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THE SPURNED PHILANTHROPIST

*Sidney Rosen
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HUMBOLDT JOURNAL OF SOCIAL RELATIONS VOLUME 13 NUMBERS 1 & 2 — 1986

Altruism and Prosocial Behavior

Editors

Elizabeth Midlarsky
Lawrence Baron

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THE SPURNED PHILANTHROPIST

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ABSTRACT

It seems remarkable that despite the considerable thought that social and behavioral scientists have given to influence processes and prosocial behavior, they have neglected to pay serious attention to the aftermath of a turn-down. The present paper is focused on the turn-down that is experienced by a would-be helper—surely a universal occurrence.

A theory is offered concerning the reactions of spurned helpers. It asserts that when would-be helpers expect that a person who needs help will accept it from them, but their offer of help is then rejected, this violated expectancy induces tension in the spurned helpers. The theory goes on to indicate how spurned helpers will attempt to cope with such stress emotionally, evaluatively, cognitively, and behaviorally. It also suggests how personal and situational variables may serve to moderate these stress-induced reactions. Some preliminary studies that address a few of these issues are offered in support.

According to his eminent biographer, the late Alan Gregg, long with the Rockefeller Foundation, wrote: "Hell hath no fury like a spurned philanthropist. . ." (Penfield, 1967:390). The biography was entitled, "The Difficult Art of Giving." Hell and tax deductions aside, the question arises as to whether this

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provocative statement is true. It suggests the even more important questions of whether any would-be altruist is rendered furious by a turn-down, and if so, why so.

Turn-downs may occur in practically any social situation where one party appears to be in need of some resource, while another appears to possess the capability of supplying the needed resource. In principle, a turn-down may come either from the resource owner in response to a request from a person seeking that resource, or it may come from a needy person in response to an offer of help from the resource owner. Judging from the way in which behavioral and social scientists have approached both kinds of turn-down, it is probably fair to say that a turn-down of the former variety has been viewed almost exclusively within the context of social power, more specifically, as a vain attempt to use power, whereas the latter kind has been linked more to the context of prosocial behavior. (For exceptions see Blau, 1964; Worchel, 1984; the linkage is also implicit in the work of Johnson, Feigenbaum, & Weiby, 1964; and Schopler & Layton, 1972.)

Kipnis (1976), who has written much and conducted extensive research on the topic of social power, has gone so far as to rule out the altruistic act from the conceptual domain of power, both on the grounds that the goal of an influence attempt is to seek an advantage for the influencing agent rather than for the target person, and because an influence attempt, unlike an altruistic act, will encounter resistance in the target person. We would disagree with Kipnis on the second count, since it is now known that an altruistic act may well encounter resistance (DePaulo, Nadler, & Fisher, 1983; Rosen, 1983), just as there exist factors which inhibit help giving (Derlega & Grzelak, 1982; Wills, 1982).

Nor are we ready to concede that an attempt to derive a benefit from someone else has nothing in common with an attempt to benefit someone else. For the time being we might regard attempts of the first kind as egoistic influence attempts and those of the second kind as altruistic influence attempts. Regardless, however, of how we label these distinctions, the issue should be met empirically by inquiring into the comparative reactions of both kinds of influencing agents on encountering resistance. Our present concern is with the aftermath of a turn-down when the spurned party is a would-be helper, and the spurner is a person who is perceived by the would-be helper to be in need of help.

Spurned help is probably a universal phenomenon. It is to be found in the marketplace and at work, in the community, in the

family, in the playground and at school, in peer relations and in the relations of nonpeers, including those between practitioners or professionals and their clients. Obviously, turn-downs can have negative instrumental consequences, such as loss of income and opportunities for promotion, loss of standing among one's colleagues, and loss of referrals, for those would-be helpers whose business it is to offer advice, comfort, or other services to clients.

