Sympathy and callousness: The impact of deliberative thought on donations to identifiable and statistical victims

Deborah A. Small [a,*], George Loewenstein [b], Paul Slovic [c]

[a] *University of Pennsylvania, 700 Jon M. Huntsman Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6340, USA*
[b] *Department of Social & Decision Sciences, Carnegie Mellon University, 208 Porter Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA*
[c] *Decision Research, 1201 Oak Street, Suite 200, Eugene, OR 97401, USA*

Abstract

When donating to charitable causes, people do not value lives consistently. Money is often concentrated on a single victim even though more people would be helped, if resources were dispersed or spent protecting future victims. We examine the impact of deliberating about donation decisions on generosity. In a series of field experiments, we show that teaching or priming people to recognize the discrepancy in giving toward identifiable and statistical victims has perverse effects: individuals give less to identifiable victims but do not increase giving to statistical victims, resulting in an overall reduction in caring and giving. Thus, it appears that, when thinking deliberatively, people discount sympathy towards identifiable victims but fail to generate sympathy toward statistical victims.
© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Identifiable victim effect; Sympathy; Generosity

"If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."

— Mother Teresa

Charities struggle to raise money to feed the thousands of starving children in third world countries and advocates struggle to raise public support for highway safety measures that would reduce future accident fatalities. Yet, people often become entranced by specific, identifiable, victims. In 1987, one child, "Baby Jessica," received over $700,000 in donations from the public, when she fell in a well near her home in Texas. Similarly, the plight of a wounded Iraqi boy, Ali Abbas, captivated the news media in Europe during the Iraq conflict and £275,000 was quickly raised for his medical care. More than $48,000 was contributed to save a dog stranded on a ship adrift on the Pacific Ocean near Hawaii (Song, 2002).

These cases demonstrate that when an identifiable victim is made into a cause, people appear to be quite compassionate and generous. However, at other times, people appear rather self-interested and callous—giving nothing despite the enormity of need. In this paper, we examine the consequences of attempting to debias the effect by educating people about it—by teaching them about the inconsistent sympathy evoked by statistical and identifiable victims.

Debiasing the discrepancy in giving is important because concentrating large sums of money on a single victim is inefficient. In many cases, society would be better off, if resources were spread among victims such that each additional dollar is spent where it will do the most good. Yet, when making a decision to donate money toward a cause, most people probably do not calculate the expected benefit of their donation. Rather, choices are made intuitively, based on spontaneous affective reactions (see Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002). To the extent that an

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 215 898 2534.
 E-mail address: deborahs@wharton.upenn.edu (D.A. Small).

identifiable victim is more likely to evoke sympathy and move people to give, excessive resources are likely to be allocated toward identifiable as compared to statistical victims (Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

Can individuals be taught to value life consistently? From a utilitarian perspective, it is straightforwardly normative to value lives equivalently. However, there is no "correct" value of a life or answer to the question of how much one should give to help someone in need. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the "identifiable victim effect" is a bias to give *too much* to identifiable victims or to give *too little* to statistical victims. The bias is simply that people care inconsistently. Therefore, an interesting and practical second question concerns the direction of correction for the effect. To the extent that debiasing the identifiable victim effect does lead to a more consistent treatment of statistical and identifiable victims, will it tend to increase generosity toward statistical victims or to decrease generosity toward identifiable victims?

The identifiable victim effect

Prior research delineates two contributing factors behind the identifiable victim effect. First, when valuing life and other commodities with non-transparent market values, people show greater sensitivity to proportions than to absolute numbers of lives (Baron, 1997; Featherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Friedrich, 1997; Friedrich et al., 1999; Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). For example, an event or calamity that causes 10 deaths within a very small community of 200 evokes a great amount of concern. Ten deaths out of 200 is a fairly large proportion. However, people exhibit much less concern if that same event or calamity causes 10 deaths throughout a large population of many million people. Ten deaths out of many million is merely a "drop in the bucket."

This "proportion of the reference group effect" results, because it is difficult to evaluate the goodness of saving a stated number of lives, since an absolute number of lives does not map easily on to an implicit scale (Slovic et al., 2002). Proportions of lives are, however, at least superficially easy to interpret, since the scale ranges from 0 to 100%. A high proportion elicits, for example, stronger support for life-saving interventions, even when the absolute number of lives saved is small. In contrast, interventions that save larger numbers of absolute lives but smaller numbers of relative lives are likely to evoke weaker support.

For a proportion to dominate evaluation, a particular reference group (denominator) must be salient. Intuitively, the reference group for an identifiable victim is itself; there was only one "Baby Jessica" to be saved. Therefore, an identifiable victim represents the highest possible proportion of a reference group (1 of 1, or 100%). Extraordinarily generous behavior toward identifiable victims, then, could simply result from the tendency for altruistic behavior to increase with the proportion of the reference group.

In addition to the proportion effect, there is also a qualitative distinction between identifiable and statistical victims. Small and Loewenstein (2003) and Kogut and Ritov (2005a) both found that the individuals gave more to help an identifiable victim than a statistical victim, even when controlling for the reference group. In one study, Small and Loewenstein (2003) modified the dictator game to produce a situation in which fortunate participants who retained their endowment could contribute a portion of it to "victims" who had lost theirs. The identity of victims (based solely on a number) either had already been determined (identifiable) or was about to be, but had not yet been, determined (unidentifiable). Gifts to determined victims were significantly greater than gifts to undetermined victims. A field experiment examining donations to Habitat for Humanity to build a house for a needy family replicated this result. Identifiability was manipulated by informing respondents that the family either "*has been selected*" or "*will be selected*." In neither condition were respondents told which family had been or would be selected; the only difference between conditions was in whether the decision had already been made. Contributions to the charity were significantly greater, when the family had already been determined. Kogut and Ritov (2005a) likewise found that a single, identified victim (identified by a name and face) elicited greater emotional distress and more donations than a group of identified victims and more than both a single and group of unidentified victims. Moreover, emotional distress partially accounted for differences in contributions.

This finding parallels our conjecture that identifiable targets stimulate a more powerful emotional response than do statistical targets. Recent dual process models in social cognition identify two distinct modes of thought: one deliberate and calculative and the other affective (e.g., Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Epstein, 1994; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Sloman, 1996). The affective mode may dominate depending on a variety of factors, including when the target of thought is specific, personal, and vivid (Epstein, 1994; Sherman, Beike, & Ryalls, 1999). The deliberative mode, in contrast, is more likely to be evoked by abstract and impersonal targets. The identifiable victim effect, it seems, may result from divergent modes of thought, with greater felt sympathy for identifiable victims because they invoke the affective system.

Indeed, there is some evidence that identification intensifies feelings. In a study that compared punitive actions taken against statistical and identified *perpetrators* (a target that evokes negative rather than positive