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"One of us": Outstanding willingness to help save a single identified compatriot ☆

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Abstract

Willingness to help victims unrelated to oneself, in situations where reciprocity is irrelevant, is a common form of altruism. Prior research showed that people are more willing to extend such help when the victims are identified, particularly when the target of help is a single individual. However, in the present research we found that only when the perceivers regard the victims as belonging to their own in-group, willingness to help a single identified individual is greater than willingness to help a group of individuals: identifying tsunami victims by name increased actual contributions only when the specified target was a single compatriot. The role of perceived shared social group in promoting the victim singularity advantage in contributions was mirrored in ratings of emotions, thus supporting an affective account of helping behavior.

Keywords: Identifiable victims; Emotion

On December 26th, 2004 a powerful earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered massive tsunami waves that obliterated cities, seaside communities and holiday resorts, killing perhaps more than three hundred thousand people. Among the victims were people from different nationalities. In addition to the large number of local residents, many foreign tourists were dead or missing. Governments and humanitarian aid agencies mobilized resources to respond to the catastrophe as soon as possible. But how did the individual person react to the appeal for contributions, needed for organizing rescue missions and providing relief for the survivors? Did certain victims evoke more willingness to help than others? The present research examined whether individual willingness to contribute to saving victims of the disaster was affected by the identity of the victims and their number. The more general issue we were concerned with here was the characteristics of victims that affect helping behavior. The specific factors we examined were: the victims' categorization as in-group or out-group members, the availability of identifying information, and whether the contribution targets a group or a single individual.

The effect of identifying a specific victim has been studied in earlier research. The "identifiable victim" effect refers to the fact that an identified victim typically elicits higher contributions than an unidentified one (Schelling, 1968; Small & Loewenstein, 2003).[1] Yet in

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[1] Under some conditions the opposite effect may occur. People may blame singled out victims and perceive them as sharing the responsibility for their situation (e.g., Irwin, Jones, & Mundo, 1996). This tendency may be specially pertinent in cases where the victims belong to an out-group the evokes dislike or antipathy (Levine & Chapman, 1990). In our research, it was difficult to see how the victims' suffering could have been avoided by their own intentional action, and when out-groups were involved, these were "neutral" out-groups that were not expected to evoke negative emotions.

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our recent research (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b) we found that the effect of identifiability does not extend to a group of people: a group of identified victims does not evoke more willingness to contribute than a group of unidentified ones. A similar pattern was observed for real monetary contributions. Providing quite meaningless identifying details increased contributions when the target of help was a single victim, but not when the target was a group of victims. We note, however, that in the previous studies the victim for whom contributions were elicited was a compatriot, a member of the contributor's in-group. The main purpose of the present research is to examine whether the singularity effect of identified victims extends beyond the boundaries of group belonging.

Social psychological research on helping behavior in general and on response to emergency situations in particular, highlighted the role of emotions as motivators of helping behavior. Early research on the Good Samaritan phenomenon (Dovidio, Piliavin, Gaertner, Schroeder, & Clark, 1991; Pillavin, Rodin, & Pillavin, 1969), posits that the tendency to offer help begins with the aversive arousal caused by perceiving the distress of others in need. Further research on empathy and altruism (Batson et al., 1991; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997) has shown that adopting the victim's perspective, imagining how he or she feels in their predicament, evokes in the perceiver feelings of empathy as well as feelings of distress. These feelings are directly related to the perceiver's decision to offer help.

Drawing upon the above findings, our earlier research examined the role of emotions as a determinant of the "singularity" effect of identified victims (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). In line with Small and Loewenstein (2003), we too found that the feelings evoked by considering the victim's plight seem to play a major role in that context. When asked about their distress after learning of the victims' predicament, participants who read about a single identified victim rated their distress higher than participants who read about an unidentified victim. However, identified victims yielded higher ratings of distress than unidentified ones only when the victim was a single individual. As both ratings of distress and willingness to contribute were elicited from the same participants, we were able to determine that distress mediated the singularity effect of identified victims. Similar results were found for rating of evoked feelings and real monetary contribution (Kogut & Ritov, 2005b).

