

# How far is the suffering? The role of psychological distance and victims' identifiability in donation decisions

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## Abstract

We are regularly told about people at various locations around the globe, both near and far, who are in distress or in dire need. In the present research, we examined how the prospective donor's psychological distance from a given victim may interact with the victim's identification to determine the donor's willingness to accede to requests for donations to help the victim in question. In three studies, we measured willingness to donate (Studies 1 & 2) and actual donations (Study 3) to identified or unidentified victims, while measuring (Study 1) or manipulating (Studies 2 & 3) the psychological distance between prospective donors and the recipients. Results indicate that increasing the psychological distance between prospective donors and victims decreases willingness to help — but only when the victims are unidentified, not when they are identified. This suggests that victim's identification mitigates the effect of distance on donor's willingness to help.

Keywords: donation decisions, distance, identifiable victim effect

## 1 Introduction

We are regularly presented with appeals to help people in need at various locations around the globe, both near and far. These may be relatively unidentified groups of people (e.g., in a massive humanitarian crisis), or specific suffering individuals. How do these factors affect people's willingness to help the victims? In the current research, we examine how the prospective donor's psychological distance from the victim might interact with the victim's identification, to determine the donor's willingness to donate money to help the victim.

In the following sections we first discuss each of these factors in isolation, then draw on that discussion to derive predictions about their likely combined effect. At the outset, we hypothesized that psychological distance would diminish the donors' willingness to help unidentified victims, but not identified victims, who tend to evoke caring regardless of how distant they are in space or social distance. In other words, we suggest that victim's identification would mitigate the effect of distance on the donor's willingness to help.

### 1.1 Psychological distance and willingness to help

Much psychological research and theorizing appears to confirm the common adage that “charity begins at home.” For example, studies have found that people are more willing to help members of their own group than members of other groups (Levine et al., 2002; Levine & Thompson, 2004), and people who are similar to them, rather than those who are perceived to be different (Dovidio et al., 1997).

Two classes of explanations have been put forward for this robust effect: First, distance diminishes the strength of the (emotional) impact of the victim's distress on the prospective helper (e.g., Chen & Li, 2009; Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007). Second, distance diminishes moral responsibility and the anticipated impact of one's help on the victim's condition (e.g., Baron & Miller, 2000; Erlandsson, Björklund & Bäckström, 2015). These explanations are not mutually exclusive, and both can be related to Latane's (1990) *social impact theory* (e.g., Nowak, Szamrej & Latané, 1990)<sup>1</sup>.

Social impact theory (Latané, 1981) suggests that the impact of a social event on us (including appeals for help) diminishes with “immediacy” — that is, the farther the victim is from us in space and time. This notion is consistent with theories that willingness to help is mediated by emotions (e.g., Batson et al. 1991; Dovidio et al, 1991; Slovic, 2007), as well as those that posit that all emotional reactions

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<sup>1</sup>To avoid confusion, we should note that none of these processes falls within the realm of *construal level theory* — see Liberman & Trope, 2008, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2010 — because they pertain to the effects of distance on intensity that are not mediated by construal. Distance may, of course, affect decisions on helping via construal, but this is not the focus of the present paper.

diminish in intensity the further one is from the object of the emotion (Van Boven et al., 2010). With regard to helping, in particular, it has been found that people who are closer to us evoke stronger other-oriented emotions, such as sympathy and compassion (e.g. Batson et al. 1997), as well as stronger self-oriented emotions, such as distress and anxiety (Piliavin, Rodin & Piliavin, 1969; Kogut & Ritov, 2011).

Apart from its effect on the helper's emotional reaction, distance may also reduce the perceived impact of help (Latane, 1990). The classic bystander intervention effect (Darley & Latane, 1968; Fischer et al., 2011) specifically suggested that the probability of helping a victim decreases with number of potential helpers due to "diffusion of responsibility," whereby people assume that they do not need to help because others would. Because the number of other people who are at least as likely to help as a potential helper oftentimes increases with increasing spatial and social distance between the helper and the victim, we might expect more diffusion of responsibility with increased distance of the victim. For example, all the citizens of my country are as likely as me to help a sick child from my country, but the circle of helpers who are as close as myself is much smaller when a sick child from my apartment building is seeking help. Diffusion of responsibility is closely related to the notion that distance may reduce the prospective donors' sense of obligation and moral responsibility (e.g. Baron, J. & Miller, J. G. 2000; Erlandson, Björklund & Bäckström, 2015) and the notion that members of larger groups may feel less interconnected and less responsible for each other (e.g., Levine & Thompson, 2004). To the extent that social/spatial distance introduces a larger, more inclusive social group (as it often does) it would also reduce moral responsibility and helping.

