

Research Report

Positive fantasies dampen charitable giving when many resources are demanded

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Abstract

Previous research found that positive fantasies about an idealized future yield low energy to pursue the fantasized future. We examined how positive fantasies about the resolution of a crisis (i.e., a lack of pain medication in Sierra Leone, the risk of flooding after Hurricane Irene) influence people's agreement to donate to charitable efforts directed at crisis resolution. In three studies, positive fantasies dampened the likelihood of agreeing to donate a relatively large amount of money, effort, or time, but did not affect the likelihood of agreeing to donate a relatively small amount of these resources. The effect of positive fantasies was mediated by perceiving the donation of larger (but not smaller) amounts of resources as overly demanding. These findings suggest that charitable solicitations requesting small donations might benefit from stimulating positive fantasies in potential donors, but those requesting large donations could be hurt.

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Introduction

In the present economic environment, garnering donations is a significant challenge for charitable organizations (West, 2004). American charitable contributions dropped by 3.2% from 2008 to 2009; this was one of the largest drops recorded in more than 50 years (Giving USA Foundation, 2010). One tool that charities deploy in an attempt to engage donors is imagery of a future in which a crisis has been resolved. For example, charitable organizations encourage donors to imagine that poor children are attending school or that cancer no longer threatens health. However, little is known about how such positive imagery of an idealized, best-case-scenario future affects giving (see Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996). Accordingly, we examined the effect of these positive fantasies about future crisis resolution on the decision to give to charity.

Theoretical framework

Positive fantasies

Mental simulation, “the imitative representation of some event or series of events,” (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998, p. 430), is an umbrella term for imaginary visions of both past and future events. Such imaginary visions, or fantasies, are not constrained by the cognitive mechanisms that make people appraise factual information (Klinger, 1971, 1990; Singer, 1966). Though some imaginary visions may depict actions and events that violate natural laws or social norms, people most frequently fantasize about futures that are not yet realized but are possible in principle. One way to simulate such possible futures is to depict them in an idealized positive way, and such images are referred to as positive fantasies (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; review by Oettingen, 2012). As pure, idyllic imagery of future events and behaviors, positive fantasies differ from other positive thoughts and feelings about the future.

For example, positive fantasies differ from positive thinking in the form of expectations, which are beliefs about the likelihood of

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future events. Generally, people base their expectations about the future on what they or relevant others have experienced in the past (Bandura, 1997; Kappes, Oettingen, & Mayer, 2012; Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996; Roese & Sherman, 2007). Thus, expectations are constrained by past performance. People also have future-oriented emotions such as hope, which “is a positively valenced emotion evoked in response to an uncertain but possible goal-congruent outcome” (MacInnis & de Mello, 2005, p. 2). Positive fantasies may arouse emotions (see D’Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2007) but are not themselves emotions. Indeed, it is not clear that positive fantasies are consistently prone to evoke hope, since the idealized futures they depict might not be congruent with the individual’s personal goals.

Effects of positive fantasies

Because they allow people to mentally enjoy a desired future in the present, positive fantasies yield the relaxation associated with success rather than the energy needed for effortful action (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011). Accordingly, positive fantasies predict the investment of low effort and subsequent low success over time, for example, regarding losing weight, finding a romantic partner, getting good grades, and finding a job after college (Kappes et al., 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). Experiments that have induced positive fantasies and measured their effects on solving challenging tasks also find that positive thoughts and fantasies produce low action toward achieving the imagined future (e.g., mastering everyday challenges over a one-week period, Kappes & Oettingen, 2011; throwing darts, Spencer & Norem, 1996). These findings suggest that positive fantasies decrease effort toward tasks because they yield low levels of energy.

Previous research on positive fantasies has focused on tasks that are relatively demanding. Accordingly, it is possible that the effect of positive fantasies on people’s willingness to engage in tasks might depend on the amount of resources (e.g., effort, time, money) required to solve the task. That is, although positive fantasies yield low energy (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011), this might not affect consumers’ actions on tasks that demand little energy and few resources. However, when tasks demand many resources, positive fantasies should leave consumers unprepared to invest these resources. Indeed, by virtue of their low energy, consumers might perceive demanding tasks as *overly* demanding; as requiring more than they feel prepared to invest. Thus, we hypothesized that the amount of resources demanded would moderate the effect of positive fantasies: such fantasies should hamper action when tasks are relatively demanding (i.e., people are asked to commit a great deal of money, effort, or time), but not when tasks are relatively undemanding. We conducted three studies to test this idea in the domain of charitable donations.

