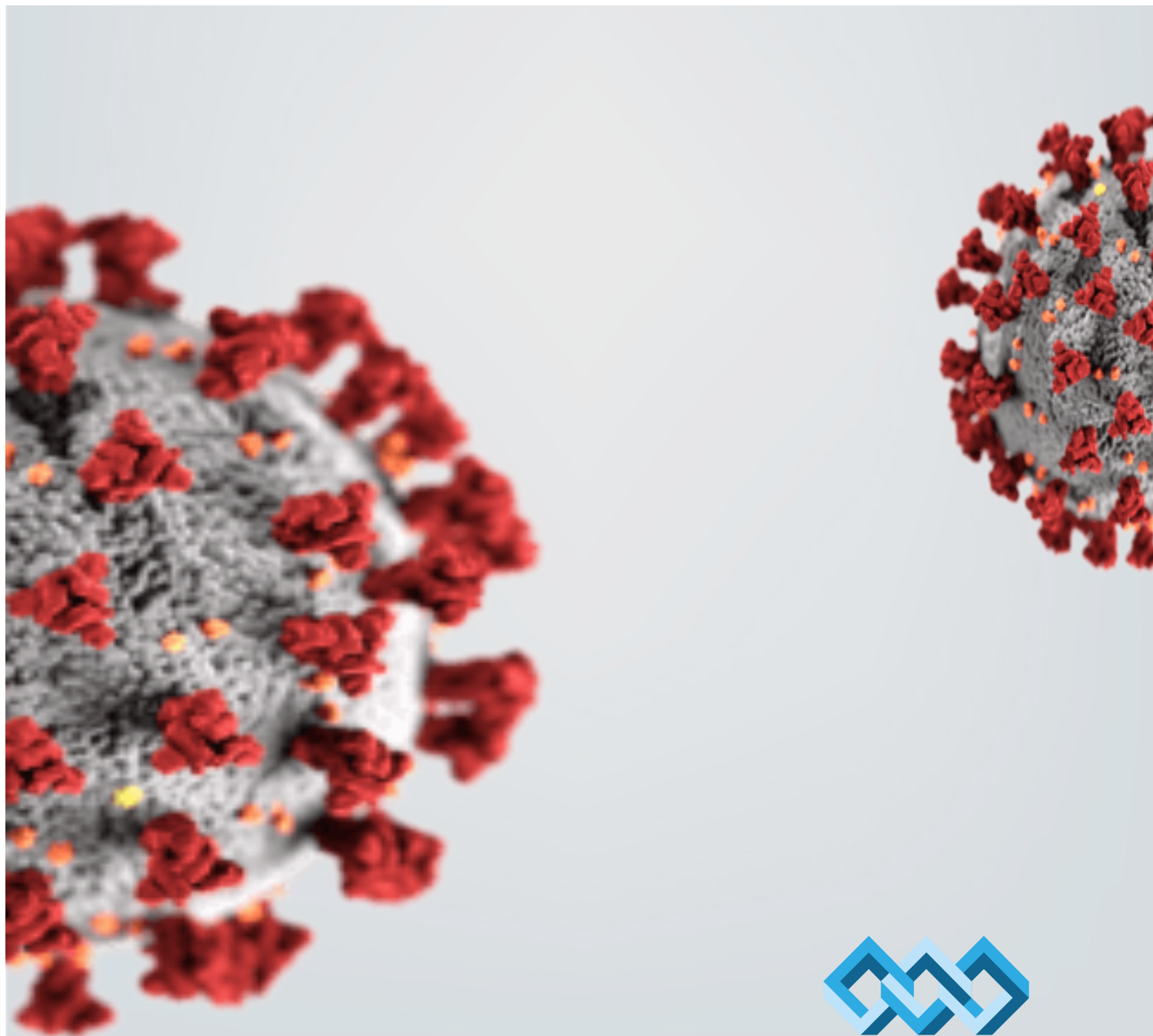


L'Année PhiLanthropique The PhiLanthropic Year

Hors-Série / Special Edition #1 | Mai / May 2020



PhiLab

Réseau Canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie
Canadian Philanthropy Partnership Research Network

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ISBN:
Dépôt légal - Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Mai 2020
Dépôt légal - Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, Mai 2020

À propos du PhiLab | About PhiLab

Le Réseau canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie (PhiLab), anciennement Laboratoire montréalais de recherche sur la philanthropie canadienne, a été pensé en 2014 dans le cadre de la conception de la demande de financement du projet développement de partenariat CRSH intitulé “Innovation sociale, changement sociétal et Fondations subventionnaires canadiennes”. Ce financement a été reconduit en 2018 sous le nom “Evaluation du rôle et des actions de fondations subventionnaires canadiennes en réponse à l’enjeu des inégalités sociales et des défis environnementaux”. Depuis ses débuts, le Réseau constitue un lieu de recherche, de partage d’information et de mobilisation des connaissances des fondations canadiennes. Des recherches conduites en partenariat permettent la coproduction de nouvelles connaissances dédiées à une diversité d’acteurs : des représentants gouvernementaux, des chercheurs universitaires, des représentants du secteur philanthropique et leurs organisations affiliées ou partenaires.