There might be also a more general sense in which distance diminishes impact of help. Recently, Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) demonstrated that people were more willing to take action to help nearby causes than distant ones, because they believed that doing so would have a greater impact. In their studies, these beliefs predicted willingness to help even when they had no objective basis.

## 1.2 The Identified Victim Effect

Considerable research has demonstrated that people are more willing to contribute resources to help an identified victim (someone whose personal information is provided) than an unidentified one (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; Small & Loewenstein, 2003; Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007). It has been suggested that while unidentified victims may exemplify a group of needy individuals in a similar predicament, identified victims are regarded individually, separately from any group, and are presented as group of one (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). This, in turn, may increase both the perceived impact of one's help and one's emotional reaction. In support of this theory, studies

have shown that a single identifiable victim prompts more donations than a group of people, even if the latter are identified (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b). In general, individual identified victims have been found to elicit greater emotional responses than groups of identified victims — such as an increased sense of connectedness, empathy and distress (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). For example, Kogut and Ritov (2005a) examined donations to help sick children and found that self-oriented emotions (worried, upset and sad), but not other-oriented emotions (sympathy and compassion toward the victim) mediated the effect of identifiability on donation amounts.

## 1.3 The combined effect of psychological distance and victim identification

Misfortune can strike anywhere, and help is often needed not only from the local community, but also from larger social circles. How should a help request be framed in order to be effective? Is victim identification as effective with victims who are close to us as it is with distant ones?

In line with the research we reviewed, we surmised that, overall, victims that are more psychologically distant would receive less help. However, we hypothesized that donations to identified victims will be less affected by distance. As mentioned earlier, the identifiability of victims enhances feelings of connectedness and distress (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b), even if they are distant from the perceiver (e.g. Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson & Gregory, 2017). Moreover, specific, vivid individuals are considered in their own right, as opposed to representing a group (i.e., are viewed as "a group of one", e.g., Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997), even if they belong to a relatively broad category (Baron, 2012). Therefore, identifiability is expected to bridge the gap between prospective donors and distant victims. We therefore predicted that victim identification would mitigate the effect of distance on donation.

For the purposes of our research, in our examination of these predictions we found it important to avoid introducing ingroups versus outgroup boundaries (i.e., "us" versus "them"). Recent research on the effect of identifiability on donation decisions in an intergroup context yielded mixed results, suggesting that donations may be dependent on the type of social categories being considered as well as on the relations between the ingroup and the outgroup (Kogut & Ritov, 2007; Ritov & Kogut, 2011; 2017). To avoid introducing boundaries between ingroup and outgroup, we used the idea of the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al. 1993), which posits that even negative intergroup sentiments can be reduced by transforming members' perceptions of group boundaries from "us" and "them" to a more inclusive "we". We did that by describing the victims in terms of one's own group and varying the size of that group (e.g., "a child from your city" vs. "a child from your country").

This manipulation was intended to create different levels of closeness without introducing feelings of group animosity and competition.

## 1.4 The present research

Three studies examined the hypothesis that victim identification would mitigate the effect of psychological distance on respondents' willingness to help, as measured by rate and amount of donations. Study 1 was an explorative attempt to demonstrate the effect of perceived distance on donations in aid of identified versus unidentified victims. Italian students were asked if they were willing to donate to help identified and unidentified survivors of the 2016 earthquake in central Italy, and how distant they were from the stricken area. In Studies 2 and 3 we experimentally manipulated the respondents' psychological distance from the victims, and examined the respondents' willingness to donate (Study 2) and actual donations (Study 3) to identified and to unidentified victims. In addition, in Study 3, after making donations, participants indicated the extent to which they felt distress and empathy toward the victim, and responsibility to help.

