that 20% of people sent a Christmas card to a complete stranger. Kunz (2000) found the same 20% response rate.

These studies are powerful examples of the reciprocity norm because receivers had no obligation to send a card, but 20% of them did. Popular media (Spiegel, 2012), blogs (Tannenbaum, 2015), and textbooks (Gilovich, Keltner, Chen, & Nisbett, 2013) cite these studies to highlight the impact of the norm. However, I am unaware of studies that have conceptually replicated the effect or examined additional moderators.

Perceived similarity is a potential moderator. People are more likely to help others when they perceive them as similar to themselves (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). For example, people are more helpful to strangers when those strangers are similar in appearance (Emswiler, Deaux, & Willits, 1971), opinions (Sole, Marton, Hornstein, 1975), or surnames (Guéguen, Pichot, & Le Dreff, 2005). Kunz and Woolcott (1976) examined sender and receiver social status but did not find a similarity effect. It appears that social status similarities may not have been apparent in this context. The purpose of Study 1 was to conceptually replicate the study by Kunz and Woolcott (1976) as well as examine perceived similarity. I expected to replicate the 20% response and to find that people would be more likely to send a return Christmas card when they perceived the sender as similar to them in an important context related to Christmas cards—religiosity.

Study 1

Participants received one of two cards that were identical except for the message: either “Merry Christmas” (religious card) or “Happy Holidays” (non-religious card). The cards were sent to people located in two cities—Holland, MI, and Bremerton, WA—that were approximately similar in terms of population, income, and race (www.city-data.com), but they differed in the extent to which people reported being religious. The Gallop Organization (Newport, 2012) surveyed 245,000 adults in the United States on their church attendance and importance of religion. Fifty-five percent of people living in Holland, MI, were highly religious, and 21% were not religious, versus 25% of people living in Bremerton, WA who were highly religious, and 50% who were not religious. This survey is not a perfect measure of the religiosity of a given random participant, but it reveals that over twice as many people are highly religious in Holland, MI, versus in Bremerton, WA. I therefore expected that more people from Holland, MI, would send a return card when they received the religious versus non-religious card, but the opposite pattern was expected for Bremerton, WA.

Method

Participants

Past work (Kunz, 2000; Kunz & Woolcott, 1976) involved samples of approximately 600. I boosted this number to 800 participants (516 males) who lived in Holland, MI, (400 participants) or Bremerton, WA (400 participants). Participants were randomly chosen from directories provided by Polk Directories for a fee (as done in Kunz & Woolcott, 1976). Age and race were not available.

Materials¹ and procedure

I followed the procedures of Kunz and Woolcott (1976) as much as possible. I sent high quality cards to participants and used my name on the return address. Participants from each city were randomly divided into two groups of 200. Each group was sent a red card that had either “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays” written on the front in white font (purchased from www.cardsdirect.com). Delivery addresses were handwritten, and the return address was on a sticker and included my first and last name and a P.O. box at my post office. The inside of each card had the words “Best Wishes for a Happy Holiday/Merry Christmas!” and was hand-signed with my first name. Cards were mailed on December 1st, 2014. After the holidays, participants received a debriefing letter that explained the study. Participants who sent a card were given a postage stamp and a \$5 Amazon gift card.

Results and discussion

Forty-five of the 800 cards were returned to sender because of an incorrect address. These participants were removed from the sample, leaving 755 participants. Returned cards were equally distributed between cities and card type (both χ^2 $ps > .396$). Neither Kunz and Woolcott (1976) nor Kunz (2000) reported the number of returned cards. Fifteen or 2% of participants reciprocated or sent a return card. This rate was significantly less than the 20% response rate from previous studies, χ^2 (1, $N = 755$) = 153.11, $p < .001$, Cramer's Phi = .45. My response rate was unexpectedly low, which did not allow for an examination of similarity.

I focused on potential reasons for the lack of conceptual replication and abandoned the similarity hypothesis. I did not manipulate card quality, sender or receiver social status, and urban/rural location like Kunz and Woolcott (1976), but I expected to obtain a somewhat comparable response rate given the similarity of the study. The response rate was so low (2% vs. 20%) that differences in methodology are unlikely to be the only cause. There are at least two possibilities for the low response rate. One, after the study, I received e-mails and letters from 12 participants. Although most of these communications were positive, three participants stated that the unexpected card was suspicious and troubling because they worried that a stranger had their address. This response was unexpected, but it seemed likely that other participants felt similarly, which possibly reduced reciprocation. There is more to be distrustful about in 2014 compared to 1976, such as identify theft. This possibility was examined using data from the General Social Survey (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2014), which has been conducted since 1972 to study trends in the United States. One question asks, "Can people be trusted?" (response options included cannot be trusted, it depends, and can be trusted). Participants in 2014 (519 of 1,683 or 30.8%) were significantly less likely to state that people "can be trusted" than participants in 2000 (662 of 1,879 or 35.2%) or 1976 (664 of 1,495 or 44.40%), χ^2 (4, $N = 5,057$) = 74.00, $p < .001$, Cramer's Phi = .09. This reason was examined more directly in Study 2.

