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Emotional reactions, perceived impact and perceived responsibility mediate the identifiable victim effect, proportion dominance effect and in-group effect respectively [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated possible mediators of the identifiable victim effect (IVE), the proportion dominance effect (PDE), and the in-group effect (IGE) in helping situations. In Studies 1–3, participants rated their emotional reactions (distress and sympathy toward the victims), perceived impact of helping, perceived responsibility to help, and helping motivation toward four versions of a helping situation. Gradually increasing victim identifiability in the helping situations primarily affected emotional reactions and sympathy completely mediated the IVE. Gradually making the reference-group smaller primarily affected perceived impact, and impact completely mediated the PDE. Gradually increasing in-groupness primarily affected perceived responsibility, and responsibility completely mediated the IGE. Study 4 included real monetary allocations and largely replicated the results using a between-subject design. Together, the results shed light on how contextual factors trigger help motivation, and indicate that different helping effects are primarily mediated by different mechanisms.

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Introduction

Helping is an inherently social behavior that can be investigated from either a motivational perspective (why do we help?) or a situational perspective (when do we help?). This study integrates these perspectives by connecting Weber's (1998) theory of decision modes with research on situational differences influencing helping (i.e., helping effects; Loewenstein & Small, 2007). The question of interest is whether different helping effects are primarily mediated by different psychological processes. We expect that the identifiable victim effect (IVE) is primarily mediated by emotional reactions, that the proportion dominance effect (PDE) is primarily mediated by perceived impact, and that the in-group effect (IGE) is primarily mediated by perceived responsibility.

Three psychological mechanisms that promote helping

According to the taxonomy of decision modes suggested by Weber (1998; Weber & Lindemann, 2007) decisions are driven by affect-based, calculation-based, or recognition-based psychological mechanisms. These three decision modes can be applied to most kinds of decisions, but like Ames, Flynn, and Weber (2004) this article focuses on decisions in helping situations.

Affect-based help decisions can be referred to as “helping with the heart”, e.g., when intense emotional reactions elicited by the emergency situation motivates helping. Calculation-based help decisions can be referred to as “helping with the head”, e.g., when people estimate the utility by calculating the costs and benefits of a certain helping-project and become more motivated to help when the perceived impact of helping is high. Recognition-based help decisions can be referred to as “helping by the book”, e.g., when people recognize their moral obligation, duty or personal responsibility to help. In this study, Weber's decision modes are operationalized as three psychological mechanisms; emotional reactions, perceived impact and perceived responsibility, all of which have been shown to increase helping motivation.

[☆] The first author presented parts of the results during the 34th annual conference of the Society of Judgment and Decision Making in Toronto, November 15–18, 2013.

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Emotional reactions

Affect has been suggested to be fundamental for moral attitudes (Haidt, 2001), judgments and decisions (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002), and particularly decision making in helping situations (Batson, 2011; Slovic, 2007), where feeling more is assumed to be related to helping more. In this paper, we focus on two types of emotional reactions that often befall the helper – personal distress and sympathy toward the victims.

We use personal distress as an umbrella term for negative feelings directed inwards (e.g., sadness or uneasiness). Distress motivates helping to the extent that helping is seen as an efficient way to get rid of the distress. If it is easier to get rid of the distress by e.g., escaping the situation, or if one believes that helping will not reduce the distress, then helping is less likely to occur (Batson, 2011; Cialdini et al., 1987). Sympathy for the victims (also referred to as affective empathy, empathic concern and compassion) is also a negative feeling but directed outwards, towards the person in need (Batson, 2011). Sympathy motivates people to help even when they could easily escape the situation and when they have no way of informing themselves about the actual outcome.

Both distress (Cialdini et al., 1987) and sympathy (Loewenstein & Small, 2007) have been suggested to be the main underlying mechanisms of helping, but the properties of these emotional reactions are not always identical (Batson, 2011; Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). For example, it appears that mood management (self-focused emotions) predicts the choice of whether to help or not, whereas the degree of sympathy toward the victims (other-focused emotions) predicts the amount of helping (Dickert, Sagara, & Slovic, 2011). Also, helping out of sympathy is traditionally seen as an altruistic motivation whereas helping out of distress is seen as an egoistic motivation (Batson, 2011). For these reasons we include both distress and sympathy as two facets of the emotional reaction mechanism.

