

Discussion by Evan Golub

# Helping others makes us happier - but it matters how we do it...

## a TED Talk by Elizabeth Dunn

Welcome to an example voice-over-slides “TED talk” talk.

The talk that you have all watched at this point was “Helping others makes us happier - but it matters how we do it...” by Elizabeth Dunn.

## Speaker: Elizabeth Dunn (April 2019)

- Was (and still is) a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia.
- Doctorate in Psychology from the University of Virginia.
- Has a strong publication history (with over 100 publications listed on Google Scholar, cumulatively cited over 10,000 times) including ones exploring the reproducibility of research results.

The speaker has had a substantial academic career, currently holding the highest professorial rank available in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia, and having earned degrees from Harvard and the University of Virginia.

Her publication record is equally strong, with over 100 publications over the span of two decades, being cited over 10,000 times. Over 45 of her papers each have 45 or more citations to them, with her most-cited paper nearing 5,000 citations.

This is noteworthy since it establishes that others in her field value her work and refer to it in their own work.

## Focus of talk: How you help others can impact whether it really makes you happier.

- The speaker had research showing that helping others by giving money lead to increased happiness in the giver.
  - The kids with goldfish crackers example from her work was interesting to see, since the puppet “consumed” the donated cracker and the toddler observed that and was still happy in giving it.
  - Good to hear that their research on giving did compensate for the correlating factor of the level of wealth of the giver.
- However, when she gave money to causes, she found that she was not experiencing the happiness her research indicated she should have.

The main focus of the talk was the idea that how you help others, rather than merely the act of helping others, can have a major impact of whether doing so increases your own happiness.

The speakers own research seemed to contradict her personal experiences in terms of giving and happiness.

We were presented with the findings of a sampling of her research, and she explained how the results could and had been replicated, an important verification stage in much scientific research.

Some of that was very well chosen since it helped allay concerns I had that minor effects might have come into play inadvertently.

For example, if the children were able to get their crackers back since they had given them to a puppet, I would have been more skeptical.

Similarly, people who donate more money might initially have more money, and I had wondered if that had been taken into account until she explained that it was.

## Experience-motivated Research

- Undertook a new study that was motivated by her own experiences with helping by giving through the “Group of Five” project, and the corresponding happiness she felt.
- The study explored giving to a vague pool of money that would help a large community versus giving that would provide a specific resource to individuals in the community, both within the same context of an international organization that promotes children’s health.
  - Giving more money that would explicitly help more individuals (the children getting the mosquito nets for their beds) lead to more happiness than giving more money into a pool (even though logically that would help more people as well).

A nice occurrence highlighted by the talk was how reviewing the results of research and identifying what appear to be inconsistencies to the world around us can lead to the design of new experiments to try to understand nuances.

A practical reality with testing and exploration in human-subjects research is that there can be many confounding factors that are unseen, hiding only inside the minds of our participants. Developing approaches to extract those can be rewarding.

Please pause to consider whether there are other scenarios that you would want to try out in furtherance of understanding the origins of happiness from helping and jot them down for our live discussion of this. Pause now.

Welcome back. Next up is what I perceived as the main take-away message, but I would also be interested in hearing what yours were if they differ from mine.

## Main Message of talk:

### Perceiving the impact of your help is important.

- The speaker found that much more happiness came to her when she participating in helping a specific, yet “random” family in need.
- However, we know that some people get joy in giving to more general funds, so there would seem to be follow-up research still to be undertaken...

Overall the take-away message seemed to be that the way a giver perceives the impact of their help is a major factor in whether helping others leads to happiness in the one providing help.

This allows for the fact that some people feel quite happy in, as the speaker referred to it, “using their credit card” and I think an interesting line of follow-up research could explore what personality traits might be correlated to the types of giving and helping that lead to happiness.

I found this all very interesting since my own experiences had been similar. It caused me to move towards donating my time rather than cash, since I could more easily see the impact of that, and now I understand that my experiences were not unique to me, even if my accountant, before I stopped using one, said it is not useful to my tax return.

## Questionable Points?

- The speaker posited, and then mostly dropped, the question of whether giving to charity was somehow part of our innate human nature?
  - Not backed up by anything in the talk. Don't know if backed up by any science.
- Later she claimed that we evolved to enjoy the type of giving opportunities that connect to appreciating a sense of a shared humanity.
  - Again, not backed up by anything presented in the talk

While I thought the talk was very good overall, there were some points that I found questionable or at least tangential to the evidence-based portions.

One was the notion raised that giving to charity was part of human nature. This hypothesis was but forward with nothing other than opinion behind it that I could see in the talk, and was then dropped. This made me question why it was brought up at all.

Similarly, the notion of evolving to enjoy a certain type of giving felt unfounded, and seems to contradict the fact that many people do get happiness out of different forms of giving, even if the speaker and others do not.

The mixture of opinions and conjectures of a personal nature in with scientifically substantiated claims was a bit unnerving to me.

## Final Thought

- How much does the bias of the researcher influence the design of experiments, and does it matter more in some fields than others?

Seeing how much the personal experiences of this researcher influenced the design of her later study, and some of those conjectures made, lead me to wonder how much the personal thoughts of a researcher can influence the experiments they design, and whether this type of bias can have a larger impact in some fields of study than others.

For example, if a physicist has personal opinions on a theory, how much could a study they design have its results swayed by a possible biased design motivation. In short, would the laws of physics counter such biases by simply proving them false? If so, could the same be said of human-subjects studies?

## Your presentations...

So, that wraps up what an 8-12 minute "TED talk" presentation might look like.

Your presentations will differ in various ways of course. There will be different types of information presented. You might look for images from within the talk or even outside the talk to bring into your slides. You might bring your own experiences from your own major or projects that you've worked on into your presentations.

There is flexibility in these presentations, so you don't have to mirror exactly what I had in this presentation, or my presentation style. I just thought this would be a useful thing as a starting place to get everyone thinking about what their presentations might look like.

I look forward to seeing yours.