A second potential reason for the low response rate is that the original studies were conducted in years (1976 and 2000) before e-mail and social media were part of people's everyday lives. In the current era of big data and strategic marketing, people receive emails and mail asking them to donate or buy products. Such communications were less common at the time of the original studies, which may have made receiving a Christmas card from a stranger a more compelling act that needed to be reciprocated. Furthermore, email enables people to easily communicate with friends and relatives, which could decrease the value of a physical Christmas card. This issue was examined in Study 2.

Study 2

Study 2 involved participants from Amazon's MTurk who were asked to imagine that they received a Christmas card from a complete stranger and then to report the extent to which they would send a return card and how suspicious they would be about this card. Participants were also asked to report their e-mail and social media use. I expected that e-mail and social media use and suspicion/threat would be negatively related to reciprocation likelihood.

Method

Participants

Data was collected from Amazon MTurk in April 2015. The study was programmed to collect 500 participants but finished with 499. Five participants were eliminated because they completed the study before or did not answer all questions. Participants' mean age was 30.87 ($SD = 9.78$) years, and

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables collected in Study 2.

	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Correlation with Reciprocation Likelihood
Reciprocation Likelihood	2.37 (<i>SD</i> = 1.73)	–
Felt Suspicion/Threat	3.99 (<i>SD</i> = 1.76)	$r = -.19^*$
E-mail Use	5.35 (<i>SD</i> = .94)	$r = -.12^*$
Social Media Use	4.86 (<i>SD</i> = 1.37)	$r = .04$

* $p < .001$; $N = 494$.

294 were male (194 females; 6 non-report). The race breakdown was 361 Caucasian, 69 Asian/Pacific Islander, 30 Hispanic, 18 Black, 6 American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4 mixed, 4 unknown, and 2 non-reports.

Materials and procedure

Participants were paid \$.10 to complete a “judgment study.” They were asked to “imagine that you received a Christmas card in the mail from an individual who is a complete stranger. The envelope and card are addressed to you.” Participants answered two questions: How likely is it that you would send a return Christmas Card to this stranger via the U.S. mail? How likely would this unexpected Christmas Card make you feel suspicious or threatened?) using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all likely; 4 = somewhat likely; 7 = very likely). Next, participants answered two questions about email (How often do you use email?) and social media (How often do you use social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.?) using a 6-point scale (1 = never, 2 = less than once a month, 3 = at least once a month, 4 = at least once a week, 5 = daily, 6 = multiple times a day). Participants then completed demographic questions and were debriefed.

Results and discussion

Table 1 lists descriptive statistics and correlations. Reciprocation likelihood was significantly and negatively related to felt suspicion/threat and e-mail use but not social media use. Although the correlations are small, they suggest that a potential reason for the lower reciprocation rate in Study 1 was the suspiciousness of the card and participants’ frequency of e-mail use. People seem less likely to correspond with someone they consider suspicious, and it appears that people who use e-mail more frequently may be less likely to return a Christmas card. Social media use was not related to reciprocation likelihood.

General discussion

In Study 1, I attempted to conceptually replicate and extend reciprocation studies from 1976 (Kunz & Woolcott) and 2000 (Kunz) that found that 20% of participants sent a return Christmas card to a stranger. A surprisingly low reciprocation rate of 2% was found, which did not allow for a test of a similarity hypothesis. In Study 2, people’s self-reports of their likelihood of reciprocating an unexpected card sent by a stranger was negatively related to how suspicious/threatened they would feel by the card and their frequency of email use.

Although the current studies have limitations (e.g., self-reported data and uncertainty of the similarity manipulations), they suggest that the reciprocity norm may have lost its power in the context of reciprocating a greeting card from a stranger. It is not exactly clear why the response rate was so low, but Study 2 and the data from the General Social Survey suggest that people’s distrust of others and their frequent use of e-mail may make them less likely to attend to and

reciprocate an unexpected Christmas card. The reciprocity norm is strong in face-to-face requests (Jacob et al., 2015), but it may be less impactful in offline situations involving strangers. It seems likely that most of the Christmas cards sent to participants ended up in the trashcan rather than in the return card pile.



Note

1. The complete materials and data for both studies are available online and can be accessed from this permanent link: osf.io/8g5fy (Meier, 2015).

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Notes on contributor

Brian P. Meier is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Gettysburg College. His research interests include aggression, embodiment, mindfulness, pro-social behavior, and social norms.

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