Less obvious are the consequences that may follow the spurning of altruistic offers of help—offers made with no immediate thought to gaining material rewards or social approval. It is our firm belief that the spurning of such altruistic offers has deleterious implications for the mental health and ensuing behavior of those would-be helpers. Our theoretical justification for this belief will be presented first. Following that we will describe some completed studies that address a number of the relevant issues. Finally, we will indicate the directions in which our current research is progressing.

Rationale

Let us suppose that a would-be helper named Oscar makes an altruistic offer of certain resources to a prospective recipient named John. Suppose further that Oscar firmly believes that John really needs those resources, but is uncertain as to whether John would accept those resources. If Oscar thinks that the odds favor rejection but the offer is then accepted, this would constitute a positive violation of expectations. That is, Oscar would be pleasantly surprised. On the other hand, if Oscar thinks that the odds favor acceptance, but the offer is then spurned, this would constitute a negative violation of expectations—an unpleasant surprise.

Borrowing on Aronson's (1968) coordination of the concept of dissonant (inconsistent) cognitions to the notion of expectancy violation, we would propose that both the positive and the negative form of violation would induce a state of tension or *psychological arousal* in Oscar. As a consequence he will engage in efforts to deal with that arousal. We would propose further that the greater the magnitude of Oscar's violated expectations, i.e., the greater the surprise, the greater will Oscar's level of arousal be, and the more intense will be his efforts to cope with that arousal. Furthermore, the more central or important the

outcome of the offer (its acceptance versus rejection) is to Oscar's self-image, the more will expectancy violation induce arousal.

In a similar vein, Aronson suggested that the most notable of violated expectancies are those that implicate the self-concept. In our view, when an offer of help results in expectancy violation of either sort, this is self-relevant for our would-be helper. Why so? First of all, we believe that the violations may reflect on Oscar's perceptions of self-efficacy. This may occur in a number of respects. If the resource in question involves technical competence or skill, then its acceptance by John might serve to maintain if not enhance Oscar's private self-image of technical competence, whereas its turn-down might threaten that self-image. Alternatively, the acceptance might enhance Oscar's private self-image of interpersonal competence or power, such as having skill in persuading others, whereas spurning might threaten that self-image. Acceptance might also confirm if not enhance Oscar's self-image of being socially responsible and supportive of humanitarian values, whereas rejection might threaten that self-image. Finally, acceptance might confirm Oscar's self-image of being well-liked by others, whereas a turn-down might have opposite significance for Oscar.

Generally speaking, the outcome of the offer may either threaten or strengthen Oscar's beliefs of having effective control over his non-personal and social environments. In parallel fashion, the outcome of the offer may enhance or threaten Oscar's public self-image of control over his non-personal and social environments. That is to say, the outcome of the offer may affect the degree to which significant others regard Oscar as possessing the requisite technical skills, interpersonal control, likeable attributes, and/or credible commitment to humanitarian values.

We hasten to add the belief that these possibilities are subject to systematic qualification in the form of personal and situational moderators. These moderators may operate not only on the magnitude of expectancy violation, but also directly on the magnitude of tension. The personal moderators might include individual differences in those aspects of self-image that we alluded to above. For instance, the greater Oscar's self-image of having special training and experience in a particular area of knowledge, the more he would expect that John would accept advice relevant to that area. Consequently, if John were to spurn his advice though apparently needing help, the greater would be

Oscar's expectancy violation and the more aroused he would then become.

Even if Oscar's degree of expectancy violation were the same as that of a would-be helper with much less relevant experience, Oscar probably attaches greater importance to that expertise as self-reflective than would some would-be helper with much less experience, if only because of the time, resources, and effort that Oscar has expended in acquiring that expertise. Consequently, a turn-down might be particularly arousing to Oscar because it appears to challenge his belief that all that self-investment was worthwhile (Rosen, 1984).