Study 1

We had participants read about an obscure but important crisis—a lack of pain medication in Sierra Leone—and then asked half of them to generate positive fantasies about the resolution of this crisis (people receiving the medication they need). We had control participants generate factual descriptions of the crisis

resolution, so that the only difference between conditions was whether or not they imagined crisis resolution in idealized positive terms. We then manipulated the amount of resources required to actually help resolve the crisis by stating that a relatively large (\$25) or small (\$1) donation was required to help relieve someone’s suffering. We hypothesized that positive fantasies would result in lower contributions than the control manipulation when helping required a \$25 donation, but equal or greater contributions when it required \$1.

Methods

Participants and design

Eighty-one American undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial course credit, and were randomly assigned to one cell of the 2 (positive fantasies, factual description control) \times 2 (\$1, \$25 required to help) design ($n_s = 20\text{--}21$).

Procedure and materials

Participants read a September 2007 *New York Times* article describing the suffering of people in Waterloo, Sierra Leone, who lack access to pain medication. They were told that researchers were interested in how people process and respond to information related to newspaper articles that they had read.

Manipulation: Positive fantasies versus control

To induce positive fantasies about the resolution of the Waterloo medication crisis, we used the following instructions (italics indicate wording that differed in the control condition):

Imagine that the people of Waterloo are given the medication they need. Picture the Waterloo medication crisis as being resolved. *What is the most positive thing that you associate with the Waterloo medication crisis being resolved? Now really think about this positive thing.* Imagine the relevant events and scenarios as *vividly* as possible! *Let your mind go! Do not hesitate to give your thoughts & images free reign.* Take as much time as you need.

In the control condition, participants identified and elaborated on a factual description of the medication crisis. We used the following instructions (italics indicate wording that differed in the positive fantasies condition):

Imagine that the people of Waterloo are given the medication they need. Picture the Waterloo medication crisis as being resolved. *Now please describe the situation in Waterloo.* Imagine the relevant events and scenarios as *factually* as possible! *Do your best to remain matter-of-fact in your descriptions.* Take as much time as you need.

Manipulation: Resources required

Participants learned about an organization, *Treatment 4 All*, which had been formed to address the medication crisis. We manipulated the amount of resources required to help resolve the crisis by varying the size of the financial donation to this organization that would relieve one person’s suffering.

Participants read, “Just [\$1/\$25] can relieve the suffering of someone in Waterloo. Can you donate [\$1/\$25]?”¹ The marking of *Yes* or *No* served as the dependent variable. In this and the subsequent studies, when the experiment was complete, participants were debriefed and informed that they would not actually have to fulfill their donation.

Results and Discussion

Thirty-three of the 81 participants (40.7%) indicated they would give a donation. We analyzed agreement to donate (agree versus not) as the dependent variable in a binary logistic regression analysis estimated using SPSS Generalized Linear Model. Predictors were condition (positive fantasies, factual description control), resources required (\$1, \$25), and their interaction. There was an interaction effect, $\chi^2(1)=4.88, p=.03$ (see Fig. 1). The follow-up pairwise comparisons computed through the Generalized Linear Model with a LSD adjustment showed that when a \$25 donation was requested, participants in the positive fantasies ($M=5\%$) condition were less likely to agree to donate than control participants ($M=29\%$), $p=.03$. When a \$1 donation was requested, participants in the positive fantasies ($M=75\%$) and control conditions ($M=55\%$) did not differ, $p=.18$. Participants in the positive fantasies condition were less likely to agree to donate \$25 than \$1, $p<.001$; control participants were marginally less likely to do so, $p=.08$.

These results show that when donating required the commitment of many resources, positive fantasies decreased efforts to help resolve the crisis. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that positive fantasies result in lower investments of effort over time (Kappes et al., 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). It adds to the previous research by suggesting that those patterns of results were only present in light of the fact that the tasks examined were relatively demanding (e.g., earning high grades, recovering from hip-replacement surgery, losing weight). When the task in the present study demanded relatively few resources (\$1 condition), positive fantasies did not reduce giving.