In light of the central role of affect in promoting helping behavior, it becomes important to clarify the conditions under which perceiving a victim is likely to evoke intense emotional response. We propose that the extent to which the perceivers' emotions are evoked depends on the psychological distance between the perceiver and the victim. 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, abstract construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2000). Specific cases are typically perceived as more personally relevant and more emotionally engaging than general ones (Sherman, Beike, & Ryalls, 1999). Recent fMRI studies found that different brain areas are involved when processing concrete and closely personal information as opposed to abstract or general information. Thus, for example, Greene et al. (2001) showed that considering personal dilemmas led to more activity in brain areas related to emotions, and to more rejection of the utilitarian option as appropriate, compared to non-personal dilemmas.

The finding that identification of the victim(s) enhanced emotional reaction only when they considered a single victim, but not when they considered several victims is consistent with the notion that groups are perceived as more psychologically distant and are processed at a more abstract level than single individuals (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Susskind, Maurer, Thakkar, Hamilton, & Sherman, 1999). However, psychological distance is determined by other factors beside group size. One of the factors that received immense attention in the literature in this context is social categorization.

Categorization of others as belonging to the same social group as oneself arouses feelings of greater closeness and responsibility, and augments emotional response to their distress (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Dovidio et al., 1991, 1997). Willingness to help is similarly affected by social categorization. People tend to help those whom they perceive as similar to themselves (Dovidio, 1984; Dovidio et al., 1997). In particular, a bystander is more likely to offer help in an emergency situation (including natural disasters) if she perceives the victim as a member of the same social category as herself (Levine, Cassidy, Brasier, & Reicher, 2002; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Levine & Thompson, 2004).

It is perhaps not surprising that people tend to help members of their own social group more than they help other victims. We are concerned here, however, with the special effect of identifying a single member. To the extent that psychological distance affects perceivers' reaction to victims, the exceptionally generous response to a single identified victim observed in our earlier research may be limited to victims who belong to the perceiver's social category. By contrast, victims who are not members of the perceiver's in-group, even identified individuals, are likely to be processed at a more abstract level, evoking less empathic emotion. In that case, identifying the victims, be they a single person or a group, would not evoke greater willingness to help. Furthermore, recent studies show that when people are presented with more abstract, less emotional information, their judgment becomes more sensitive to quantitative aspects (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004). If considering

whether to extend help to out-group victims involves more abstract and less on emotional processing, we predict that the spontaneous reaction towards the single identified victim will diminish and therefore, contributions for the single victim will not exceed contributions for a group.

In sum, the psychological distance between the perceiver and the victim seems to be affected by several factors, including the concrete identification of the victim, his or her singularity, and the group-level categorization of the victim relative to the perceiver. We propose, however, that the effects of these factors on helping behavior are not additive: only when the perceivers regard the victims as belonging to their own in-group, willingness to help a single identified individual is greater than willingness to help a group of victims.

We tested our hypothesis in three experiments. The first experiment, in which we elicited real contributions for rescuing and helping tsunami victims, was designed to demonstrate that identification of victims increases contributions to save their lives mostly for single victims who are compatriots of the respondents. The second and third experiments employed a hypothetical health problem, in order to control for familiarity and similarity effects, and to explore emotional reactions to identified victims.

