

Investing in Karma by Doing Good Deeds

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For so many important outcomes in life – applying for jobs, waiting for medical test results – there comes a point when you just have to sit back and hope for the best. But that doesn't mean we always behave that way. New research published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests that even when an outcome is out of our control we often act as though we can still get on the good side of fate by doing good deeds.

According to lead researcher Benjamin Converse, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Psychology at the University of Virginia, the research was inspired by the kinds of deals many of us seem to make in which we promise ourselves that, if we can just make it through some trying situation, we'll be better citizens in the future. Converse and co-authors Jane Risen and Travis Carter, both of the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, wondered if these kinds of deals might be part of a more general phenomenon in which we intuitively bargain with 'the universe,' however we might define it.

"Everyone is familiar with the basics of reciprocity, the idea that if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. We wondered if people think this way even when they aren't dealing with another person at all, but rather with the universe," says Converse.

The researchers hypothesized that waiting for an important, uncontrollable outcome may lead people to do good deeds with the implicit expectation that the universe will return the favor, a phenomenon they refer to as "investing in karma."

In the first experiment, Converse and his colleagues primed some participants with thoughts of uncontrollable outcomes, asking them to write about an important, unknown outcome they were currently awaiting, while other participants just wrote about their daily routine. After the study was supposedly over, participants were asked if they wanted to donate their time to participate in additional work for the lab, the proceeds of which would go to provide food for hungry community members or wishes for terminally ill children.

Just as the researchers hypothesized, after reflecting on important, unknown outcomes – such as the results of pregnancy attempts, graduate admissions, and court proceedings (all responses given by participants in the priming condition) – people were more likely to volunteer their time to charities.

Participants in the priming condition were not more likely to volunteer their time for a second task if it was described as 'entertaining' and 'fun' rather than helpful, which suggests that their helping behavior was not related to general agreeableness, a desire for distraction, or an attempt to boost mood. These results suggest that the participants volunteered specifically as way of investing in karma.

These findings were confirmed in a second experiment, in which participants who reflected on an uncontrollable outcome were more likely to make a monetary donation than participants who thought

about a controllable unresolved personal dilemma or their personal preferences in making everyday choices.

Following these studies, Converse and his co-authors wanted to see if their findings would hold up in a real-world situation. They found that job fair attendees who had been primed to think about aspects of the job hunt that were outside their control (such as whether new jobs will open up) pledged to donate more of their potential prize money to charity than those who were primed to think about aspects that are within their control (such as learning about the industry).

In their fourth experiment, the researchers wanted to extend the karmic investment hypothesis by examining possible consequences. They surmised that if people do good deeds as a bargain with the universe, they might be more optimistic about the likelihood of receiving their desired outcome.

Again, the researchers recruited job seekers and asked them to complete one of the same surveys from the previous study. They then asked participants if they wanted to complete another 1-minute survey that would add \$50 to the lottery prize. This reward opportunity was designed to be so desirable that everyone would accept. For half of the participants, the extra \$50 reward would benefit a charity, while the other half of participants would keep the extra reward for themselves.

Participants in the outside-control condition who had fulfilled their karmic bargain by helping charity were the most optimistic about their job prospects, suggesting that our karmic investments may pay off by boosting our optimism about uncontrollable outcomes.

The authors point out that these findings are in some ways quite counterintuitive. “You might expect that people would be more selfish when thinking about the things in life that they want, but that are beyond their control” says Converse. “But we found that this experience makes them more likely to reach out and help, at least when they are given the opportunity to do so.”

The researchers believe that investing in karma may be a positive way for us to cope with the otherwise unpleasant experience of just sitting around and waiting. “Even if people don’t actually believe in karma, they may still have an intuitive sense that good things happen to good people. If that intuition moves us to donate to a good cause and makes us a little more optimistic in the meantime, that seems like a good thing,” they conclude.