The most obvious alternative interpretation for these results is that positive fantasies did not inhibit giving, but instead, the factual description control manipulation boosted it. To address this possibility, in the next study we compared positive fantasies to an attention-demanding manipulation that prevented participants from generating positive or negative thoughts about the crisis. Agreement to give in this control condition provided a baseline from which to establish whether positive fantasies actually decrease giving.

Study 2 built on Study 1 in a second way. Charities do not always ask potential donors for a specific dollar amount (e.g.,

¹ As a manipulation check, a separate group of 33 people read the article and information before answering four questions in randomized order: “How much effort would it require for you to donate \$1 [\$25] to *Treatment 4 All*?” and “How demanding would it be to donate \$1 [\$25] to *Treatment 4 All*?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). The mean of the two questions about each dollar amount was computed ($r_s>.76$) and a paired-samples *t*-test showed that donating \$25 was seen as more effortful and demanding than donating \$1, $t(32)=6.43, p<.001$ ($M_s=3.89$ and 1.91 , respectively).

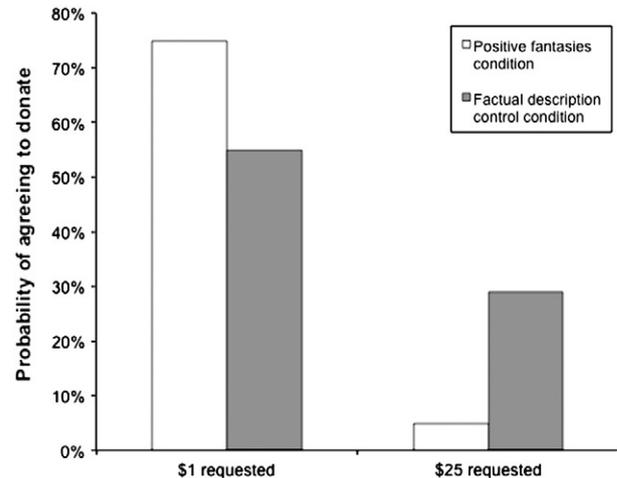


Fig. 1. Estimated marginal mean probability of agreeing to donate to *Treatment 4 All* in Study 1, as a function of condition and resources required to help resolve the crisis.

\$1 or \$25 as in Study 1) or provide information about the precise amount of money that would help. Instead, potential donors often infer the amount of resources required from what they learn about the crisis situation and the charity’s progress to date. Thus, we wanted to see whether positive fantasies would have the same dampening effect on giving when the amount of resources required was depicted by the charity’s progress in resolving the crisis.

Study 2

We used the design of Study 1 with two changes. First, we varied the amount of resources required by asking participants to commit to volunteering for an organization that had made little (versus much) progress to resolve the medication crisis in Sierra Leone. We expected this information to suggest that the organization still required relatively many (versus few) resources to resolve the crisis. Second, we had control participants complete an attention-demanding task to prevent them from generating any thoughts about the crisis, rather than having them factually describe the resolution of the crisis.

Methods

Participants and design

One hundred thirty-three American undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial course credit, and were randomly assigned to one cell of the 2 (positive fantasies, d2 control) \times 2 (much progress so far, little progress so far) design ($n_s=33-34$).

Procedure and materials

Other than the changes described below, materials were identical to those described in Study 1.

Control participants completed the d2 test (Brickenkamp, 1962), which consists of a series of the letters ‘d’ and ‘p’ with various numbers of slashes above and below them; *ds* with a

specified number of slashes must be crossed out. This manipulation took the same amount of time as the induction of positive fantasies, and prevented participants from fantasizing about the future facing the people of Waterloo.

Manipulation: Resources required

Again, participants learned about the organization *Treatment 4 All*. This time, we varied the extent to which this organization had made significant progress, which should indicate the magnitude of resources still required to provide relief to the people in Waterloo. Specifically, participants read that *Treatment 4 All* [had/had not] already made significant progress and [many/not many] people had already found relief from their suffering.² They were asked, “Can you commit to weekly volunteering for *Treatment 4 All*?” followed by a space to indicate a number of hours per week. This number of hours was our dependent variable.