## 2 Study 1

The first study is an explorative attempt to demonstrate the effect of actual distance and perceived distance of potential donors from the victims of a humanitarian crisis. Participants were Italian students who were asked if they were willing to donate in aid of a single young man who was identified by name, or to help general unidentified victims in the same plight following the massive earthquake in central Italy in 2016.

### 2.1 Method

One hundred and thirty-five undergraduate students and former students of the University of Padua (57% women, mean age = 29.42, SD = 11.17) took part in the study voluntarily, through an email survey. The survey was sent to the participants in August 2016, a week after a massive earthquake in central Italy had killed 297 people and injured 400, and approximately 2,100 people had lost their homes and obliged to take shelter in emergency camps. The survey took part during the summer vacation, when many of the students do not stay at the University's area, and tend to move to different locations in Italy. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subject conditions, manipulating the identifiability of the victims in need (*Identified Single Victim* versus *Unidentified*). Participants in the Unidentified condition read (in Italian):

Many young people lived in Amatrice, at the epicenter of the earthquake region (some of whom

were away at the time), and were saved when it struck last week — but their houses, and all their belongings, were destroyed. A large part of their town was devastated, as well, and some of their friends are still missing. These people are desperate. In many cases, their families are unable to provide financial help. They need immediate help to start their lives over.

Participants in the Identified condition read the same information about a particular named young man:

Giovanni is a young man who lived in Amatrice, at the epicenter of the earthquake region. Luckily, he was not in town when the earthquake struck, but his house and all his belongings were destroyed. A large part of his town was completely devastated, and some of his friends are still missing. He is desperate. His parents are unable to help him financially. He needs immediate help to start his life over.

To examine the respondents' perceived psychological distance from the earthquake region, they were asked to rate how close or distant they personally felt from the earthquake area, on a 7-degree scale ranging from 1–*Very close* to 7–*Very distant*. In addition, they were asked to indicate where they were at time of the earthquake, and when they completed the survey. Finally, participants were asked if they would be willing, if asked, to donate money (WTD) to the cause in question, (*Yes/No*).

### 2.2 Results

Overall, 55% of the participants (74 participants) stated they were willing to donate money in aid of the earthquake victims. To examine the role of Identifiability, Perceived Distance, and the interaction between them on WTD, a simple logistic regression analysis was conducted. The results revealed a significant effect for Perceived Distance (Wald(1) = 8.34, B = -.50, p = .002<sup>2</sup>), while the effect of Identifiability did not approach significance (Wald(1) = 2.27, B = -1.31, p = .13); and participants in the Identified condition expressed greater WTD (60.3%) than those in the Unidentified condition (49.3%). In line with our prediction, a significant interaction was found between Identifiability and Perceived Distance (Wald(1) = 4.22, B = .46, p = .04). Separate analysis revealed that in the Identified condition WTD was not significantly related to Perceived Distance (Wald(1) = .056, B = -.034, p = .81); in the Unidentified condition, however, WTD significantly increased as Perceived Distance diminished (Wald(1) = 8.34, B = -.49, p = .004).

<sup>2</sup>Since our main prediction is a significant interaction between distance and identifiability, in all three studies the interaction effect is examined in a one-tailed test.

Perceived distance did not significantly correlate with participant's actual distance (measured in kilometers) from the earthquake region ( $r=.099$ ,  $p=.29$  and  $r=.072$ ,  $p=.43$ , for the correlation between perceived distance and participant's location at the time of the earthquake, and between the distance between the earthquake region and the participant's location at the time of the survey, respectively). To examine the role of actual (as opposed to perceived) distance from the earthquake region in predicting WTD with regard to identified and unidentified victims, two further logistic regression analyses were conducted, with Identifiability, Distance, and the interaction between them as predictors. In one regression, we entered the distance (in kilometers) between the stricken region and the participant's location at the time of the earthquake, while in the other regression we entered the distance between the earthquake region and the participant's location at the time of the survey. No significant results emerged from these analyses — which suggests that donation decisions may be more affected by perceived distance than by actual distance. Alternatively, it may mean that the respondents had a different actual distance in mind (such as the distance between the earthquake region and their original homes).

