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Society for Risk Analysis

Love in the Time of Ebola: Study Reveals Factors Bolstering Altruism in Face of Risk

Study explores why some people react altruistically to news about an Ebola outbreak while others do not.

Washington, D.C.—When the Ebola epidemic broke out in 2014, many people responded with fear and loathing, calling for travelers from West Africa to be quarantined, including health workers returning from Ebola-affected areas. Sound familiar? Responses to the Syrian refugee crisis bear some of the same hallmarks as the response to the Ebola epidemic. These and many other crises underscore the importance of understanding how people respond to risks.

A new study by risk communication expert Janet Yang of the University of Buffalo throws important light on how altruistic behavioral intentions related to the Ebola outbreak were deeply rooted in cultural values and worldviews and emotions, yet also were influenced by the ways in which people dealt with factual risk information related to the outbreak. Professor Yang’s research appeared in the online version of the international journal Risk Analysis, a publication of the multi-disciplinary Society for Risk Analysis.

To understand U.S. responses to the epidemic, described by the World Health Organization as the largest and most complex Ebola outbreak in history, Yang conducted an experimental survey involving a nationally representative sample of 1,046 U.S. adults, from 18 to 91 years old. In each condition of the experiment, participants were exposed to a mock-up of New York Times stories, titled “Ebola cases could reach 1.4 million in 4 months, C.D.C. estimates,” designed to manipulate their perception of risk. The high-risk version highlighted that fact that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had confirmed two diagnosed cases of Ebola in the United States, whereas the low-risk version omitted this fact.

The studies revealed that factors such as a more individualistic (“fend for yourself”) and hierarchical worldview (“resources should be distributed based on geo-political boundaries”) as well as anger about the Ebola outbreak led to less altruistic behavioral intentions among study participants. Those with a more “solidarist” or “communitarian” view that sees individuals as needing to depend on each other and who felt sad about the epidemic were more likely to express altruistic intentions. In either case, when communicating about a humanitarian crisis, “it is crucial to aim at reducing the perceived social distance between the victims and those who can offer help,” Yang writes.
In addition, when communicating with audiences who believe that the Ebola outbreak might affect the United States if not effectively controlled, Yang suggests, “communication messages might include more facts and statistics because these individuals are more likely to process this information.” In contrast, audiences who don’t perceive Ebola as an urgent risk potentially threatening the United States might be more effectively stirred to take altruistic actions by messages “that strike the emotional cord such as sadness and sympathy,” she adds.

A related *Risk Analysis* article, “Knowledge, Risk Perceptions, and Xenophobic Attitudes: Evidence from Italy during the Ebola Outbreak,” by University of Bologna researchers Gabriele Prati and Luca Pietrantoni, also identified a number of risk perception and other factors that influenced the responses of 486 Italian adults.

The study was designed to examine the relationships among risk perception of Ebola, levels of knowledge about Ebola, and (blatant and subtle) prejudice toward African immigrants. The study results support the idea that “risk perception and worry about Ebola have the potential to elicit ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes” because Ebola is framed as a disease that affects “others,” such as African immigrants. A low level of knowledge about Ebola was considered a factor contributing to xenophobic attitudes in response to the Ebola risk. In general, the study also indicates that “people living in a developed country without widespread Ebola transmission are not particularly concerned about Ebola and do not feel at risk of acquiring the virus,” the authors write.

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