Results and discussion

Weekly volunteer hours pledged ranged from 0 to 8 ($M = .46$, $SD = 1.24$). There was a high count of “0” responses and the variable was highly positively skewed, so we used negative binomial regression, a generalized linear model that has been recommended for non-normal count variables (Gardner, Mulvey, & Shaw, 1995; Hilbe, 2007), with robust standard errors. Predictors were condition (positive fantasies, d2 control), resources required (much progress so far, little progress so far), and their interaction. There was an interaction effect, $\chi^2(1) = 3.69$, $p < .06$ (see Fig. 2). Again, pairwise comparisons with LSD adjustment showed that when the organization required relatively many resources, participants in the positive fantasies condition pledged fewer hours ($M = .06$) than control participants ($M = .64$), $p = .04$, and when the organization required relatively few resources, participants in the positive fantasies ($M = .56$) and control ($M = .58$) conditions did not differ, $p = .96$. Participants in the positive fantasies condition volunteered fewer hours when the organization required more rather than fewer resources, $p = .03$; control participants did not, $p = .86$.

Like in Study 1, when many resources were required—this time, in terms of how many resources the organization still needed to address the crisis—positive fantasies resulted in less giving. Because control participants completed an attention-demanding task that inhibited thoughts about the crisis, these results suggest that positive fantasies dampen giving compared to a baseline.

² As a manipulation check, a separate group of 58 people read one of the two versions of the manipulation and then answered the questions: “How much work will it take for this organization to make a difference?” and “How much effort is needed for this organization to address the crisis situation?” (1 = very little, 7 = very much). A mean was computed ($r = .86$), and a t -test verified that participants who read that *Treatment 4 All* had not made significant progress perceived more work and effort needed to resolve the crisis, $t(56) = 2.01$, $p = .05$ ($M_s = 6.28$ and 5.70 , respectively).

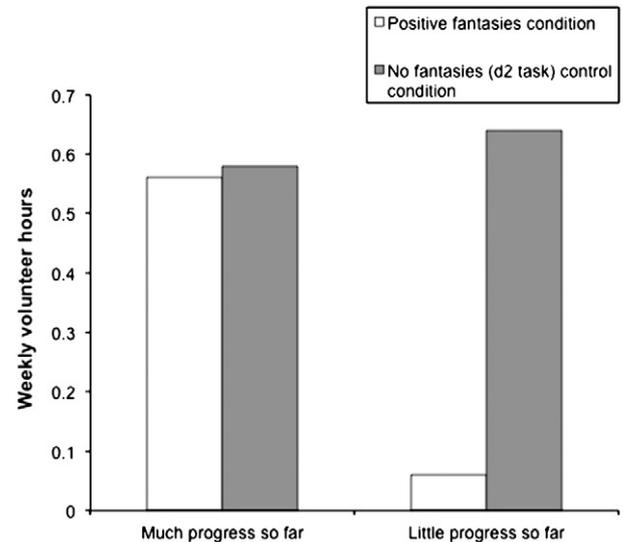


Fig. 2. Estimated marginal weekly hours volunteered for *Treatment 4 All* in Study 2, as a function of condition and resources required to help resolve the crisis.

Moreover, it seems that positive fantasies dampen giving even when the amount of resources demanded is manipulated in an ecologically valid way (i.e., via the charity’s progress to date).

In Study 3, we delved deeper into why positive fantasies might exert the effects demonstrated. To reiterate, research finds that positive fantasies, which permit the effortless mental enjoyment of a fantasized future, yield low energy (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011) and feign that the road to this fantasized future is smooth and easy (Oettingen & Wadden, 1991; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). That is, these fantasies do not prepare people to invest many resources in pursuit of the fantasized future. If a task requires more resources than people feel prepared to invest, it should be perceived as overly demanding. Thus, following positive fantasies, people should perceive a request for a relatively large amount of resources as *overly* demanding, and decline to give. However, when the request is for a relatively small amount of resources, it should not exceed what people feel prepared to invest, and so they should comply in giving. In Study 3, we tested whether perceptions of the request as overly demanding mediated the effect of positive fantasies on low giving in response to a demanding request.