The results of Study 1 lend initial support to the idea that perceived distance reduces WTD only in relation to unidentified victims — not to identified ones. However, in this study, psychological distance was measured, rather than manipulated — which raises the possibility that increased distance was the *product* of the diminished willingness to donate to unidentified victims, rather than its cause. Therefore, in the following two studies, we manipulated the psychological distance between respondents and the victims, to examine whether psychological distance had a causal effect on donations to identified, and unidentified, victims.

### 3 Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to further examine the effect of psychological distance on donations to identified versus unidentified victims, while manipulating (rather than measuring) the respondents' perceived distance from the victim. In addition, in this study we asked for the particular amount participants are willing to donate (as opposed to merely asking if they were willing to in general). Participants were told about a sick child in need of expensive medication that may cure his disease. To manipulate their psychological distance, they were asked to imagine either that the child was a fellow resident of their neighborhood, their town, or their country. Finally, they were asked whether, and how much, money they would be willing to donate toward the cost of the medication for the sick child.

### 3.1 Method

Two hundred and fifteen undergraduate students from Ben-Gurion University, Israel (72% females, mean age = 25.16 years,  $SD=3.07$ ) voluntarily took part in the study, after classes or while working individually at the library. They were randomly assigned to one of six between-subject conditions of a 2X3 (Identifiability X Distance) experimental design. They were all given the same basic description — adapted from Kogut and Ritov (2005a) — of a sick child being treated at a medical center for a potentially fatal illness, and that a new drug that could cure it has been developed, but is very costly and not covered by the child's national medical insurance. In the Identified conditions, the name and picture of the child were added. To manipulate psychological distance from the child, participants were asked to imagine that the child was a fellow resident of their neighborhood, their town, or their country. Next, they were asked whether they would be willing to donate money right then and there toward the cost of the child's medication — and if so, how much.

### 3.2 Results

To examine the role of Psychological Distance (three levels, coded 1–3) and Identifiability (a dummy variable) in predicting participants' willingness to donate (WTD) a simple regression analysis was conducted on WTD (this variable included the donation amount for participants who were willing to donate, otherwise 0), with Identifiability, Psychological Distance and the interaction between them as predictors. The effect of Psychological Distance was found to be significant,  $t = -2.89$   $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p = .004$ , such that greater distance was associated with lower WTD over all. The effect of the Identifiability approached significance —  $t = 1.86$   $\beta = .333$ ,  $p = .064$  — in that participants were more willing to donate to the identified victim ( $M = 90.09$ ) than to the unidentified one ( $M = 74.93$ ). Most importantly for the purposes of our study, the interaction between Psychological Distance and Identifiability was also significant:  $t = 2.39$ ,  $\beta = .46$ ,  $p = .009$ . As can be seen in Figure 1, in the Identified condition, Psychological Distance did not affect WTD ( $t = .456$   $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .65$ ); while in the Unidentified condition, distance reduced willingness to donate ( $t = -3.26$   $\beta = -.30$ ,  $p = .011$ ).

The results of the second study provide further support to the idea that willingness to donate to victims decreases when they are distant from the potential donor — but only when the victims are unidentified, not when they are identified. In Study 3, we sought to replicate these findings with actual rather than hypothetical monetary donations. In addition, to ensure that the manipulation affected perceived distance from the victim in the predicted manner, in Study 3 we measured the respondents' subjective perceptions of their distance from the victim. Finally, we examined the role

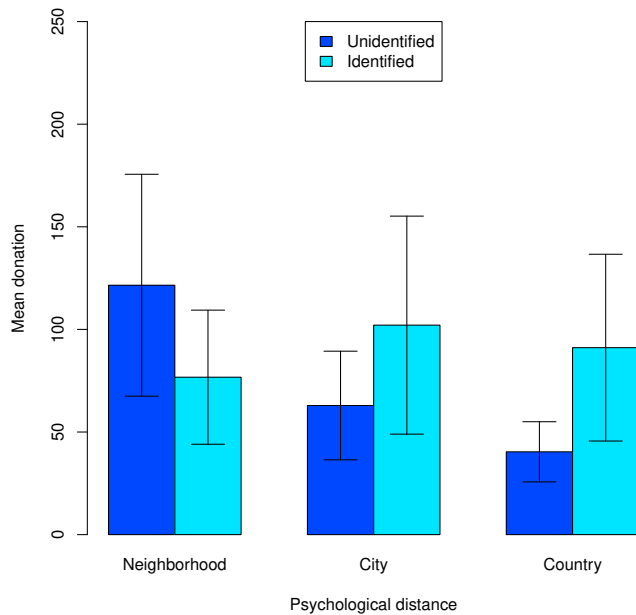


FIGURE 1: Mean WTD to identified and to unidentified victims, as a function of manipulated Psychological Distance – Study 2.

