

The Social Contagion of Generosity

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Abstract: Why do people help strangers when there is a low probability that help will be directly reciprocated or socially rewarded? A possible explanation is that these acts are contagious: those who receive or observe help from a stranger become more likely to help others. We test two mechanisms for the social contagion of generosity among strangers: generalized reciprocity (a recipient of generosity is more likely to pay it forward) and third-party influence (an observer of generous behavior is more likely to emulate it). We use an online experiment with randomized trials to test the two hypothesized mechanisms and their interaction by manipulating the extent to which participants receive and observe help. Results show that receiving help can increase the willingness to be generous towards others, but observing help can have the opposite effect, especially among those who have not received help. These results suggest that observing widespread generosity may attenuate the belief that one's own efforts are needed.