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## **The Influence of Victim-Unitization on Charitable Giving**

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Charitable donations are often insensitive to the number of victims and sometimes actually decrease as victims become more numerous. Three studies show that these effects are eliminated by restoring the psychological coherence of multiple victims. Donations to multiple animals were larger for a herd or flock than for disaggregated animals. Furthermore, donations were higher when six children were said to belong to one unit than for disaggregated children. This effect reversed for children with negative traits, however, because participants' feelings of concern increase for units with positive traits (single individuals and unitized groups) and diminish for units with negative traits.

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# The Influence of Victim-Unitization on Charitable Giving

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People react strongly to images, names, and personal stories of individual victims. However, when it comes to helping large numbers of victims, charitable reactions are typically muted. Two patterns of findings have been documented. First people are “scope insensitive.” When asked how much money they would donate to save 2,000, 20,000, or 200,000 migrating birds from drowning in oil ponds, people indicated they would give only slightly more to save 200,000 birds than to save 2,000 birds (Desvousges et al. 1993). Second, people show a “singularity effect:” They donate more to help a single child identified with a photo and a name than to help several children (Kogut & Ritov 2005a, b). Thus, though tragedy often occurs on a large scale and requires action that takes the quantity of victims into account, both the scope insensitivity and singularity effect literatures suggest that it is in these cases that reactions are often most muted.

The singularity effect is driven by an increase in sympathy and concern for a single individual. Previous research has suggested that people react more strongly to individual victims than multiple victims because single units are perceived as more internally consistent than multiples (Kogut & Ritov 2005b). Individuals are perceived as more coherent entities, or “entitative,” than disaggregated groups, which causes their salient attributes to be perceived as psychologically coherent. This in turn makes trait judgments more extreme for individuals than for groups. However, groups can also be entitative; those that are presented with higher coherence and unity receive more extreme judgments than those that are not (Hamilton & Sherman 1996; Mishra 2009; Geier, Rozin, & Doros 2006).

We hypothesize that unitizing multiple victims increases the coherence of their defining attributes. When those victims are defined by positive attributes, sympathy and concern should increase when these multiple victims are unitized. However, by the same logic, unitizing will not always lead to a more favorable response than disaggregated victims. Any victims with unfavorable defining attributes should be judged as more unfavorable when presented as a unit (see Mishra 2009 for a product-related example of this). Thus, sympathy and concern should be diminished when unfavorable victims are unitized and donations should suffer in turn.

In this article we show that people can react more strongly to a large number of victims if they are presented as a single, coherent unit. In three studies, we manipulate the quantity of victims and the way in which multiple victims are presented (disaggregated or unitized). In Study 1, participants made hypothetical donations to save 2,000, 200,000, or a flock of 200,000 birds. Though participants' donations were not different for 2,000 and 200,000 birds, donations were significantly higher for a flock of 200,000 birds than the disaggregated 200,000 birds. In Study 2, hypothetical donations were made to save 1, 200 or a herd of 200 gazelles. Similar results were observed, and could be explained by participants' emotional reaction to the manipulation. Study 3 involved actual donations. Though donations were lower for 6 disaggregated children than for a single child, donations were significantly higher when the same six children were said to belong to one unit. As entitativity research would predict, this effect held only for children with positive traits. In fact, the pattern reversed for unfavorable children: Donations were lower for the family of 6 child prisoners than the disaggregated 6 child prisoners. Participants' feelings of sympathy and concern explain these effects.

These results show that the singularity effect is much more general than originally thought. Single victims are just one example of a unit. The process of increased sympathy and concern that underlies the assessment of a single victim also extends to unitized multiple victims. Therefore, these results suggest a simple way to increase prosocial behavior toward multiple victims. However, there is also an unfortunate effect to unitizing some victims. We show that unitization effects reduce prosocial behavior toward some less favorable victims. In these cases, sympathy and donations are higher if the multiple victims are presented as disaggregated.

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