of emotions and sense of responsibility in explaining the behavioral pattern we observed.

## 4 Study 3

### 4.1 Method

Two hundred and fourteen undergraduate students from Ben-Gurion University, Israel (65% females, mean age = 24.47, SD= 2.50) participated in the study at the end of classes, in return for a nominal fee of NIS 10, which they received in NIS 1 coins. They were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions that manipulated the distance from, and identifiability of, the person in need. Specifically, they read about a desperately ill student in need of a certain expensive medication that may save his life. To manipulate the respondent’s psychological distance, the student was described as being someone from the respondent’s own department, university, or country. In the Identified condition, the ailing student’s initials were added. Respondents were then asked if they were willing to donate to help purchase the necessary medication for the ill student — and if so, they could donate any amount of their choosing (including, in particular, any portion of the NIS 10 that they had received for participation in the study).

On the final page of the questionnaire, participants were asked two questions, to assess their perceived distance from the victim (as a manipulation check). The first measure was the *Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale* (Aron,

Aron & Smollan, 1992) — a single-item, pictorial measure of closeness, comprising two identically-sized circles, one representing oneself, and the other representing the other person, and a scale ranging from 1 (*No overlap*) to 5 (*Complete overlap*). The second measure is a self-report of closeness, in which the respondents rate the degree to which they would use the term “we” to describe themselves and the other (Dovidio et al. 1991). Next, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt each of six emotions on a 7-degree scale — two emotions related to the victim (*Concern for the victim* and *Sympathy toward the victim*), and four that are more self-oriented (*Sad*, *Distressed*, *Bothered*, and *I felt that it could happen to me*) — and to indicate the extent to which they felt personally responsible to help the ill student.

Finally, to ensure and emphasize confidentiality, participants were given an envelope and asked to place the completed questionnaire (with or without a donation) in it, and to put it in a box with other identical envelopes. (The donated money was donated to a charity that helped sick children.)

## 4.2 Results

Descriptive statistics (Means and SDs) of all variables are presented in Table 1.

### 4.2.1 Manipulation check

We first examined whether our Psychological Distance manipulation affected participants’ perceived distance from the victim. The two measures of Perceived Distance were found to be highly correlated ( $\alpha = .64$ ) and were averaged. Results of a simple regression analysis on Perceived Distance as a function of the manipulated Psychological Distance (3 levels, coded 1–3) revealed that greater manipulated distance gave rise to greater perceptions of distance (i.e. lower ratings of closeness),  $t = -2.25$   $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p = .025$ . To rule out the possibility that the identifiability manipulation itself also affected psychological distance, a regression analysis was conducted on Perceived Distance with Identifiability, Psychological Distance and the interaction between them as the predictors. Results reveal no significant main effect for Identifiability ( $t = -.83$   $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p = .41$ ), nor for the interaction between Identifiability and Psychological Distance ( $t = .36$   $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .72$ ).

### 4.2.2 Donation Amounts

To examine the effect of psychological distance and victim identifiability on donation amounts, a simple regression analysis was conducted with Identifiability (dummy variable), Psychological Distance (coded 1–3 in a three-level scale) and the interaction between them as predictors. The role of Psychological Distance approached significance,  $t = -1.88$   $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p = .060$ , such that greater distance was

TABLE 1: Mean responses, Study 3. SD in parentheses.