Similarly, if Oscar has a long-established self-concept of being a dedicated humanitarian, a turn-down would induce more tension in Oscar than it would in a less dedicated would-be helper. A parallel of sorts may be found in the allegation (e.g., Pines, 1982) that, among professional human service providers, it is the ones who were most dedicated to the ideals of helping on entering their helping profession who, in comparison with their fellow-professionals, are most likely to fall prey to the ravages of "burn-out." This implies, of course, that we should not equate being in a helping profession with offering help out of altruistic concern for others. As indicated earlier, people who find themselves in the helping professions, or in other professions for that matter, may offer help partly, if not solely, because their livelihood depends on it, and not necessarily because they wish to help.

There are at least four classes of situational moderators. One such class consists of contextual factors. Among such *contextual* variables are the nature of the help: Does the resource being conveyed in the offer of help reflect some special area of technical competence, skill, or body of knowledge? Or does it reflect merely the provision of some convenient service? Is the offer intended to be accepted seriously, or is it merely a symbolic gesture made as custom dictates, and with the expectation (perhaps even the hope) that it would be rejected? Is the offer made freely or is it made out of forced compliance with the dictates of third parties? Consider the last distinction. We would expect that if Oscar were being pressured by someone else to help John, then the magnitude of arousal on being spurned should be less than if the intention to offer help originated with Oscar, since there is less self-investment and commitment in the former case. Still another contextual variable would be the presence of other would-be helpers to whom the recipient turns instead: The spurning of Oscar in favor of some other helper would be expected to impact

more strongly on Oscar's private and public self-image than if John does not then accept help from someone else.

Another class of situational moderator has to do with the *type of pre-existing relationship* between would-be helper and recipient. For instance, are Oscar and John friends or strangers, peers or nonpeers, and if nonpeers does Oscar or does John have superior status? Consider the case of friendship. Surely, the outcome of the offer would matter more to Oscar, and therefore induce greater arousal in Oscar, if John were his friend than if John were a stranger. Suppose instead that theirs is a relationship of nonpeers. According to Blau (1964), if Oscar had higher status than John and Oscar's offer were spurned, Oscar would interpret this rejection as a sign of weakness—an index of John's inability to reciprocate such help. On the other hand, if Oscar had lower status than John and his offer was rejected by John, such a spurning would incur Oscar's enmity. We know of no systematic evidence that bears on these conjectures of Blau.

A third class of situational moderator involves the *perceived attributes of the needy person*. For example, does Oscar consider John to be capable or incapable (by virtue of youth, mental retardation, senility, or psychosis) of making a realistic assessment of the extent of his need? One would imagine that the latter alternative would engender less expectancy violation and arousal than would the former alternative. Is John seen as chronically bent on maintaining his autonomy? If so, one might expect a spurning to be less of an expectancy violation than if John is not seen to be so bent.

A fourth class of situational moderator has to do with the *perceived importance of the help for the recipient's welfare*. Surely, the turn-down of a life preserver by a drowning John ought to have more impact on Oscar than would the turn-down of sunburn lotion by a sunburnt John.

How does Oscar react to that spurning-induced state of arousal? In our judgment the reactions are multimodal. They involve affective, evaluative, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Affective reactions would include the particular emotional labels that the would-be helper attaches to his or her aroused state. For instance, the extent to which Oscar labels his state of arousal as distress and irritation on the one hand, and joy on the other, would depend on the degree to which his expectations regarding the outcome of the offer are violated. Generally speaking, he would express greater distress and irritation, but less joy, if his offer is rejected than if it is accepted.

Evaluative reactions would include the extent to which the would-be helper subsequently views the recipient of the offer in a positive light: the more unfavorable the outcome the more negative the view. Thus if Oscar's offer is spurned he is likely to consider John as less competent and sociable, and would be less inclined to have John as a possible friend, than if Oscar's offer is accepted.

Cognitive reactions would include the kinds of explanations that the would-be helper generates to account for the outcome of the offer, particularly if the outcome is unexpected. Thus Oscar would be more inclined to account for John's rejection of his offer as due to characterological or dispositional weaknesses in John than he would if John accepted the offer. Generally speaking, we would expect would-be helpers to reveal "self-serving biases," i.e., taking credit for success and shifting blame for failure, in accounting for the outcomes of their offers. For instance, Oscar might hint at praiseworthy attributes in himself as responsible for the outcome, in the event his offer is accepted, but to blameworthy attributes in John if the offer is rejected.