Le Réseau regroupe des chercheurs, des décideurs et des membres de la communauté philanthropique à travers le monde afin de partager des informations, des ressources et des idées.

The Canadian network of partnership-oriented research on philanthropy (PhiLab), previously called the Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian philanthropy, was thought up in 2014 as part of the conception of a funding request by the NRCC partnership development project called “Social innovation, social change, and Canadian Grantmaking Foundations”. From its beginning, the Network was a place for research, information exchange and mobilization of Canadian foundations’ knowledge. Research conducted in partnership allows for the co-production of new knowledge dedicated to a diversity of actors: government representatives, university researchers, representatives of the philanthropic sector and their affiliate organizations or partners.

The Network brings together researchers, decision-makers and members of the philanthropic community from around the world in order to share information, resources, and ideas.

Prochaine publication

Next publication

Volume #2 en juin 2020 / June 2020



Social Sciences and Humanities
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PHILAB DE L'ATLANTIQUE | ATLANTIC HUB

Le Centre Régional de l'Atlantique est dirigé par Roza Tchoukaleyska. Il est situé sur le Grenfell Campus du Memorial University à Cornerbrook. Courriel central du Hub: philab@grenfell.mun.ca

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ATLANTIC HUB

Prosocial Responses to Randomness



Par | By:
Daniel Nadolny, Ph.D

Daniel Nadolny is a social psychologist located at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland. His interest is in what leads individuals to contribute to different charitable organizations. In particular, he is interested in examining how donations are influenced by the role of perceived connection of donors with those who are helped by charities, as well as how threats to the perceived orderly and controllable nature of the world spur people to regain control through philanthropic behaviour.
<https://fac.grenfell.mun.ca/dnadolny/SitePages/Home.aspx>

As of May 1st, 2020, COVID-19 has killed hundreds of thousands of people, ground economies to a halt, and caused unprecedented disruptions to the lives of the global population. Aside from the threat of the virus, Atlantic Canadians have recently endured other tragedies such as Canada's largest mass-shooting, inevitably exacerbating the stress felt in the region. We have heard everything from stories of people fighting over toilet paper [1], through to violations of social distancing [2], and the worst mass-shooting in modern Canadian history [3] - arguably all related to stressors and problems exacerbated by the deep disruption to the lives of Canadians, and the rest of the world.

Not everyone has responded to this situation with increased hostility and violence. Stories of the incredible kindness and charity of people throughout the world have also emerged, as we act to limit the death and destruction caused by Corona. How can we understand the increase of philanthropic and helping behaviour, and the broad sense of cooperation that has swept the world (UN Affairs, 2020), in response to COVID-19? This question can be answered in part through social psychological research on prosocial behaviour.



However, not everyone has responded to this situation with increased hostility and violence. Stories of the incredible kindness and charity of people throughout the world have also emerged, as we act to limit the death and destruction caused by Corona. How can we understand the increase of philanthropic and helping behaviour, and the broad sense of cooperation that has swept the world (UN Affairs, 2020)?

Theory

One theory that may help explain this shift in behaviour is called "Compensatory Control Theory". This theory posits that humans have a certain amount of order and control that they need to perceive in the world. When people have that sense of order and control threatened, through natural disasters, global pandemics, or even positive unpredictable events, they respond in ways to re-establish their perception that the world is an orderly and controllable place (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan and Laurin, 2008). The theory does not explore much into the underlying reasons for this need but does make a number of fascinating predictions that have been supported through experimental and correlational work.

Many of the studies in this area show that people respond to threats to order and control by changing their perceptions. A metaphor often used in this theory is that our need for order and control is like a glass of water, with the water (our perceptions of order and control) reduced at times but which can be re-filled from a variety of sources. For example, they

Image: Edwin Hooper

may turn to others to fill in the gap – in experiments, after experiencing a threat to control, people are more likely to turn to their religious beliefs of God ultimately controlling the world, or can turn to the government, trusting that their leaders have things well-in-hand. These effects can be seen in some of the responses people have had to the threat to order and control that this pandemic has caused.

Studies

Rather than looking at how people change their perceptions in response to unprecedented situations, might they actually act in different ways to take matters into their own hands, looking to actually help address the problems that arise? Along with Dr. Aaron Kay, and (now) Dr. Jillian Banfield, we designed studies to explore how people respond to these threats to control by helping others through a variety of experimental studies, three of which will be discussed in the following sections.

In one study, we recruited participants from the University of Waterloo “Student Life Centre”, that maintained a help desk staffed 24-hours a day, which included a place where students could sign up to be blood donors. For this study, we randomly assigned half of the participants to write a short paragraph about a recent positive event they had no control over, and the other half to write about a positive event over which they had control. We found that the participants who wrote about a time they had no control reported more interest in donating blood, and greater intentions to donate blood within the next week.