Distance	Victim	Perceived distance	Donations	Other-focused emotions	Self-focused emotions	Responsibility
Department	Unidentified	2.44 (0.98)	8.18 (4.96)	5.90 (1.01)	4.93 (1.32)	4.41 (1.65)
	Identified	2.12 (1.01)	7.88 (3.99)	5.65 (1.09)	4.48 (1.26)	4.15 (1.39)
	Total	2.28 (1.00)	8.03 (4.47)	5.77 (1.05)	4.71 (1.29)	4.28 (1.52)
University	Unidentified	1.92 (1.02)	7.46 (4.04)	5.56 (1.12)	4.42 (1.22)	3.97 (1.62)
	Identified	1.89 (1.01)	7.89 (5.70)	5.36 (1.26)	4.46 (1.49)	3.51 (1.63)
	Total	1.91 (1.01)	7.68 (4.93)	5.46 (1.19)	4.44 (1.35)	3.74 (1.63)
Country	Unidentified	2.00 (0.88)	5.78 (4.41)	5.11 (1.21)	4.03 (1.37)	3.11 (1.65)
	Identified	1.80 (1.06)	8.60 (7.75)	5.09 (1.43)	4.48 (1.45)	3.58 (1.84)
	Total	1.89 (0.97)	7.23 (6.46)	5.10 (1.32)	4.26 (1.42)	3.35 (1.75)

overall related to lower donations; while the role of identifiability was not significant ( $t = -1.89$   $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p=.27$ ). The interaction between Psychological Distance and Identifiability is significant,  $t=1.76$ ,  $\beta=.34$ ,  $p=.04^3$  — echoing the pattern found in Study 2. As can be seen in Figure 2, in the Identified condition, Psychological Distance had no significant impact on donations,  $t = .51$ ,  $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .607$ , while in the Unidentified condition greater distance was significantly linked to lower donations,  $t = -2.25$   $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .026$ .

### 4.2.3 Emotional reactions

We computed two emotional measures for each participant: Other-related emotions ( $\alpha=.73$ ) and self-oriented emotions ( $\alpha=.79$ ). To examine the role of Psychological Distance and Identifiability in predicting participants’ emotions, two simple regression analyses were conducted with Identifiability, Psychological Distance and the interaction between them as predictors. The regression of Other-related emotions revealed a significant effect of Psychological Distance ( $t=-2.75$   $\beta= -.26$ ,  $p=.006$ ), while the interaction between Identifiability and Psychological Distance was not significant ( $t=.58$   $\beta=.11$ ,  $p=.56$ ). The regression of “self-oriented emotions” revealed a significant effect of Psychological Distance  $t=-2.80$   $\beta= -.27$ ,  $p=.006$ , and a significant interaction between Psychological Distance and Identifiability  $t=1.98$   $\beta= .39$ ,  $p=.049$  — replicating the pattern found with donations. Specifically, in the Identified condition, self-oriented emotions were not affected by Psychological Distance ( $t=-.01$   $\beta= -.001$ ,  $p=.99$ ), while in the Unidentified condition self-oriented emotions diminished with Psychological Distance  $t=-2.91$   $\beta= -.27$ ,  $p=.004$ .<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Repeating the same regression analysis with donors only (excluding participants who were not willing to donate at all) reveals a highly significant

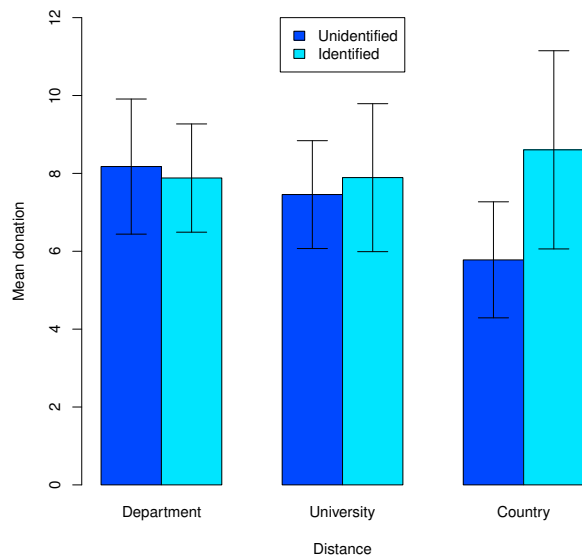


FIGURE 2: Mean donation to identified and to unidentified victims, as a function of Psychological Distance – Study 3.

two-way interaction ( $t = 2.64$   $\beta = .57$ ,  $p=.009$ ).