Experiment 1

Method

The questionnaires of the present experiment were distributed to students at the Hebrew University 2 days after the tsunami struck in south-east Asia, as rescue teams were already working on the ground, and news reports mentioned the many missing, including Israeli tourists. Eight different versions were used, following a 2 (single vs. a group of seven individuals) by 2 (identified vs. unidentified) by 2 (in-group vs. out-group) experimental design. All questionnaire started by informing participants of an Israeli rescue team that was sent to the Abalok island, located a 1000 kilometers from India, in the center of the earthquake area, in order to seek and rescue missing people. The estimated cost of the team's work was 70,000 Shekels (about $14,000) a day. Following this initial information, the questionnaire continued in one of eight different versions: ''It became clear that there is [are] still one [seven] Israeli/s [Indian/s] missing on that island''. In the identified victim condition the names of the victim/s were also given, using Israeli names in the in-group conditions and Indian names in the out-group conditions. In each of these two conditions, we used seven different names to identify the group members, and each name was used separately in a seventh of the single identified victim conditions.

Two hundred and thirty five students participated in this experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. Participants in all conditions were asked whether they were willing to contribute money to help fund the continued work of the rescue team on the island. If they responded in the affirmative, they could contribute any amount of money they wished. Participants were instructed to put the questionnaire, together with the donation (if any) in a sealed, unmarked envelope. All the money raised in this study was transferred by the researchers to the Israeli Volunteering Association that was collecting money for the tsunami victims.

Results

Mean contributions, as a function of identification and singularity of the victim, for in-group and for out-group victims are presented in the left panel of Fig. 1. Since the contributions were not distributed normally, we report the analysis of the log-transformed contributions. Not surprisingly, contributions to in-group ($M = .31$) were higher overall than contributions to out-group ($M = .11$), $F(1,227) = 12.92$ $p < .001$ for the group main effect, in an ANOVA of contribution by group belonging, singularity and identifying information. Replicating earlier findings, single victims received overall higher contributions ($M = .29$) than groups ($M = .14$), $F(1,227) = 6.56$ $p < .011$ for the main effect of singularity. More important for the purpose of our study, in the in-group conditions, single victims received higher contributions ($M = .50$) than groups ($M = .13$), while in the out-group conditions, groups received higher contributions ($M = .15$) than single victims ($M = .001$), $F(1,41.45) = 17.79$ $p < .001$ for the interaction of group belonging and victim singularity.[2]

Analysis of the percentage of contributors in each condition (presented in the right-hand panel of Fig. 1) yielded a similar pattern. Overall percentage of contributors to in-group victims was higher than percentage of

[2] Singularity and the identification of the victim also interacted ($F(1,227) = 9.09$, $p < .01$), showing that (across the two group belonging conditions) identified single victims elicited more contributions ($M = .40$) than non-identified single victims ($M = .18$), while the identified groups elicited even less contributions ($M = .001$) than non-identified groups ($M = .20$). Furthermore, group belonging and identification also interacted ($F(1,227) = 6.56$, $p < .01$)—showing that in the in-group condition, identified victims received more contributions ($M = .42$) than non-identified victims ($M = .21$), while identified out-group victims elicited even less contributions ($M = .001$) than non-identified victims ($M = .17$). Although the interaction between the three independent factors did not reach a significant level ($p = .12$), separate analyses for in-group and out-group conditions indicate that identification of the in-group victims increased contributions to single victims ($M = .73$) but not for the group ($M = .11$), $F(1,112) = 7.30$, $p < .01$, while the parallel comparison was not significant for out-group victims ($p = .18$).

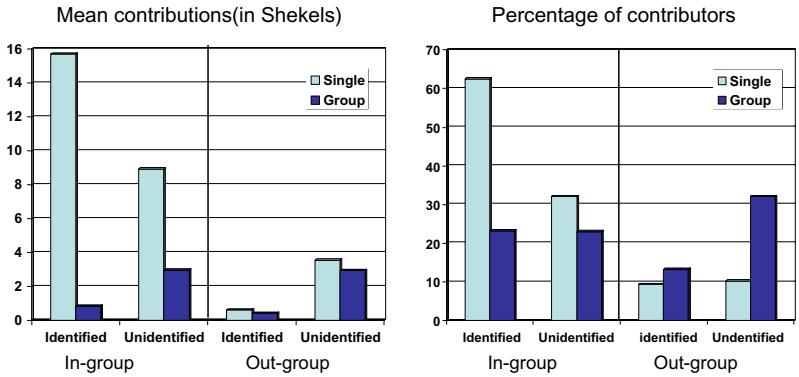

Fig. 1. Mean contributions (in Shekels) (left panel) and percentage of contributors (right panel), for in-group and out-group tsunami victims, as a function of the identification by name, and the singularity of the victim. Identification of the in-group victims increased contributions for single victims but not for the group, while the parallel comparison was not significant for out-group victims.