In a second study, we recruited US participants online, who read a false story about a fictional family called the Millers. The Millers were having a picnic, which was interrupted by the nearby river flooding. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a condition where they read that there was no explanation for the sudden flood, while the other half read that it was explained by an employee of a dam. Again, participants exposed to the condition where events were unpredictable or inexplicable had greater interest in helping solve problems in the world.

In a third study, we recruited University of Waterloo students who participated for course credit. We assessed the extent to which randomness and

unpredictability were disliked by the participants, and then randomly assigned them read that scientists had determined that the world is ultimately controllable and understandable, or that the world is ultimately random and unpredictable. We then had participants play a game that I found created by the World Food Programme, Free Rice, which allows users to answer questions to learn vocabulary (with other topics now added), and to simultaneously donate grains of rice to the World Food Programme, paid for by advertisers. We found that there was a trend for people reading that the world that is uncontrollable and unpredictable to donate more rice compared to the other condition. We also found that the more participants reported disliking randomness, the more they were affected by what they had read.

In an additional correlational study, I decided to examine a broader, less controlled, but more relevant real-world behaviour. I contacted Tony Steed, the then Canadian Blood Services Director of Marketing & Recruitment, who was willing to share data regarding the number of blood donors who were creating appointments and actually donating, week by week (all summary level data – there was no individual information about blood donors). I then collected information about stock market fluctuations, based on the idea that greater market fluctuations would be indicative of increased changes and uncertainty in the world. The two were positively correlated, even accounting for seasonal and holiday-related patterns that could otherwise explain the association – the more volatility in the stock market, the greater the number of blood donations. Although there are many possible explanations for this effect due to its correlational nature, it was consistent with our explanation that perceptions of randomness and uncontrollability can lead people to reassert order and control through helping others.

COVID-19 Uncertainty and Control

How is this all related to COVID-19? During this time, there has been a great deal of fear and uncertainty, and one of the largest threats we have seen in living memory to our view that the world operates in an orderly and predictable fashion. At the same time, we have seen some acts of humanity at its best, with people truly trying to help those around them, through monetary donations, and contributing tangible goods, from homemade masks, through to substantial personal

donations to foodbanks, charities and others together. One of the ways that people may be responding to the threats to order and control that have come about due to COVID-19 is by actively exerting order and control in a positive way by directly making the world a better place.

I believe these findings are powerful, meaningful, and show some of the positive consequences that can come from these events. Indeed, this line of research was partially inspired by a saying that helped me in my early life, relayed through my mother – “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change those I can, and wisdom to know the difference”. Our changing perceptions of what we can do don't directly matter, but our behaviours do. Experiencing a threat to order and control, and through wisdom to know how to help, we can use our time and money to have substantial positive impacts in the lives of those we care about, for family, friends, and the world at large. Regardless of personal religious views, this adage provides some insight into these findings and how they can be used. Threats to control bring about situations in which people want to help in whatever ways they can. Governments and other organizations may be able to help people do this effectively by helping educate and channel people into the activities that have the greatest impact. There are many reasons why people donate their time and money to causes, including their humanitarian views, their concern for friends and family, and even their own personal efforts to create islands of stability in what can sometimes be a chaotic world. By using experiments and data to understand this behaviour, we may be able to gain wisdom about how we respond to these situations, and develop the tools and resources to ensure that we are effectively able to reach the lofty heights of our aspirations, rather than be thwarted by the confusing or frustrating barriers that often limit our ability to do good. ■

[1]<https://www.tmg.com/2020/03/07/women-fight-toilet-paper-grocery-store-australia-coronavirus/>

[2]<https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/bylaw-issues-nearly-450-warnings-for-violating-covid-19-rules-over-long-weekend-1.4945321>

[3]<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/when-and-where-the-mass-shooting-unfolded-in-central-nova-scotia-1.5547747>

Acknowledgements

This project would not have existed without the support and collaboration with one of my early advisors, Dr. Aron Kay, and my at-the-time fellow graduate student, Dr. Jillian Banfield. I'd also like to acknowledge Dr. Tony Steed, then Director of Marketing & Recruitment for Canadian Blood Services. A team of undergraduate research assistants also provided essential support in collecting data: Kirsten Hartburg, Kate Kennedy, Molly Kravali. Brady Reid provided editing and suggestions on earlier drafts of this post. Finally, I'd like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who provided the financial resources that made this project possible.

Further Info and Call for Collaborators

This project was based on one of my earliest ideas in graduate school, and ultimately has not (yet) been published, in part due to the research team dispersing and the demands of pre-tenured faculty. I have a sabbatical coming up for the 2020/2021 year, and plan to return to this area of research. If you are a researcher, community member, or part of an organization that would like to collaborate on a project related to the above work, please feel free to contact me: dnadolny@grenfell.mun.ca

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Image: Mick Haupte