<sup>4</sup>Following up on these results, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis to examine the role of self-focused emotions in explaining the interaction between Psychological distance and Identification. We used the SPSS PROCESS macro model 7, with bootstrap techniques and 5,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013), to examine whether the conditional indirect effect of Psychological distance on donations through self-focused emotions (mediator) occurs only for unidentified victims (and not for identified victims; moderator). As reported earlier, Psychological distance significantly affected self-focused emotions,  $b=-.45$ ,  $SE=.16$ ,  $p=.006$ , 95% CI  $[-.77, -.13]$ . Stronger self-focused emotions significantly predicted donations,  $b=.73$ ,  $SE=.26$ ,  $p=.007$ , 95% CI  $[.19, .12]$ . Importantly, the indirect effect of Psychological distance on donations was significantly mediated by self-focused emotions only in the unidentified condition,  $b=-.33$ ,  $SE=.17$ , 95% CI  $[-.81,$

#### 4.2.4 Perceived responsibility

Finally, a simple regression analysis of perceived responsibility — with Psychological Distance, Identifiability, and the interaction between them as predictors — revealed a significant main effect only for Psychological Distance ( $t=-3.33$ ,  $\beta = -.32$ ,  $p=.001$ ), while the interaction between Psychological Distance and Identifiability was not significant ( $t=1.37$ ,  $\beta=.26$ ,  $p=.17$ ).

The results of Study 3 further support our hypothesis that the identifiability of victims in need weakens the effect of psychological distance on donations, in that increased distance between the respondent and the victim decreases donations only in relation to unidentified victims, not to identified ones. We also found that self-oriented emotions (i.e., sadness, distress and increased sense of vulnerability) follow the pattern found for donations, in that distance dampened self-oriented emotions only when the victim is unidentified. Finally, distance reduced the donors' sense of responsibility regardless the victims' identifiability, supporting the notion that people follow a moral principle of responsibility for those who are closer to them, who share with them membership in a smaller group.

## 5 General discussion

The picture of Aylan Kurdi — a Syrian child whose body had washed up on the Turkish shore on September 2, 2015 — moved people around the world, and raised awareness of the Syrian crisis more than the tragedy of hundreds of thousands of dead and displaced Syrians whose plight had been published by the media around the world for months (Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson & Gregory, 2017). Specifically, Aylan's photo and story led to a peak in donations to the Red Cross campaign to help Syrian refugees. It was a powerful illustration of how identification of a specific individual increases emotional response and donations in aid of psychologically distant victims.

The results of three studies replicate the findings of recent studies that the willingness of prospective donors to help victims in need decreases overall as the psychological distance between them and the victims increases (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach 2017). In our study, psychological distance was also found to be linked to an overall decrease in emotional responses toward the victims, and in the respondents' perceived responsibility to help. These findings support the

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-.08], but not in the identified condition  $b=-.001$ ,  $SE=.12$ , 95% CI [-.23, .27]. This suggests that self-focused emotions mediate the interaction between Psychological distance and identifiability on donations. Replicating the same moderated mediation analysis with other-oriented emotions as the mediator revealed significant results in both conditions:  $b=-.43$ ,  $SE=.20$ , 95% CI [-.97, -.13] in the unidentified condition and  $b=-.30$ ,  $SE=.17$ , 95% CI [-.71, -.03] in the identified condition. Thus, other-focused emotions mediated the main effect of Psychological distance on donations, but not the interaction between Psychological distance and identifiability.

idea that people follow a moral principle of responsibility for needy people who are in their more immediate vicinity and in their smaller, more intimate group (Baron, 2012; Erlandsson et al, 2015).

We also found a novel effect of victim identification: identifying a specific victim attenuates the impact of perceived distance on donation decisions. In all three studies, an increase in the psychological distance between the prospective donors and the recipient diminished donations to unidentified victims, but had no significant impact on donations to specific identified individuals. Consequently, the identification of a specific victim in need had a greater impact on donation decisions when the victims involved were distant (as opposed to closer).

