



Exploring the relationship between adult attachment style and the identifiable victim effect in helping behavior

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ The identifiable victim effect is related to the perceiver's adult attachment style.
- ▶ Secure people provide similar levels of help to identified and unidentified victims.
- ▶ Attachment avoidance is associated with lower donations to both types of victims.
- ▶ Anxious people tend to donate relatively higher amounts to identified victims.
- ▶ Anxious people tend to donate relatively lower amounts to unidentified victims.

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ABSTRACT

People's preference to help victims about whom they have some information is known as the identifiable victim effect. Results of three studies, in which dispositional attachment styles were measured (study 1) and activated in a between-subjects priming manipulation (studies 2 and 3), suggest that the intensity of this phenomenon is related to the potential helper's adult attachment style. Specifically, we found that secure people provide similar levels of help to identified and unidentified victims. Attachment avoidance is associated with lower donations to both types of victims. Finally, the biggest gap between donations to identified and unidentified victims was found for anxious people, who tend to donate relatively higher amounts to identified victims and lower amounts to unidentified ones. Moreover, people under attachment-anxiety priming tend to perceive less similarity and connectedness between themselves and unidentified victims as opposed to identified victims, a tendency that may underlie the identifiability effect.

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Introduction

Research in the last decade indicates that willingness to help victims unrelated to oneself is often greater when the victims are identified rather than anonymous or statistical, even when identification conveys no meaningful information about the victim (Slovic, 2007; Small & Loewenstein, 2003; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2006). However, Kogut and Ritov (2005a, 2005b) suggest that the effect of identifiability does not extend to a group of people. Their research found that the provision of quite meaningless identifying details (a name and a picture) increased contributions when the target of help was a single victim, but not when the target was a group of victims.

Research examining the role of emotions as a determinant of the above "singularity" effect suggests that feelings evoked by considering the victim's plight play a major role in that context (Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Specifically, Kogut and Ritov showed that when

asked about their distress after learning of the victims' predicaments, participants who read about a single identified victim rated their distress higher than participants who read about an unidentified victim or about a group of victims (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a).

Another mechanism underlying the identifiability effect is based on the psychological distance between the target and the perceiver. The extent to which the perceiver's emotions are evoked by the victim's plight depends on the psychological distance between the perceiver and the victim (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997). As the psychological distance increases, the perceiver is less likely to adopt the victim's perspective, and is more likely to process the information at a higher, more abstract construal level (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2000) even when the victim is identified (Kogut & Ritov, 2007). Indeed, recent research provides further evidence for this idea by showing that feelings of relatedness, reflected by ratings of similarity and connectedness, replicate the pattern found for contributions to identified and unidentified victims, such that identification of the victim increased donations only in situations in which identification enhanced perceptions of similarity and connectedness toward the victim (Ritov & Kogut, 2011).

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The identifiable victim effect represents an apparent deviation from rational models, according to which every human life has equal value. Unless willingness to contribute is driven by a special personal attachment to the particular identified victim, making a greater contribution to an identified victim may not best serve the contributor's goals, as it is unlikely that social benefits will be maximized when resources are made available more to identified, than to unidentified victims. Thus, understanding the sources and boundaries for this effect is of great importance. Previous research has demonstrated that attachment theory can provide an important framework to explain helping behavior phenomena. Especially in the context of the identifiable victim, the relatedness to the specific victim was found to be a main source of the effect. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to conceptualize the identifiable victim effect in terms of Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1982), and thus to uncover some of the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect. To our view, accounting for the variance in helping behavior can improve if the perspective taken would combine knowledge from both the attachment and the identifiable victim theories and research.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory argues that early experiences with primary caregivers have a major influence on the way people conduct their intimate relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Ainsworth et al. (1978) delineated three attachment styles during infancy – secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent – which they found to be related to the typical interactions between the infant and his/her caregiver (for extensive review see Ainsworth, 1985). Beginning with Hazan and Shaver (1987), this research was extended to adulthood, suggesting that continuous and stable individual differences in attachment style exist and account for a systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that result from one's attachment history (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Waters, Weinfield, & Hamilton, 2000).