Another possible cognitive reaction is "hindsight bias." In order to re-establish the illusion of having control (such as interpersonal control) over his environment after his offer has been spurned, Oscar might claim that there was no expectancy violation, that although he felt obliged to offer help (e.g., as a moral imperative) he felt certain all along that John would reject the offer.

Behavioral reactions might range, depending on different possible moderators such as the would-be helper's perceptions of self-efficacy or the extent to which the recipient's need is perceived to be important, from persistent attempts to overcome the recipient's resistance to being helped (see Bandura, 1982), to disengagement from this particular recipient, to withdrawal from this class of recipients, or from needy persons in general. Graphically put, this gamut could be described as a flight from philanthropy to misanthropy, or less colorfully put, as the development of that phase of "burnout" called depersonalization (Pines, 1982).

Some Preliminary Studies

In the absence of empirical precedents to guide the investigation of spurned helpers' reactions, it was considered judicious to

begin with "as if" or role-play simulation experiments. We began by constructing hypothetical scenarios involving an offer of help from the respondent. The scenarios included two situational moderators, namely, *type of relationship* and *type of help* offered. Thus, some scenarios involved offers to a stranger; others involved offers to a close acquaintance or friend. Some involved offers of help that were skill-irrelevant; others involved offers of help that were skill-relevant. In most of the experiments the outcome of the offer was represented as either acceptance of the help, or as rejection of the help.

It was predicted that the respondents would react to rejection with negative affect, more negative evaluations of the recipient of the offer, and with self-serving explanations of the outcome of the offer. Furthermore, it was predicted that outcome would interact with each of the two situational moderators, such that reactions would be relatively more extreme if the recipient were a friend or if the help was skill-relevant.

General Method

Four studies were conducted with introductory psychology students recruited from the departmental research participant pool. There were 10 participants in each of the first three studies, and 29 in the fourth study. The first three differed only in the dependent variable employed; this was done so as to keep responding by any participant from being unduly burdensome. The fourth study differed in that no outcome was specified. Instead, these participants were asked to "predict" the outcome, so that we could establish whether there was a typical base-rate with regard to outcome expectancies. In addition, the participants in the fourth study were asked to write down their reactions to open-ended questions that were based on the dependent variables of the first three studies. This was done to determine whether the responses thus obtained served to complement and were consistent with the responses to the structured questions in the first three studies.

We constructed 24 hypothetical scenarios involving an offer of help supposedly coming from the participant. In each study the participants were presented with booklets containing some combination of 16 of those situations. Each participant in the first three studies was exposed to all eight combinations of type of relationship, by type of help, by outcome, with each combination

represented by two scenarios. For those in the fourth study, each type of relationship by type of help combination was represented by four scenarios. An example of a skill-relevant offer to a friend was as follows: "You run into a friend at the Computer Center. After watching the friend's efforts it becomes clear that you know more about computer operations than does your friend. You offer to help." By way of contrast, the following illustrates a skill-irrelevant offer to a stranger: "While walking down the street you encounter a stranger who is trying to push a stalled car. The person is not having much success. You offer to help push."

Study 1. The first study focused on the participants' affective or mood reactions to each alleged outcome. To measure those reactions we presented participants with nine 7-point scales involving a particular emotional term, with the request to indicate to what degree the outcome of their offer elicited that particular emotion. The summed responses to the terms *sad*, *upset*, and *alarmed* were considered to represent a "distress" index. Summed responses to the terms *angry*, *irritated*, and *insulted* were regarded as an index of *irritation*. Finally, the summed responses to *proud*, *elated*, and *pleased* were treated as an index of "joy." The rationale for selecting and grouping these emotional labels was based on the work of Davis (1983) and some of his coworkers.

