

Title: Prosocial Behaviour: The Moral Emotions That Guide It and the Altruists' Preferred Victim

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Ethics approval number: 2014/129

Description:

Aim of the Research

Research shows that people appear to be more willing to help a single identifiable person, rather than a statistical group of people. This is known as the Identifiable Victim Effect and occurs because people become overwhelmed by masses of victims in need. People also generally perceive help that is directed at a singular victim to be more effective.

Sympathy, existential guilt and moral outrage have been identified as emotions that motivate people to engage in helping behaviours.

This study sought to address the gap in the current literature by combining the research on the identifiable victim effect with emotions to predict prosocial behaviours. It was expected that a preference for identifiable victims would be evident in the absence of emotion manipulations, however this effect would disappear when the emotions of sympathy, existential guilt and moral outrage were manipulated in participants. It was expected that inducing these emotions would lead to greater preference to help a statistical victim.

Methodology

169 participants took part in this study. Firstly, participants were randomly allocated to read a short passage about either an identifiable or a statistical victim. Next, they were randomly allocated to read an emotion manipulation about either; sympathy, existential guilt, moral outrage or no emotion (in the case of the control condition). After reading the manipulations, participants completed a questionnaire to gauge their perceptions of charities and measure their felt emotions. Participants were then presented with a paragraph about the other victim, read the same emotion manipulation and completed the same questionnaire for the other victim. Finally, they were told that the researchers would donate \$100 to one of the 2 victims and they were asked to indicate which of the two victims they would prefer to donate to.

Results

In contrast to previous research, the current study found that participants preferred to give to statistical victims (79%) rather than identifiable victims (21%) in the absence of any emotion manipulation. Donation preference was not significantly affected by the level of sympathy, existential guilt or moral outrage felt by each participant. Only self-reported felt emotions were used in analyses as the emotion manipulations were not precise enough at

evoking the specific emotions. Existential guilt predicted participants' perception of the charities but sympathy and moral outrage did not.

These results may be attributable to the participants being presented with the 2 victims side by side. Previous research has shown that when making a direct comparison of identifiable and statistical victims, the usual preference for helping an identified victim is reversed. This may occur because participants are forced to use rational reasoning rather than emotional reasoning.

It is recommended that future studies adopt more refined manipulations for victim types and moral emotions and include a check to ensure that emotional manipulations are successful. Future research may also consider prosocial behaviour in forms other than just monetary contributions or at least charitable giving of participants' own money. Despite the limitations of the current research the results revealed boundaries of the identifiable victim effect and provided good direction for future research.