Perceived impact

Perceived impact (also referred to as perceived utility or perceived efficacy) is another mechanism that promotes helping. To illustrate, if a helping project generates a very limited amount of good (minor benefits) it will be perceived as having low impact. If another helping project demands an equal amount of resources but generates a much larger amount of good (major benefits) it will be perceived as having high impact. The higher impact people believe that their contribution will have, the more likely they are to help. For example, helping motivation decreases if the overhead costs are perceived as high (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007), but increases when campaigns approach their goals because donors believe that their contribution will make a larger impact than (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltman, 2013).

Perceived responsibility

The sense of responsibility, duty and obligation is part of moral decision making and the perceived responsibility to help is often affected by situational circumstances. A classic example is the bystander effect, where other potential helpers diffuse the personal responsibility (Darley & Latane, 1968). Being the only potential helper makes people help more and an increased perceived responsibility has been suggested as the main reason for this (Cryder & Loewenstein, 2012). Perceived responsibility is also related to causal attribution. If David accidentally hurt Robin, he will perceive himself having a responsibility to help. If someone else hurt Robin, he may not.

Perceived responsibility is role-dependent. Working as a police-officer is related to a stronger duty to prevent crimes and working as a doctor is related to a stronger duty to cure people (Jeske, 2008). Being higher up in the hierarchy is associated with more responsibility to prevent harm (Haidt & Baron, 1996).

Although emotional reactions, perceived impact and perceived responsibility will be interrelated to some degree, we assume that the three mechanisms can increase helping motivation independently. In addition, we believe that the three mechanisms primarily mediate three different helping effects.

Mediators of different helping effects

Although mediation is commonly examined in helping situations, our study is, to our knowledge, the first to systematically explore if different helping effects are primarily mediated by different psychological mechanisms. We focus on three of the most well-known helping effects: (1) the identified victim effect, (2) the proportion dominance effect, (3) the in-group effect.

The identifiable victim effect (IVE)

The IVE refers to the tendency to help identified victims more than statistical victims (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; Slovic, 2007; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Determined (but anonymous) victims usually elicit more helping motivation than undetermined victims (Small & Loewenstein, 2003) and victims who are presented with their age, name or picture elicit even more (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; Sah & Loewenstein, 2012). An important boundary condition of the IVE is that it primarily works for a single identified victim versus a single statistical victim (the singularity effect; Dickert, Kleber, Peters, & Slovic, 2011; Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). The traditional way to test the IVE is to frame the situation to imply that donated money is earmarked for a single identified victim (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). However, one can also demonstrate the IVE by showing a single identified victim but be clear that donated money will be given to a larger group and that the identified victim is only one among many beneficiaries (e.g. Oceja et al., 2014), or by showing a single identified iconic victim that personifies a specific cause but that personally cannot benefit from donations (e.g. Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002).

Several psychological mechanisms have been discussed in relation to the IVE. It has been suggested that an identified victim might elicit more perceived impact as the prospect of helping an identified victim seem more tangible and therefore more efficient than the prospect of helping statistical victims (Duncan, 2004). A recent study tested multiple mediators of the “identified intervention effect” (providing more information about a situation increases helping), and found that impact was a better mediator than emotional reactions for this effect (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013). Perceived responsibility has also been linked to the IVE (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006). People donate more money when they believe they are the only possible helper of an identified child than when there is a shared responsibility to help all children (Cryder & Loewenstein, 2012).

Although other mechanisms have been suggested to underlie the IVE, feelings and affect (broadly defined) are the clearly most commonly discussed (Slovic, 2007). Emotional reactions have been suggested to underlie helping effects in general (Loewenstein & Small, 2007, and specifically the IVE. Both personal distress (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2007) and sympathy (Kogut & Ritov, 2005b) is higher when the victim is identified, and both are positively correlated with helping intentions. Although there were no mediation analyses of the IVE per se in these studies, the authors

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