The predictions that rejected offers, in contrast to accepted offers, would elicit greater distress, greater irritation, and less joy were clearly supported, $F(1, 9) = 17.30, p < .002$, for distress; $F(1, 9) = 28.06, p < .0005$, for irritation; $F(1, 9) = 19.56, p < .002$, for joy. The predicted Outcome X Type of Relationship interaction effect was supported in the case of distress, $F(1, 9) = 5.84, p < .039$, and for irritation, $F(1, 9) = 6.92, p < .028$. Furthermore, the predicted Outcome X Type of Help interaction effect was supported with regard to expressed joy, $F(1, 9) = 5.32, p < .046$.

Study 2. This second study dealt with respondents' evaluative reactions to the outcome of the offer. To this end, respondents were asked to rate the recipient on twelve 7-point scales. On the basis of studies conducted in a different helping context (Rosen, 1984), their responses to six of these scales, when summed, were considered to reflect the recipient's sociability, whereas the summed responses to the other six scales were considered to be an index of the recipient's competence, as perceived by the respondent. We predicted that respondents would consider the recipients who accepted their offers to be more sociable and

more competent than the recipients who spurned their offers. We also predicted that outcome would interact both with the nature of the help and with type of relationship in influencing respondents' evaluative reactions, in a manner similar to their emotional reactions.

The prediction that rejected offers, in contrast to accepted offers, would induce participants to evaluate the recipient of their offer more negatively was significantly supported only on perceived sociability, $F(1, 9) = 18.62, p < .002$. Furthermore, the predicted Outcome X Type of Help interaction effects were supported significantly in the case of perceived sociability, $F(1, 9) = 6.52, p < .031$; but only marginally in the case of perceived competence, $F(1, 9) 3.91, p < .079$. As matters turned out, an Outcome X Type of Help X Type of Relationship interaction effect on competence defied easy interpretation, $F(1, 9) = 7.49, p < .023$, in that while friends who rejected skill-relevant help were perceived as least competent, strangers who accepted skill-relevant help were judged as most competent, relatively speaking.

Study 3. To elicit an accounting for the outcomes of their offers participants were presented with eight 7-point scales adapted from similar scales appearing in Anderson's Attributional Style questionnaire (Anderson, Horowitz, & French, 1983). Participants were simply asked to indicate the degree to which each statement in question was a reason for the recipient's reactions to the offer, namely, the would-be helpers' ability to persuade people, the amount of effort they exerted in offering help, the mood they were in, the particular strategy they used, the recipient's personality, and the particular circumstances. Responses were grouped into four causal loci: those of a "characterological" and a "noncharacterological" sort internal to the would-be helpers, and two loci external to the helpers. To our disappointment, the outcome of the offer, neither in its own right nor in combination with the type of relationship or the type of help, had no systematic impact on these attributional indices taken singly or jointly.

Study 4. Our fourth study, conducted with 29 respondents, consisted in presenting 16 scenarios varying only in type of relationship and type of help. Respondents were asked to indicate in turn whether in their estimation each offer was accepted or rejected. Participants were then invited through open-ended questions to write down in their own words the emotions they experienced in encountering each projected outcome of their offer, their evaluations of the recipient, and the reasons why the

recipients responded to their offer in the manner indicated by the participants.

Modal affective statements suggested that our distress index of Study 1 might have been improved by the addition of "hurt" and "bothered" and the elimination of "upset," that our irritation index might have been strengthened by the addition of "offended," and that the joy index might have been improved by the replacement of "elated" by "needed" and "effective." Two possible supplements to our evaluative indices that emerged in this study were "grateful" and "admirable." In any event, spurning, unlike acceptance of their offers, produced more negative than positive emotional labels and evaluations.

Asked to "predict" the outcomes of their offers, the average respondent expected that over 11 (71%) of the 16 offers made would be accepted. We also counted the number of "acceptances" per Type of Help X Type of Relationship combination. A three-way within-subject ANOVA on these acceptance scores yielded a significant main effect of type of relationship, $F(1, 112) = 18.50, p < .0001$, indicating that respondents expected strangers more than friends to accept help. In addition, we counted the net number of reasons for acceptance (i.e., reasons for acceptance minus reasons for rejection) given by each participant, and subjected these scores to a three-way within-subject ANOVA. Only a main effect of type or relationship emerged, $F(1, 112) = 6.74, p < .001$. More reasons were listed when the recipient was a stranger than when the recipient was a friend.

