Helping secondary victims: The influence of vividness and 'transfer' of sympathy

Habil Otanga* Coordinator of the Faculty of Arts programmes, University of Nairobi, Mombasa Campus, Nairobi, Kenya, Lecturer in the Department of Psychology, University of Nairobi, University Way, Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

The assertion that people are more likely to help identified as opposed to unidentified victims has not been investigated among secondary victims. This experimental study examined a) whether identifiability predicted changes in observers' sympathy for a secondary victim; b) whether sympathy for a single primary victim is transferred as helping behaviour to a secondary victim and c) whether sympathy mediated the relationship between identifiability and helping behaviour. The sample comprised 130 undergraduate students at a university in Kenya. Their age ranged from 20 to 24 years (M = 22.09). Data were collected using a questionnaire and analysed using SPSS 25. Significant gender differences in helping, significant differences in sympathy and helping by identifiability were found. Sympathy significantly mediated the influence of identifiability on helping. Findings provide support for the role of identifiability and affective reactions in decision making concerning helping indirect victims. Future directions are discussed.

Keywords: Helping; identifiable victims; secondary victims; sympathy; vividness.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Habil Otanga,** Coordinator of the Faculty of Arts programmes, University of Nairobi, Mombasa Campus, Nairobi, Kenya; Lecturer in the Department of Psychology, University of Nairobi, University Way, Nairobi, Kenya.
E-mail address: habil@uonbi.ac.ke

1. Introduction

Does information provided about primary victims trigger affective mechanisms in observers that influence willingness to help secondary victims? Existing research reveals that the information about victims presented in a way to foster mental images evokes strong affective reactions in observers that likely increase helping (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b). However, these positive correlations between identifiability and helping through affect are reported in the context of help giving to primary victims, that is, those that suffer tragedy and directly evoke affective reactions and help giving among observers. Scarce research has focused on the 'transferability' of affect and help giving to secondary victims. Therefore, there remains need to further interrogate linkages between information presentation and observers' affective reactions and the influence on helping among secondary victims. The question that the current study seeks to answer is whether information presented vividly about one victim predicts sympathy and helping for a secondary victim not responsible for evoking initial sympathy. Answering this question is expected to advance our understanding of affective mechanisms in intergroup helping for victims unknown to potential help givers.

1.1. Identifiability and helping behaviour

Experiencing feelings, like sympathy play a key role in decision-making when help is required (Batson, 2011; Slovic, 2007). In fact, Batson (1990, p. 339) suggests that the help is more likely for a person we 'feel for'. Therefore, the extent to which help is given depends on a situation's appeal to the emotion of the help giver, and is more likely when the image is of an identifiable victim with a face and a name. It, therefore, follows that help is likely to be given to identifiable than anonymous victims (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Loewenstein & Small, 2007) because identifiable victims are more tangible and evoke powerful emotional responses (Small & Loewenstein, 2003). This effect holds when minor details, including age, name or picture are used in identification (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007); in addition to verbal descriptions (Frey & Eagly, 1993; Lesner & Rasmussen, 2014). Adding a face and name to a victim personalises the victim's situation in the observer, consequently predicting help by reducing the psychological distance between helper and recipient (Eckel, Grossman & Milano, 2007; Small, 2015).

Mixed findings on the influence of identifiability on help giving are attributed to the number of identified victims (whether singular or group); cause of their situation (whether responsible or not) and group identity (whether in-group or out-group) (Kogut & Ritov, 2007; Lee & Feeley, 2016). One line of research shows no differences in help giving between identified and unidentified victims (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Lesner & Rasmussen, 2014; Wiss, Andersson, Slovic, Vastfjall & Tinghog, 2015). A second line of research shows significant differences in help giving between identified and unidentified victims, when victims are identified by name, age or picture (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a); and when personal details about victims were provided (Cryder, Loewenstein & Scheines, 2012). A third line of research finds negative effects of identifiability on help giving. For instance, Kogut and Ritov (2005b) suggest that identifying a group may reduce sympathy and helping, while Kogut (2011: Study I) and Wiss et al. (2015: Exp. SWE I, Exp. SWE II) found that identifying a single victim may not necessarily increase willingness to help. These reverse effects of identifiability were due to attributions of responsibility for the misfortune. The more victims of tragedy are perceived to be responsible for their situations, the less likely they are to get help. Additionally, Small and Loewenstein (2005) indicate that attributing personal responsibility for misfortune to identifiable victims may in fact result in more punishment than help.

Another possible explanation of the reverse effects of identifiability on helping is the intensity of information given in a short time. For instance, Eckel et al. (2007) found that information overload about Hurricane Katrina reduced donations among participants in the University of Texas (UTD) sample. This 'burnout effect' was attributed to the negative press about the disaster. Finally, the role of group identification (Kogut & Ritov, 2007; Ritov & Kogut, 2011) predicts differences in helping.