Study 3

Like in Studies 1 and 2, after inducing positive fantasies or a control manipulation, we asked participants to volunteer; here we asked them to commit a relatively undemanding (5 min) or demanding (60 min) amount of time to help resolve a crisis. To provide insight into the suspected underlying process, we asked participants about the degree to which they had perceived the requested amount of time to be overly demanding. We expected participants in the positive fantasies condition to perceive 60, but not 5, minutes of time as overly demanding, more

so than control participants, and we expected these perceptions to mediate the effect of positive fantasies on giving.

To ensure that possible differences were not merely due to thoughts about the scope of the crisis (versus an unrelated task), we returned to the factual description control condition used in Study 1, which required participants to elaborate in factual terms on the same content as in the positive fantasies condition. To extend the findings to a publicly salient crisis, we induced fantasies and measured giving pertaining to a major storm that had hit the Eastern United States three days before the study was conducted. To generalize the findings to audiences beyond students, we recruited a national sample that varied in age and income.

Methods

Participants and design

One hundred seventy-two individuals living in the United States, ages 18 to 72 ($M=34.65$ years, $SD=12.06$), were recruited through www.mturk.com and participated for a \$.50 payment. Average annual income, as indicated by selecting one of eight categories, fell in the \$25,001–50,000 range. Participants were randomly assigned to one cell of the 2 (positive fantasies, factual description control) \times 2 (5 min, 60 min requested) design ($ns=40$ –45).

Procedure and materials

Participants first read a brief description of the emergency situation following the August 2011 landfall of Hurricane Irene, which included facts about the storm's impact, quotes from government officials, and information about the current needs of the affected communities (i.e., sandbags to control and prevent flooding). Participants then completed a positive fantasies or control manipulation parallel to those described in Study 1.

Manipulation: Resources required

Participants read that it was vitally important to quickly make sandbags available to people whose homes were in areas where more flooding was expected, so that they could remain safe and protected in their homes. They were told that one way to make these sandbags available was by obtaining donations from corporate sponsors, who would provide funding when people clicked a link to view an advertisement. They read: "This funding provides 100 sandbags for every [5/60] advertisements that one person views; watching each ad takes about a minute. Can you volunteer to spend [5/60] minutes of your time in the next 24 hours watching ads in order to obtain funding for sandbags?" The response of *Yes* or *No* was the dependent variable.

Mediator

Participants indicated how they had perceived the request to volunteer by reporting their agreement with the statement: "The time requested was *too demanding*" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results and discussion

One hundred twenty-three of the 172 participants (71.5%) indicated they would volunteer their time. We analyzed

agreement to volunteer (agree versus not) as the dependent variable in a binary logistic regression analysis estimated using SPSS Generalized Linear Model procedure with robust standard errors. Predictors were condition (positive fantasies, factual description control), resources demanded (5, 60 min requested), and their interaction. Age and income category were included as covariates in this and subsequent analyses. There was an interaction effect, $\chi^2(1)=3.74$, $p=.05$ (see Fig. 3). Pairwise comparisons with an LSD adjustment showed that participants in the positive fantasies condition ($M=45\%$) were marginally less likely to agree to volunteer 60 min than control participants ($M=65\%$), $p=.07$, but equally likely to agree to volunteer 5 min ($M_s=91\%$, 84% respectively), $p=.26$. This result replicates Studies 1 and 2. Like in Study 1, participants in both the positive fantasies and the control conditions were less likely to volunteer for the more demanding task, $p<.001$ and $p=.05$, respectively.

Next, we assessed the proposed mediator: the degree to which the requested amount of time was perceived to be overly demanding. A 2 (fantasies condition) \times 2 (5, 60 min) ANOVA showed a marginally significant interaction effect, $F(1, 166)=3.02$, $p=.08$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}}=.018$. Participants in the positive fantasies condition perceived 60 min to be overly demanding more so than participants in the factual control condition, $F(1, 80)=3.28$, $p=.07$, $\eta^2_{\text{partial}}=.039$ (estimated marginal $M_s=5.03$ versus 4.17). Participants in the positive fantasies and control conditions did not differ in how they perceived the request to spend 5 min, $F<1$ ($M_s=1.99$ versus 2.04). Overall, the more that participants felt that the requested amount of time was overly demanding, the less likely they were to agree to volunteer, $r(170)=-.66$, $p<.001$. Accordingly, we tested whether these perceptions mediated the interaction effect of positive fantasies and required resources on giving.

Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005) specify that this mediated moderation hypothesis is supported by finding a coefficient for the independent variable (fantasies condition) \times moderator (time requested) interaction effect that is reduced in size when adjusting for the mediator (perception of the request as overly demanding). A coefficient that becomes nonsignificant suggests full

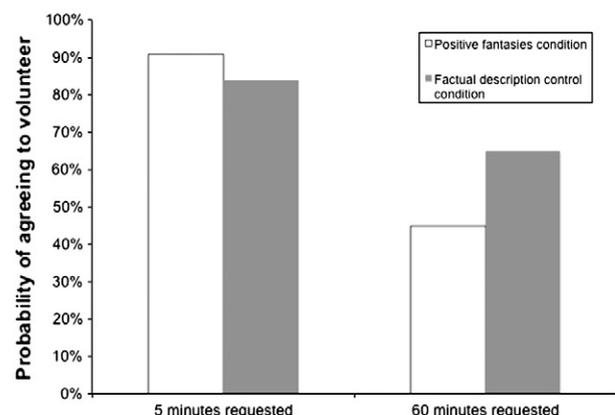


Fig. 3. Estimated marginal mean probability of agreeing to volunteer in Study 3, as a function of condition and amount of resources required to help resolve the crisis.

mediation. In the model above, the fantasies condition \times time requested interaction effect coefficient was $b=1.55$, $p=.05$; this coefficient was reduced to $b=1.41$, $p=.17$ when adjusting for perceptions of the request as overly demanding, and these perceptions remained a significant predictor, $p<.001$. Thus, the effect of positive fantasies on low likelihood of volunteering a relatively demanding amount of time (60 min) was mediated by the perception of this request as *overly* demanding.

General discussion

When helping to resolve a crisis required many resources—across a variety of manipulations—positive fantasies dampened giving. This finding was observed compared to control manipulations that called for generating factual descriptions of crisis resolution (Studies 1 and 3), or completing an attention-consuming task unrelated to the crisis (Study 2). It was also observed for little known (Studies 1 and 2) as well as publicly salient (Study 3) crises, speaking to the range and generalizability of these findings.

Study 3 provided suggestive evidence for the process underlying these effects. Participants in the positive fantasies condition reported stronger agreement that the 60-minute request was *too* demanding than did control participants. Presumably, as found in previous research, positive fantasies dampened energy (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011), luring participants into supposing the road to the fantasized future to be rather smooth and effortless (Oettingen & Wadden, 1991; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002), and this pretense led participants to evaluate the large amount of time as more than they could commit. However, it is important to note that this evidence is only suggestive. Among other shortcomings, the proposed mediator was measured after the decision to donate, and so it could reflect post-hoc explanations as well as actual perceptions. Future studies should provide more conclusive evidence. They should also test the more distal mechanisms that may explain why positive fantasies result in perceiving demanding tasks as overly demanding. We assume that these mechanisms include low energy and little preparation to invest resources. However, other influences, such as the diffusion of responsibility—in an ideal world, others would solve the problem, so one need not personally take action—might also play a role.

Future research

Our work may fuel new research in several directions. First, previous research examining effects of positive fantasies has focused on tasks that are relatively demanding. The present findings suggest that the low effort and poor achievement associated with positive fantasies in those studies (e.g., Kappes et al., 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen & Wadden, 1991) is moderated by the demands of the task. In domains beyond charitable giving, we expect to see the same pattern of results. When tasks are relatively demanding (require more resources), positive fantasies should hamper action; when tasks are relatively less demanding (require fewer resources), these fantasies should not hamper action and might even bolster it.

If future research finds a similar moderation effect of required resources outside the domain of charitable action, these results could help integrate potentially conflicting findings in previous research. For example, imagining a positive experience using cable TV resulted in more returns of a stamped postcard requesting further information about cable, more acceptance of a free week of service from a visiting salesperson, and more actual subscriptions (Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982, Experiment 4). Likewise, decisions between comparable vacation destinations were predicted by activity in the caudate nucleus, a region related to reward processing and reward anticipation, when imagining the vacation (Sharot, De Martino, & Dolan, 2009). These findings at first sight seem to contradict research showing that positive fantasies predicted low effort in the direction of the fantasized future and poor actual attainment over time (Kappes et al., 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). This contradiction might be reconciled by noting that when relatively few resources were required (e.g., returning a prepaid postcard) positive fantasies heightened action, whereas when relatively many resources were required (e.g., sticking to a diet over several months' time), positive fantasies dampened action.

