

The complexity and importance of general organ donation attitudes:

A letter to the editor regarding Siegel et al. (2014)

Siegel et al. (2014) revisited Ajzen's (1988) principle of compatibility in an attempt to explain the lack of consistency between organ donation attitudes and registrations. While the large majority of the U.S. population report favorable attitudes toward organ donation, far less actually become organ donors (Healthcare Systems Bureau, 2013). Siegel et al. (2014) proposed that one explanation for the lack of attitude-behavior consistency is that research often measures attitudes at the general level (e.g., "In general, how do you feel about organ donation?") rather than the specific level (e.g., "How do you feel about registering yourself as an organ donor?"). The principle of compatibility suggests that in order to enhance attitude-behavior consistency, the attitudes must be specific to the behavior of interest (Ajzen, 1988). To examine the importance of this principle, Siegel et al. (2014) tested the predictive value of specific attitudes in comparison to general attitudes, and demonstrated that specific attitudes were a stronger predictor of organ donor registration than general attitudes.

Although the authors demonstrate the value of the principle of compatibility, and, in turn, the role of specific attitudes in organ donor registration behaviors, it must be emphasized that general attitudes remain an important variable in this field of study. As health researchers, we must be careful not to too narrowly define our predictors such that the complexity of the behavior of interest is diminished. While Siegel et al. (2014) demonstrated that specific attitudes out-predicted general attitudes in their statistical models, the explanatory power of specific attitudes could be the result of oversimplifying organ donation attitudes to closely match the outcome of

interest: organ donor registration. That is, organ donation attitudes arguably involve more than feelings about the act of registering to become an organ donor.

Importantly, measures of general attitudes have the potential to capture the multifaceted nature of organ donation attitudes, involving factors such as perceptions about bodily integrity in death and trust in the procurement system (Rumsey, Hurford, & Cole, 2003). Furthermore, research shows that family and religious affiliation play a role in influencing general attitudes about organ donation (Wakefield et al., 2010), which further emphasizes their relevance for future research. It is possible that such social factors impact general attitudes, which, in turn, influence specific attitudes about registering to become an organ donor. Therefore, although Siegel et al. (2014) note the “superiority of specific attitudes toward donor registration for predicting actual donor registration behavior” (p. 6), given the inherent complexity of health behaviors, it may be beneficial for researchers to consider both specific and general attitudes as potential complementary factors in understanding organ donation perceptions and behaviors.

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