More help is expected if the target of help is from the ingroup than out-group. The current study sought to show that a) identifiable victims elicit affective reactions in observers and b) observers extend these reactions to other victims indirectly affected by tragedy and predict helping behaviour.

1.2. Affect and helping behaviour

The suffering of others evokes emotional reactions in the observer which are associated with the likelihood to offer help. Help giving can be out of selfless intentions, including empathic concern for the other (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b; Loewenstein & Small, 2007); or a desire to reduce aversive arousal due to exposure to others' suffering. This selfishly motivated helping focuses on reducing distress experienced due to exposure to the suffering of others, indicating a correlation between affective arousal and helping (Dickert, Sagara & Slovic, 2011). Dickert et al. further found that an increase in how much better participants estimated they would feel by donating increased the likelihood of donating by a factor of five; and priming affect increased the likelihood of donating.

Studies show that distress and sympathy underlie selflessly motivated help giving (Cryder et al., 2012; Loewenstein & Small, 2007); and are higher when the victim is vividly identified (Erlandsson, Bjorklund & Backstrom, 2015, Study 1; Kogut & Ritov, 2005a) than when identified without detail. This is because vivid information is likely to increase emotional responses to those in need; and is associated with increased contributions (Eckel et al., 2007).

Put together, these separate perspectives provide support for psychological mechanisms underlying decision making, especially those affective feelings relevant to helping situations among identifiable victims (Batson, 2011; Slovic, 2007). The literature leads to the suggestion that victims whose situations evoke stronger emotional reactions are more likely to be helped; and that affective reactions mediate the influence of vividness on help giving. The current study sought to understand whether information presented vividly evokes higher affective reactions in potential help givers.

1.3. Gender differences in helping

Differences in empathy-related responding between men and women vary depending on the definition and measure of empathy-related responding used. For instance, Lennon and Eisenberg (1987) note large differences in favour of females for self-report measures, especially questionnaires, but not for physiological measures. Some studies have also found gender differences in helping as a function of the cost of helping (Andreoni & Vesterlund, 2001); and due to differences in sympathy (Bos, Dijker & Koomen, 2007). Other studies have not established specific gender directions in helping behaviour. For instance, Lilley and Slonim (2016) found both men and women to increase help giving in response to the Victorian Bushfires in Australia although the increase was larger for females. However, women outnumbered men in new donors towards the disaster, a finding shared in the Eckel et al. (2007) study in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, Tscharaktschiew and Rudolf (2015) found women to show more sympathy and greater willingness to provide both personal and financial help. A cross-cultural study by Wiss et al. (2015) found females more than males in the Swedish sample willing to help a single child. However, no such gender differences were reported in the American sample. The finding of higher helping among women is likely related to the female gender role that encourages caring and nurturance (Eagly & Crowley, 1986).

Empirical findings support the positive correlation between sympathy and helping among females, suggesting that higher sympathy in females than males is responsible for higher reports of helping among females. For instance, Bos et al. (2007) found significantly higher reports of pity from women for HIV+ persons who express distress. The current study, therefore, sought to establish male–female differences in both sympathy and helping without posing any directional hypothesis.

In summary, the focus on affective mechanisms that predict helping to secondary victims related to immediate victims of unfortunate situations remains an area of interest. Therefore, based on literature reviewed, the current study proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to the primary victim in the *not vivid* condition, the victim in the *vivid* condition would elicit higher sympathy; which would be transferred to the secondary victim;

Hypothesis 2: Compared to the secondary victim in the *not vivid* condition, the victim in the *vivid* condition would be more likely to be helped;

Hypothesis 3: The effect of vividness on willingness to help would be mediated by sympathy;

Hypothesis 4: Gender would predict differences in observers' affective reactions and the likelihood to help victims.

The study, thus, sought to answer the following questions:

1. Does a single identifiable victim elicit higher sympathy in observers compared to a single unidentifiable victim?
2. Are observers more likely to help a secondary victim related to a single identifiable victim compared to a secondary victim related to a single unidentifiable victim?
3. Does sympathy mediate the relationship between identifiability and willingness to help?
4. Does gender predict differences in observers' affective reactions and willingness to help victims?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

The study employed a 2 (Gender: Female, male) × 2 (Identifiability: Vivid, not vivid) between-subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions and allocated separate rooms for the experiment. Effort was made to ensure that neither group knew the content of the other group's task.

2.2. Participants

The study sample consisted of 130 first year undergraduate students taking a course in 'Introduction to Psychology' from a university in Kenya. There were equal numbers (n = 65) of both male and female students randomly sampled for this study. Their age ranged from 20 to 24 years (M_{age} = 22.09, SD = 1.09).

