Friends of Victims: Personal Experience and Prosocial Behavior

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Why do different people give to different causes? We argue that knowing people with specific misfortunes is an important determinant of preference. Three studies demonstrate that knowing a victim increases prosocial behavior directed toward other victims of the same misfortune in the lab and field, for both donated time and money. An experiment shows that the relationship is causal, not due to unobserved heterogeneity. Survey data suggests that knowing a victim decreases social distance and increases perceived responsibility for others’ welfare together, fully mediating the effect on prosocial behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why do some people donate money to research on Alzheimer’s and others to help nourish children in Africa? Why do some people ‘race for the cure’ of breast cancer while others walk for multiple Sclerosis?

Anecdotally, people often recount witnessing a relative or friend suffering from an ailment when expressing their motivation for giving to particular causes. For example, we personally know of many relatives of cancer victims who give to cancer charities and friends of AIDS victims who volunteer for AIDS awareness campaigns. Celebrities such as Nancy Reagan, Mia Hamm, and Rob Lowe all promote charities that benefit victims who suffer from an affliction from which a family member suffered. Perhaps because they can empathize or feel a connection to those anonymous targets of their donations, their personal experience with a particular misfortune appears to transfer to sympathy for other victims of that same misfortune.

The existing literature on charitable giving has concentrated on the influence of victims’ and donors’ characteristics on overall generosity, and on factors that lead specific donors to behave more generously towards specific victims. It has not addressed, however, why people exhibit different willingness to help victims of a given misfortune, independent of the specific victims involved. This is an important gap, because much of charitable giving outside the laboratory is directed towards organizations that benefits victims of specific misfortunes rather than towards specific victims or to victims who have certain personal characteristics.

In this paper we bridge this gap by showing that personal experience (i.e., knowing a victim) who suffered from a specific misfortune increases caring for other victims of the same misfortune. Prior research has found that personal experience increases risk perception and self-protective behavior such as purchasing insurance (see Weinstein, 1989 for a review), but the effects of experience on sympathy and charitable behavior have yet to be examined. We expect that experience similarly affects sympathy. That is, knowing someone who has suffered from a particular misfortune increases caring for other victims of that same misfortune.

A survey of volunteers confirmed that relatedness to victims of particular misfortunes is correlated with causes for which people volunteer. However, friends of victims may be more aware of the prevalence and seriousness of their friends’ ailment and might even perceive an inflated risk of becoming a victim. Therefore, knowledge could be driving the effect or even self-interest, if experience causes worry about oneself becoming a victim in the future.

An experiment which controlled for information and avoided any possibility of self-interested action showed that personal experience uniquely shapes social preferences. We endowed all participants with ten dollars and induced friendship between random pairs of individuals. Then we randomly made some participants’ “friend” into a victim, by taking away their money. Finally, each fortunate participant could share their money with another anonymous victim of money loss or to a general campus wide scholarship fund, depending on a random drawing. Participants gave more to another participant who lost their money when their friend had lost money than when there friend had not lost money. Donations to the scholarship fund did not depend on whether their friend was a victim or not. Thus, relatedness to a victim increased generosity to another victim of the same fate, but had no effect on generosity for a distinct cause.

In sum, donations of time and money involve both a choice to give and a selection among many options since there are many victims and many misfortunes which could be remedied by aid. Here, we demonstrate that personal experience with a particular misfortune is factor that affects the social preferences often seem inconsistent: people appear quite uncaring toward certain victims and quite altruistic toward others. Personal experience is apparently one important factor that can explain such inconsistencies.