contributors to out-group victims in the in-group conditions (36% vs. 16%), and the overall percentage of contributors to single victims (29%) was slightly higher than percentage of contributors to groups (23%). More importantly, in the in-group condition the percentage of contributors to the single victim (48%) was higher than that to for the group (23%), whereas the order reversed in the out-group condition (10% for the single victim and 22% for the group). Loglinear analysis of the dichotomous variable of contribute/not contribute by singularity, group belonging, and identification yielded a significant main effect of group belonging (χ^2 for removal of the term = 11.01, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) as well as a significant interaction of group belonging and victim singularity (χ^2 for removal of the term = 9.85, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).[3]

In sum, the above results support our proposal that increased willingness to help identified victims is largely confined to situations in which the target of help is a single victim belonging to the respondent's in-group. The singularity effect of identified victims occurred in the in-group condition only, where identified single victims received significantly higher contributions than identified groups. The differences in mean contribution and in percentage of contributors to the single victim and to the group were not significant in the out-group condition.

Two factors limit the conclusions from Experiment 1. First, in the unique situation described there, the Israeli victims were in a foreign country far from home while the Indian victims were missing in their own country. Second, the victims were introduced by their names—the in-group of Israeli victims by Israeli names and the out-group of Indian victims by Indian names. The different names used in that study may have had an influence on participants since the Israeli names are familiar to the participants and may evoke images of victims who are more similar to the respondents than the Indian victims. Indeed, it has been argued that perceived similarity between other and self is a main source for the greater willingness to help in-group members (Davis, 1994; Krebs, 1975). In the next experiment, we controlled for the situational confound, and manipulated the similarity between the participants and the victims.

Experiment 2

In this experiment, we asked about willingness to contribute to life-saving treatment. The victims in all cases were sick children being treated in medical centers in their own countries, in need of costly life-saving treatment. Victims were identified by a picture only (when applicable). We manipulated two factors that might influence the perceived group belonging and similarity between the participants and the victims. The first factor was the victims' nationality, and the second factor was their skin color. As the participants in our study were white, we assumed that black victims would appear less similar to themselves than white victims. Hence, we included in this study both white and black victims, using two sets of pictures: a group portrait of eight white children (similarity condition), and a group portrait of eight black children (dissimilarity condition). The former group was described either as Israeli (in-group condition) or as Argentinean (out-group condition), and the latter one either as Israeli (of Ethiopian background) or as African. Eight separate pictures of the same eight children, from each of the two pictures, were used to identify the single individuals (using sections of the group portraits presented in the group conditions). Each individual child was presented an equal number of times

[3] The same analysis also yielded a significant interaction of identification and group belonging (χ^2 for removal of the term = 4.86, $df = 1$, $p = .02$) as well as a significant interaction of singularity and identification (χ^2 for removal of the term = 4.58, $df = 1$, $p = .03$), replicating the effects found in the analysis of the contribution amount.

Fig. 2. An example of one of the two group portraits used to identify the victims and one out of the eight separate pictures of the same eight children, used to identify the single individuals. The victims were introduced either as Israelis (of Ethiopian background) or as Africans.

in each of the identified single victim conditions. An example of the group portrait and a portrait of a single member of the group are presented in Fig. 2.