2.3. Measures

The stimuli were based on an article from the New York Times newspaper published a day after the tragedy off Bodrum, Turkey, that provided a factual description of the event (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015). The factual basis of the article remained unchanged except for the details in either version. To reduce potential confounds, the original headline on the article was removed. An opening instruction stated, 'The following article appeared in a newspaper on September 2, 2015, following the drowning of refugees.'

Participants in the *vivid* condition read an article titled 'Aylan Kurdi, Syrian Refugee Boy Drowns in the Mediterranean', while those in the *not vivid* condition read an article headlined 'Syrian Refugee Boy Drowns in the Mediterranean'. Both versions comprised a single paragraph describing the drowning except that the *vivid* version included name and age of the primary victim and names of members of his family.

After reading the article, participants were presented with a questionnaire containing items adapted from Tscharaktschiew and Rudolf (2015) measuring sympathy and willingness to help on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all; and 4 = To a great extent). Demographic items of age and gender were included. To conceal the motive of the study, items on anger and deservingness were also included (not part of this analysis).

2.3.1. Sympathy

This was measured using a single item: 'To what extent do you feel sympathy for the father'? on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all; and 4 = To a great extent).

2.3.2. Willingness to help

This was measured by assessing participants' hypothetical financial contributions in two items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all; and 4 = To a great extent); 'To what extent are you willing to contribute financially to help the father bury his family'? and 'To what extent are you willing to contribute financially to help the father start a new life'? α = 0.76.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Participants provided consent to participate in the study before they were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. No identifying information was required on the questionnaire. At the end of the session, participants were briefed on the actual objective of the study and allowed to ask questions before they were dismissed. The study was approved by the University of Nairobi Ethical Review Board and participation was voluntary.

3. Results

After excluding participants whose questionnaires were incomplete, data from 118 students (49 male, 69 female) were analysed. No significant differences in sympathy [t(116) = −0.05, p = 0.958] were found between women (M = 2.87, SD = 1.28) and men (M = 2.86, SD = 1.24). However, significant gender differences were found between women (M = 5.88, SD = 2.05) and men (M = 5.05, SD = 2.03) on willingness to help [t(116) = −2.21, p = 0.029].

Significant group differences in sympathy [t(116) = 3.86, p < 0.001] were found between the *vivid* (M = 3.29, SD = 1.02) and the *not vivid* group (M = 2.44, SD = 1.34); and in willingness to help, [t(116) = 3.27, p = .001] between the *vivid* (M = 6.14, SD = 1.79) and the *not vivid* condition (M = 4.93, SD = 2.19). No age differences were found on any of the measures.

A 2 (Gender: Male, female) × 2 (Vividness: *Vivid vs. not vivid*) between-subjects analysis of variance on sympathy did not find a significant interaction [F(1,114) = .01, p = 0.925]. Whereas the main effect of gender was not significant, a significant main effect of vividness was found. Findings suggest that exposure to vivid information positively predicted sympathy.

A significant interaction effect of gender and vividness on willingness to help was not found, [F(1,114) = 1.02, p = 0.315, ηp^2 = 0.01]. An insignificant main effect of gender and a significant main effect of vividness on willingness to help were found. Findings provided support for the assertion that the effect of vividness on willingness to help was not influenced by participants' gender. Table 1 shows the simple effects of gender and identifiability.

Table 1. Simple effects of gender and identifiability

Factor	R^2	F	p	ηp^2
Sympathy	0.115			
Gender		0.164	0.686	0.001
Vividness		14.279	0.000	0.111
Helping	0.120			
Gender		3.771	0.055	0.032
Vividness		8.030	0.005	0.066

3.1. Mediation

To test whether sympathy mediates the effect of vividness on willingness to help, the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) was used for analysis. We report results for bootstrap significance tests using a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) and based on a resample procedure of 5,000 bootstrap samples. The indirect effect was considered as significant if the 95% CI does not contain zero.

The mediation model of vividness on helping was significant controlling for sympathy, $F(2, 115) = 12.87$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.18$ and accounted for 18% of the variance in willingness to help. A negative correlation between vividness, sympathy and helping was found and the indirect path through sympathy was statistically different from zero [$B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, CI (−0.446, −0.071)]. Belonging to the *not vivid* group decreased sympathy which in turn decreased willingness to help. Evidence provided support for the hypothesis that identifiable victims elicit affective reactions which predict observers' willingness to help. Table 2 displays the unstandardised regression coefficients.

Table 2. Unstandardised regression coefficients on helping

Predictor	Willingness to help		
	Direct effect	Indirect effect [95%CI]	Total effect
Vividness	−0.369*	−0.233	−0.602**
		[−0.446, −0.071]	

*p = Significant at 0.05 level; **p = Significant at 0.01.