We grouped the many reasons offered for the expected outcomes of their offers into 11 ad hoc attributional categories. Keyed in the direction of inferred reasons for the recipient's rejection of the offers, these categories were as follows: concern about imposing, lack of realization of the need for help, the recipient's belief that the would-be helper lacked the requisite ability or skill, lack of trust in the helper, a desire to acquire skill without help, concern about appearing inferior, shyness, stubbornness, pride, and embarrassment. The most frequently cited reason for acceptance was the polar opposite of the lack of realization of the need for help, whereas the reason most often cited for the spurning was the recipient's desire to acquire skill without help.

Discussion and Conclusions

In sum, these studies suggest that would-be helpers are likely to react, as predicted, with relatively greater negative emotion on

learning that their offer was rejected, than on learning that it was accepted, particularly if the offer is made to a friend. The studies also suggest that would-be helpers are likely to react, as predicted, by belittling the recipient who spurns rather than who accepts their help. We were somewhat less successful in demonstration that helpers' affective and evaluative reactions are consistently qualified by the helper's relationship to the recipient or by the type of help given. In our judgment the reasons for this may be more methodological than conceptual. For instance, in addition to the small size of each group employed in the first three studies, the manipulations of type of help and type of relationship may have been overshadowed by the outcome manipulation, if only because there were fewer exemplars of the moderator variables than of the outcome variable.

Judging from the results of our fourth study, would-be helpers entertain expectations that their offers will be accepted. This may reflect a self-enhancing bias, or simply the optimism of freshmen. The latter interpretation would be consistent with the position of Ross and his associates (Ross, Bierbrauer & Polly, 1974) that failure violates our expectancies more than does success. It is rather curious, too, that they expect strangers more than friends, and offer more reasons as to why strangers rather than friends, would accept help. Perhaps our respondents are saying that friends feel and are expected to feel freer to say "no" or "yes," and therefore the would-be helper has less need to muster reasons for the response of friends.

We failed in the third study to demonstrate systematic attributional biases. It is evident now that the items we had adapted from Anderson's scales simply were inappropriate for the problem area at issue. By way of contrast, the attributions offered by respondents in the fourth study, when asked to give reasons for the outcomes they expected, suggests that spurned helpers, like accepted helpers, can generate a rich variety of explanations to account for the outcome of their offers, explanations that for the most part place the causal locus of the outcome outside of the helper and internal to the recipient. However, the difference between the explanations provided for rejection, unlike those given for acceptance, are that the former tend, for the most part, to put the recipient in a relatively uncomplimentary light.

We have nearly completed an experiment that actually exposes a research participant to an alleged person in need of special guidance who either accepts or rejects the offer of help from our participant, then subsequently goes on to fail or succeed on a

comparable task, regardless of the outcome of the offer. The emerging results appear to be clearly supportive of our theory: The spurned philanthropist is not only furious but goes on to belittle the recipient and to profess a desire to dissociate from the spurner. The individual difference variable dealing with chronic expectations of interpersonal control clearly seems to amplify these differences. As we say in the trade, the disquietude of the spurned helper is a robust phenomenon.

Our future plans include a consideration of a variety of other personal moderators, such as factors that would prompt certain spurned helpers to persist longer than would other spurned helpers in trying to overcome the recipient's resistance to being helped. We also hope to investigate the role of other situational moderators, such as whether the extent of the recipient's state of need modifies the would-be helper's reactions to the outcome of the offer. We are also beginning to explore the possible relationship of being spurned to the development of "burnout" among human service professionals in different work settings. Eventually, we would like to inquire into the possible adverse implications of being a chronically spurned would-be helper for the development of self-efficacy in the young, and for its maintenance in the elderly.

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