Previous research suggests that single identified victims evoke spontaneous emotional reactions in the perceiver more than unidentified ones because they are tangible and concrete and easy to relate to (Kogut, 2011; Kogut & Ritov, 2005 a; Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007). This may be especially important when considering the plight of victims that are distant or those who share with us membership in relatively large, anonymous and loosely connected social group, because such victims would normally be seen in a way that is detached from emotions (Slovic, 2007). Providing identifying information about distant victims makes them seem more vivid and more human (Baron, 2012), which allows the rise of stronger emotional responses. Indeed, the results of Study 3 provide initial evidence to the possible role that emotions play in explaining the interaction between distance and identifiability. Self-oriented emotions (i.e., sadness, distress, and an increased sense of vulnerability) echo the pattern found with donations, so that when an identified victim is involved, the respondents' self-oriented emotions are less affected by their perceived distance from the victim. By the same token, when the victim in question is unidentified, the respondents' self-oriented emotions (such as feelings of vulnerability) are more intense when the victim is perceived as close. We should note, however, that self-reported emotions were assessed after the donation decision, and might have served to justify one's behavior, rather than causing it. Future research should directly examine this question by measuring emotions before and after the decision, as well as by manipulating them.

Another possible mechanism that may explain the interaction between distance and identifiability, which was not examined in the current paper, is that distant victims may elicit less help because the helper might assume a larger circle of alternative potential helpers with increased distance (e.g., Social Impact Theory, Latane, 1981). This is because one is inclined to think that the circle of potential helpers includes people who are closer to the victim than oneself. As the distance between the prospective helper and the victim grows, the circle of alternative potential helpers appears to grow, rendering help less necessary, similarly to the way that

increasing the number of bystanders reduces propensity of helping a victim (Darley & Latane, 1968). Possibly, when the victim is concrete and identified s/he ceases to be perceived within a group of potential helpers, and a decision to help becomes less affected by distance. Future research is needed to examine this hypothesis.

The similar pattern found with measures of perceived distance (Study 1) and manipulated distance between prospective donors and recipients (Studies 2&3), increases the external validity of our findings. Could it be that our manipulation of larger distance introduced ingroup-outgroup boundaries? We think that this is unlikely, as social psychological research suggests that even hostile and competitive attitudes could be mitigated by using overarching social categories of the type we used (e.g., if supporters of rival soccer teams are told “you are all citizens of the UK”). Let us also note that earlier research on the role of identifiability in intergroup context (Kogut & Ritov, 2007; Ritov & Kogut, 2011, 2017) did not find an effect of identifiability of outgroup members if the groups were not rivals or cohesive. If distant help seekers were viewed as outgroup members we should have failed to find an effect of victim identification. The finding that this effect emerged (and in fact was stronger with increase distance) could be taken, with some caution, to suggest that our distance manipulation did not introduce ingroup-outgroup boundaries.

Our studies focus on perceived social and spatial distance. It would be interesting and important to examine other types of psychological distance, such as distance in time. Specifically, it has been shown that people tend to react more strongly to recent and sudden emergencies than to similar emergencies that are ongoing (e.g., Epstein, 2006; Van Boven et al., 2010). Future research is needed to examine how recency may interact with identifiability in affecting willingness to help.

Our line of research contributes to the literature on prosocial behavior, specifically with regard to the *identifiable victim effect*, by suggesting that this effect is more pronounced when the victims in question are distant, and diminishes when the respondent perceives them to be close to home. Specifically, in the latter case, both identified and unidentified victims arouse emphatic emotional responses, a sense of responsibility and caring.

The research also contributes to the literature on psychological distance and prosocial behavior. While recent studies have suggested that respondents perceive the efficacy of donations to distant victims to be low (compared with donations for closer victims), our research suggests that increased distance also dampens the respondents’ emotional reactions and perceived responsibility to help. Most importantly, our results suggest that when it comes to identified recipients, distance does *not* significantly diminish donations, nor does it lessen the strength of self-oriented emotions.

Besides its theoretical contribution, our research offers practical implications that may help to increase charitable contributions. Specifically, it offers insights into possible ways of enhance a sense of caring for distant victims, by presenting a specific identified victim whom the respondents can sympathize with. At the same time, our findings highlight an important boundary condition of victim identification, in that it loses its effectiveness with socially proximal victims.

## 6 References

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