4. Discussion

The current study investigated the effects of vividness on willingness to help a secondary victim. It sought to establish whether vivid information about a direct victim's tragedy would predict higher vicarious sympathy and helping for a secondary victim; and whether sympathy would mediate the effects of vividness on willingness to help. Findings show main effects of vividness on sympathy and willingness to help. This supports the assertion that a single identified victim elicits more sympathy and helping than a single unidentified victim, and hence provides new evidence of the identifiable victim effect among secondary victims.

The finding of the affective mechanism underlying helping supports the notion that empathic emotions evoked by exposure to an identifiable victim in distress has a major impact in predicting helping. It is evident that presenting a single victim vividly evokes significantly higher sympathy than when the victim is anonymous. The results, therefore, support earlier studies by showing that tragedy evokes sympathy and willingness to help secondary victims. In the current study, it is likely that sympathy is evoked via cross-cultural and universal norms regarding helping others in distress; and that consequently led to expression of affective responses and prosocial behaviour. One way to interpret findings on sympathy and helping in the current study is through the selfless approach to helping (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b; Loewenstein & Small, 2007) because potential helpers in this study are culturally and racially unrelated to the victims. These findings provide support for the assertion that identifiability increases emotional arousal and willingness to help through the reduction of psychological distance between potential helper and target of misfortune (Eckel et al., 2007);

consequently providing support to System 1 of information processing (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002) in the context of secondary victims.

Whereas previous studies predicted the effects of ingroup (as opposed to out-group) on helping, findings of the current study suggest that affective processes and subsequent helping during tragedy transcends group identification, hence supporting studies that underline the role of emotions in helping (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). It is also likely that when victims are identified, potential helpers see them as a part of the ingroup, thus supporting studies that found affective reactions to predict helping through reduction of psychological distance (Eckel et al., 2007; Lesner & Rasmussen, 2014; Small, 2015).

The study is not without limitations. Children suffering tragedy will evoke strong emotional reactions due in part to perspective taking. The reactions to the descriptions may have been different if the victims were much older. Secondly, the study did not control for respondents' recollection of the event which happened in a foreign country long before the study was carried out. Additionally, the lack of cultural and physical identification with victims may have affected respondents' conceptualisation of the tragedy. It may have been difficult to personalise the situation. Finally, whereas in some previous studies real monetary contributions are used as outcome measures, this study's focus on willingness to help may not provide clarity on actual behaviour. Whether the same sample would contribute money equal to their expressions of willingness to help in real help giving situations is unknown.

Despite the limitations, these findings present new perspectives on helping secondary victims unrelated to potential helpers' ingroup. Study findings show that sympathy towards one victim can be transferred to helping another, related victim of the tragedy. The study of such triadic relationships in helping is important since in many tragedies, for instance, genocide, floods, and civil war, the primary victims may be dead, leaving only third parties in need of help. Since participants in this study were distinct from both the primary and secondary victims in terms of culture, race and social class, findings show the likelihood of using media to help distant victims by personalising tragedy.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

There is a broad body of literature on the psychological factors that predict help giving among primary victims. However, there is scarce literature on whether affective reactions towards primary victims can be transferred to secondary victims. This study expands perspectives in the area of affective reactions in help giving among potential help givers unrelated to victims of misfortune. The uniqueness of the study lies in its attempt to examine help seeking for secondary victims by observers unrelated to both primary and secondary victims. Additionally, the sample also consisted of both male and female students to allow for the examination of gender differences in affective reactions and help giving. Drawing from theories of information processing and altruism, findings of the study add one more step towards understanding psychological predictors of helping.

The current study found that although there were no significant differences in affective reactions between men and women, more women were more likely to show willingness to help. Additionally, identifiability predicted both affective reactions and willingness to help, therefore indicating that the more victims are presented vividly, the more they are likely to be helped by observers unrelated to them. Lack of vividness also predicted lower affective reactions and willingness to help.

This study also provides evidence that addresses a gap in the literature on transferring affective reactions from primary victims to secondary victims; and consequently helping for secondary victims. Findings show that a single vividly described primary victim of misfortune elicited sympathy in observers that was transferred to another victim related to the primary victim. While breaking new ground, these results are consistent with other research that points to the role of identifiability in help giving. In summary, these findings lend support to the affective factors responsible in altruism as described by Batson (1991) and suggest the importance of presenting information about tragedy in

vivid ways to elicit affective reactions and promote help giving among potential help givers far removed from victims.

Future research may consider varying primary victims' age to examine any differences in affective reactions and helping. To test the universality of emotional reactions to people in distress, further cross-cultural research is needed.

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