Method

All participants read the same basic story describing a sick child, or a group of eight sick children, from their own country (in-group) or from a foreign country (out-group) who are being treated at a medical center for a life threatening disease. Next, the questionnaire reported that, "A new drug was recently developed that cures the disease. Unfortunately this drug is extremely expensive, and unless the sum of 1,500,000 Shekels (about $300,000) is raised soon, it will no longer be possible to save the lives of the sick child/children". Participants were then asked whether they were willing to contribute money to save the victim/s lives and if so, how much money they would donate at that moment.

Three hundred and ten undergraduate students at the Hebrew University participated in this study. They were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions of the 2 singularity (single vs. a group of eight individuals) × 2 nationality (in-group vs. out-group) × 2 similarity (picture set: white victims vs. black victims) experimental design.

Results

Since the contributions were not distributed normally, we again report the results for the log-transformed WTC. We note first that black victims received higher overall WTC ($M = 1.41$) than white victims ($M = 1.11$), $F(1,301) = 13.70$, $p < .001$ for the picture set main effect, in an ANOVA of WTC by singularity, picture set and group belonging. This may appear surprising, considering the fact that the participants were white. It seems that besides group belonging and similarity, there might be other reasons why black victims evoked greater WTC. Participants may perceive their need to be greater, or they may even feel more responsible for the Ethiopian victims. Notwithstanding the greater overall WTC for black victims, skin color did not significantly interact with any of the other factors. We conclude that perceived similarity between the contributor and victim (at least with respect to skin color) does not account for the singularity effect for in-group victims we found.[4] We report the next effects across the two picture sets.

Means of willingness to contribute (WTC) in each condition (across the two picture sets) are presented in the left panel of Fig. 3. WTC to the single victims did not significantly differ for the different children, and were averaged across the eight children.

Not surprisingly, as can be seen in the figure, WTC to in-group victims ($M = 1.50$) was higher than WTC to out-group victims ($M = 1.05$), $F(1,301) = 25.20$ $p < .001$ for the group belonging main effect, in an ANOVA of WTC by singularity, picture set and group belonging. More important for our present study, we found, as expected, a significant interaction between singularity and group belonging ($F(1,301) = 4.16$, $p < .05$) showing that in the in-group condition, single victims received significantly more WTC ($M = 1.55$) than groups ($M = 1.38$), $t(154) = 1.90$, $p < .05$, while in the out-group conditions, we found no significant difference between contributions to single victims and groups

[4] This finding is compatible with those of Batson and his associates (Batson, Lishner, Cook, & Sawyer, 2005) recent research, failing to support the role of perceived similarity as a determinant of empathy and compassion for strangers in need.

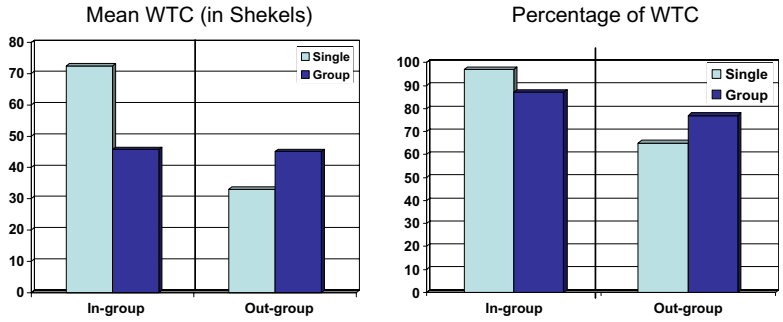

Fig. 3. Mean willingness to contribute (in Shekels) (left panel) and percentage of contributors (right panel), for providing life-saving treatment to sick children, as a function of the victims' singularity and their categorization as belonging to the contributor's in-group or out-group. In the in-group condition, WTC was significantly higher for single victims than for groups, while in the out-group conditions, the opposite trend occurred.

($M = .97$ vs. $M = 1.14$, NS). These findings further support the hypothesis that the singularity effect occurs only when the victims are perceived as belonging to one's own in-group.