One might then wonder why in the present studies, positive fantasies did not boost giving when few resources (e.g., \$1, 5 min) were demanded. One possibility is that such a difference would emerge when even fewer resources were demanded. Perhaps giving any amount of money when one is a student and research participant, or willingly spending any amount of time watching advertisements, is already seen as moderately demanding. Unobtrusive observational research could be one way for future research to investigate this question.

More broadly, it is important for future work to consider the distinction between the selection of one out of several options, and whether that option is effortfully pursued. When it comes to elections, for instance—once someone is standing in the voting booth, positive fantasies might increase the likelihood that one candidate is selected over others. However, these fantasies might decrease the chances that this individual makes time in his or her busy schedule to get to the voting booth in the first place.

Additional variables for future research

Since positive fantasies depict a future, one might wonder about the role of temporal construal. Research finds that relatively distant futures are construed abstractly and evaluated in terms of their desirability; relatively near futures are construed concretely and evaluated in terms of their feasibility (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The present studies found that the amount of resources demanded moderated the effects of positive fantasies on giving, regardless of whether the crisis was geographically distant (Sierra Leone in Studies 1–2) or nearer (the eastern U.S. in Study 3), suggesting that geographical distance might not play a role. Although it is not clear whether participants imagined the future crisis resolution as distant or near, we suspect that this should be relatively unimportant, since positive fantasies have been found to diminish

achievement of both distant (job success two years after university graduation) and near (physical ability two weeks after surgery; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002) tasks. However, future research could systematically vary the distance of the idealized positive future to see whether positive fantasies are particularly easy to generate or especially powerful with a distant or near construal level.

A second direction for future research is to examine whether the dispositional tendency to generate mental imagery (e.g., visualizer versus verbalizer, Richardson, 1977) plays a role in the effects of positive fantasies. For instance, although people typically prefer products for which they do rather than do not generate imagery, this effect is reversed when participants are low in imagery ability or when a product is not presented in a vivid way (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). Since positive fantasies call for the generation of idealized mental imagery, these fantasies might have particularly strong effects for individuals who are prone to generate such imagery (i.e., visualizers, Richardson, 1977). The effects of positive fantasies might also be strengthened by the provision of vivid details that make it easier to generate mental imagery.

Applied implications

The present studies have practical as well as theoretical implications. Organizations might want to proceed with caution when using or evoking positive fantasies for fundraising, particularly when giving demands many resources. Such fantasies might prove fruitful in other cases, such as collecting a large number of signatures or garnering new subscribers to an email newsletter, for example. Interestingly, some researchers have pointed out that maintaining the status quo is often the easiest path, such as when ego-depleted participants continue watching boring films rather than exerting the effort to stop them (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). When people have invested an initial charitable effort (e.g., becoming a monthly supporter with automatic credit card charges), and the aim is to have them continue, positive fantasies might be helpful.

Since positive fantasies about an idealized future are conjured so widely (see Ehrenreich, 2009), the applied implications of our findings go beyond the field of charitable giving. Politicians trying to attract voters and fund managers trying to attract investors, for example, often summon such imagery. Over time, such messages might decrease rather than increase the desired actions (e.g., donating), particularly among individuals whose resources are limited. When targeted at such individuals, appeals that are less idealized should be more effective. Future research might consider whether negative images (e.g., a rocky future, a vulnerable market) have effects opposite to positive fantasies; if so, negative images might be fruitfully used.

Conclusion

Charity solicitations often encourage people to imagine a positive future of crisis resolution. The present studies shed light on how such positive fantasies are likely to affect giving,

depending on the amount of resources required. Idealized positive fantasies about future crisis resolution lead people to perceive demanding requests (i.e., requests for relatively much money, effort, or time) as *too* demanding. Accordingly, such fantasies dampen helping when many resources are required to resolve a crisis.

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