The attachment avoidance dimension indicates the extent to which a person distrusts the goodwill of relationship partners and strives to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance from partners. The attachment anxiety dimension indicates the degree to which a person worries that a partner will not be available or responsive in times of need. High attachment security is manifested by both low attachment avoidance and low attachment anxiety (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Research in the last three decades has examined in depth the manner in which adult attachment styles are related to various aspects of life, including emotional experiences, self regulation of emotions and stress, self-image, interpersonal relationships and many behaviors.

Next we discuss two lines of research that are particularly relevant to the current study: One examines the relations between adult attachment style and helping behavior, and the second explores the relations between adult attachment style and subjective perceptions of "self-other similarity." We then suggest how attachment theory can provide an important framework to explain the identifiable victim effect and present our hypotheses based on these two lines of research.

Attachment theory and helping behavior

In his seminal work, Bowlby (1969) already asserted that attachment theory provides an ideal framework to study concern for the other's welfare because distress regulation and the need for sensitive care are core components of both the attachment and caregiving behavioral systems. According to Bowlby (1969), these two (among other) behavioral systems were shaped during the evolution process, because they improved human's survival. The attachment system's function is to protect people in need (e.g. children, sick people) by promising that

they would remain close to supporting others who would offer them care. The caregiving system can be seen as serving a complementary function, since it causes people to provide help and support to people in need, and is aimed at reducing the partner's distress. In order to do so, an empathic stance toward others' suffering is required. When the situation is perceived according to the other's experience, fostering the other's welfare is enabled, while lessening the individual's (caregiver) focus on his/her own state of mind (see also Batson, 1991; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). Bowlby (1969) as well as contemporary researchers (Feeney & Collins, 2001; Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005) described an interplay between these two behavioral systems, such that under felt-security it is far more likely that a person would be able to address another person's distress and needs. Therefore, securely-attached individuals are theoretically expected to be able to adopt an empathic stance and to provide help to others in need more than insecurely attached people.

Indeed, research has shown that the sense of having a secure base (expectations that significant others will be available and supportive in times of need) seems to be a crucial factor underlying people's concern for others' welfare, caregiving behaviors, and other pro-social behaviors like greater tolerance of out-group members (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001) or support provision to relationship partners (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Kuncie & Shaver, 1994). Furthermore, attachment security has also been associated with empathy, in both children (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989; van der Mark, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2002) and adults (Mikulincer et al., 2001).

More recently, Mikulincer and collaborators (Mikulincer et al., 2001, 2003, 2005) and Gillath and collaborators (Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005; Gillath, Shaver, Mikulincer, Nitzberg, et al., 2005; Gilath, McCall, Shaver, & Blascovich, 2008; Gilath, Selcuk, & Shaver, 2008) directly examined the relationship between attachment style and reactions to another person in need (e.g. Mikulincer et al., 2001, 2005) and voluntarism (e.g. Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005; Gillath, Shaver, Mikulincer, Nitzberg, et al., 2005). They suggest that attachment security makes empathy and altruism more likely, since only a relatively secure person can find the mental resources necessary to provide sensitive and effective care to others. Attachment insecurities impede altruism, because insecure people are more likely to be focused on their own vulnerability and hence they lack the mental resources (attention and energy) necessary to attend to others. Specifically, attachment avoidance was consistently associated with engaging in fewer volunteering activities and being involved in such behaviors for less altruistic reasons. Anxiously-attached people may provide help and engage in pro-social behaviors; however, their behavior is positively correlated with egoistic, rather than altruistic motives for helping and volunteering. (Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005; Gillath, Shaver, Mikulincer, Nitzberg, et al., 2005). Similar results were obtained by Mikulincer et al. (2003) who experimentally enhanced people's sense of attachment security which led to greater compassion and willingness to help another person in distress.

Most importantly, Mikulincer et al. (2005, study 5) examined closeness as a reason for helping. Following Cialdini et al. (1997), they manipulated two levels of closeness: In the high closeness condition, subjects were asked to imagine that a needy woman was a member of their nuclear family, whereas in the low closeness condition they were asked to imagine that she was only an acquaintance. These researchers showed that after "attachment security priming" (by asking them to name specific security-providing attachment figures), participants reported significantly higher compassion and willingness to help the needy woman compared with participants in a "neutral priming" condition, even in the low closeness condition. Moreover, the two attachment dispositional measures (attachment anxiety and avoidance measured to provide actual individual differences in participants global attachment style) had significant roles in predicting feelings of distress and concern and the willingness to

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