Analysis of the percentage of contributors in each condition (presented in the right panel of Fig. 3) yielded a similar pattern. Overall percentage of contributors to in-group victims was higher than percentage of contributors to out-group victims (94.78% vs. 70.43%). However, in the in-group condition the percentage of contributors to the single victim (97%) was higher than that to for the group (87%), whereas the order reversed in the out-group condition (66% for the single victim and 77% for the group). Loglinear analysis of the dichotomous variable of contribute/not contribute by singularity, group belonging, and identification yielded a significant main effect of group belonging (χ^2 for removal of the term $= 13.22$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The interaction of group belonging and victim singularity was marginally significant (χ^2 for removal of the term $= 3.34$, $df = 1$, $p = .06$).

In sum, even with the same pictures used for identifying in-group and out-group victims, the results of the present experiment replicated the interaction between group belonging and singularity: a single victim evoked greater willingness to help than a group of victims, only when the victims were described as in-group members. It appears, thus, that perceived similarity does not seem to be at the route of the effect.

Our account for the limited nature of the singularity effect, namely the finding that the single victims have an advantage over groups only when they are perceived as belonging to the helper's in-group, rests on the assumption that the emotions evoked when considering in-group and out-group victims are different. More specifically we assume that as the psychological distance between the perceiver and the victims is greater when the victims are categorized as members of an out-group than when they are categorized as members of the perceiver's in-group. Consequently the emotional reaction in the former case is less intense than in the latter. We further assume that the greater distance between the perceiver and out-group victims would diminish the differential reaction to a single victim vs. a group. While earlier research showed that a single identified victim evokes more intense emotions than a group of victims (either identified or unidentified ones), the impact of singularity on emotional response to in-group as opposed to out-group victims has not been tested.

The next experiment was designed to test the above assumptions. We examined the effect of group belonging and victim singularity on emotional reaction to the victim(s). We expected emotional arousal to mirror the pattern found for contributions and for WTC in the first two studies. Thus we predicted a singularity effect of identified victims (greater emotional arousal in response to a single identified victim than in response to a group of identified victims) only in the in-group condition.

Experiment 3

Method

One of the picture sets from Experiment 2 was used for the present experiment, with the same basic story describing a sick child or a group of eight sick children, whose lives are at risk. Again, the children were described either as Israelis or Argentineans. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of the 2 (single vs. a group of eight individuals) × 2 (in-group vs. out-group) experimental design. The participants' emotional arousal was measured by two different variables: explicit ratings of distress, and inferred impact of reading about the victims on the participants' mood. Distress was rated on a 7-point scale, reflecting the extent to which the responder agreed with the sentence: "After reading the child's/children's story I felt worried, upset and sad." The scale ranged from "not at all" to "very much." Mood change was computed as the difference between the mood rating elicited at the beginning of the experimental session and the mood rating elicited

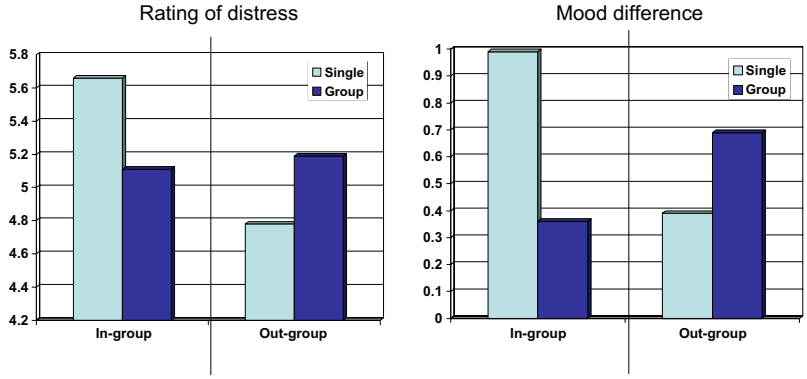

Fig. 4. Mean ratings of distress (left panel) and mean mood change (right panel), for in-group and out-group victims, as a function of the singularity of the victims. In the in-group condition, single victims yielded higher ratings of distress and sharper mood change than groups of victims, while in the out-group condition, groups yielded higher ratings of distress and sharper mood change than individuals.

at the end of the session. In both instances mood was rated by marking a point on a visual analog mood scale.

One hundred and twenty seven undergraduate students at the Hebrew University participated in this study in return for payment (5 Shekels).

Results

Fig. 4 presents the mean ratings of distress (left panel) and mean mood change (right panel), in the four groups. As can be seen, both measures mirror the pattern found in the first two experiments for real contributions and for willingness to contribute. Examining distress rating first, we find that in the in-group condition single victims yielded higher ratings of distress ($M = 5.66$) than groups of victims ($M = 5.11$), while in the out-group condition, the order reversed ($M = 4.78$ vs. $M = 5.19$). However, the interaction between the factors of group belonging and the singularity of the victim did not reach a significant level ($F(1,123) = 3.13$, $p = .080$, in an ANOVA of distress rating by the two independent factors: group belonging and victim singularity). Turning next to the mood change measure, we find that in the in-group condition the mood decreased more after being exposed to the single victim ($M = .99$) than after being exposed to the group of victims ($M = .36$), and the order reversed in the out-group condition ($M = .39$ vs. $M = .69$). Again, the interaction between group belonging and singularity did not reach a significant level ($F(1,123) = 2.95$, $p = .088$). Finally, we computed for each participant a combined measure emotional arousal, the sum of the standardized values of the distress rating and the mood change. As predicted, analysis of the combined measure yielded a significant interaction of singularity and group belonging. ($F(1,123) = 5.82$, $p < .05$), showing that in the in-group condition, single victims evoke more emotions ($M = .50$) than groups ($M = -.27$), $t(66) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, while in the out-group conditions, no significant difference was found ($M = -.47$ vs. $M = -.004$, NS). Thus, the results of the present experiment support the hypothesis that single victims evoke more emotions than groups of victims, only when the victims are identified members of the perceiver's in-group.

General discussion

The results of the reported experiments support our proposal that identification of the victim leads to an increase in helping behavior only when the victim is a single individual who is perceived as belonging to one's own in-group: contributions for rescuing the tsunami victims were most generous when the described victim was a single in-group member, identified by name. Similarly, expressed willingness to contribute for saving sick children was amplified when the depicted victim was a single child, purportedly a member of the respondents' social category. Finally, the emotions evoked by considering the victims' plight, observed in the third experiment, were particularly intense when the victim was a single child, notably a compatriot. These emotions may be at the source of the "in-group singularity effect" of identified victims.

Our findings are in line with a growing body of research showing the major role of emotions in decision making (Epstein, 1994; Greene et al., 2001; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001; Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002; Sunstein, 2005). The direct emotional influence on the decision process often results in behavioral responses that depart from what the individual would view as the best course of action. In particular, stimuli that evoke more immediate emotional response may take precedence over less affect rich stimuli, even if the latter have more important rational consequences.

The present research focused on a particular behavioral pattern, namely that of altruism. While an accumu-

lation of experimental evidence indicates that altruism is a powerful force, this evidence is largely limited to dyadic interactions. The evolution of altruistic behavior in larger groups remains an open question (Fehr and Fishbacher, 2003). Our findings are compatible with earlier research suggesting that people have developed a capacity to experience empathy with an unfamiliar human being even if this individual is not directly related to them. However, the fact that a single identified victim evokes more altruistic behavior than a group of identified victims suggests that this capacity is likely to be triggered particularly when perceiving the distress of a specific single individual. The finding that the advantage of a single identified victim does not extend to out-group victims, neither with respect to emotional response nor with respect to extended help, speaks to the importance of social categorization as a determinant of empathic propensity.

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