

## **Responsibility, Intent, and Donor Behavior: Commentary on Who Helps Natural-Disaster Victims? Assessment of Trait and Situational Predictors**

**Jesse Chandler\***

*Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy, Princeton University*

*Intentional harms are perceived as more painful and more deserving of compensation than unintentional harms. In conjunction with research demonstrating that people are poor judges of intent, this observation may explain why people are more willing to help victims whose suffering appears to be caused by others. This account further explains the authors' finding that people high in cognitive empathy are especially sensitive to other-caused harm, and aligns well with existing attributional accounts of why perceived victim responsibility reduces helping behavior. Finally, this account suggests a number of novel predictions about the determinants of donor behavior.*

Marjanovic, Struthers, and Greenglass (this issue) demonstrate that people are more likely to help disaster victims when other agents are judged at least partially responsible for their suffering. The authors explain their finding by suggesting that people feel that human relief is more effective in alleviating human-caused disasters than natural disasters. This may or may not be true—one could just as easily argue that people think that those who fail to prepare for disasters are also likely to squander relief money. However, this explanation by itself seems incomplete for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, this account ignores the attributional framework that is typically used to explain why people are less likely to help victims perceived as the cause of their own misfortunes (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004; Weiner, 1995). Empirically,

---

\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jesse Chandler, Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy, Princeton University, Green Hall, Princeton, NJ 08540. [e-mail: [jjchandler@princeton.edu](mailto:jjchandler@princeton.edu)].

I wish to thank Danielle Shapiro and Pam Mueller for comments on an earlier draft.

this account does not explain the authors' observation that those who are high in cognitive empathy (or perspective taking; Davis, 1996) are particularly likely to donate money to the victims of human caused suffering.

So why are people high in cognitive empathy especially willing to donate money to alleviate suffering caused by others? By definition, people high in cognitive empathy frequently consider the mental states of others. Thus, in the face of apparent government inaction, they are particularly likely to ask themselves "what were they thinking?" To answer this sort of question, people often use their own beliefs as a starting point, projecting them on to others (Nickerson, 1999; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Although initial impressions can be adjusted, people are rarely able to fully correct for differences in self-other knowledge (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). Further, although people high in cognitive empathy are more likely to consider the mental states of others, when doing so they are likely to make errors as everyone else (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990).

People's retrospective perceptions of natural disasters are distorted in predictable ways, and these distortions are likely to influence the presumed beliefs of whomever else they consider. With hindsight, occurrences seem more likely (Fischhoff & Beyth, 1975), making the risk posed by hurricanes and the insufficiency of preparation seem obvious (Brown, Williams, & Lees-Haley, 2006). Moreover, with attention focused on the disaster, it is unlikely that people will consider all of the other demands on time and resources that actors faced (the focusing illusion) (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998). As a result, those who consider the mental states of government officials are likely to conclude that they knew that a disaster is likely, had few other demands on their time and resources, yet elected to do nothing.

From a legal standpoint, one can question whether such inaction amounts to negligence or intentional harm. However, lay intuitions about culpability are less fine grained: people hold negligent actors and deliberate actors as equally responsible for their actions (Knobe, 2006), and report feeling anger (an emotion that implies intent; Brown et al., 2006; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and moral outrage (Mueller, Solan, & Darley, 2011) in the face of merely negligent acts. These perceptions were clear in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when many perceived the harm caused by the government's response as deliberate (Henkel, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2006).

Ascriptions of intentionality may directly influence willingness to help victims because people perceive deliberate harm as causing more damage (Darley & Huff, 1990) and even leading to the experience of more pain (Gray & Wegner, 2008) than equivalent but unintentional harm. Even perceived negligence may have this effect, as suggested by people's equal willingness to award damages to plaintiffs who are intentionally harmed, and plaintiffs who were merely exposed to a minimal (3%), and ancillary risk of harm (Mueller et al., 2011).

An explanation that emphasizes the presumed mental state of actors also agrees well with earlier attributional accounts of why victim responsibility reduces helping (Rudolph et al., 2004; Weiner, 1995). When victims are salient, it is likely that potential donors will consider what they may have known, again concluding that they knew that the disaster was likely, faced few other demands on their attention and resources, and yet did nothing. Consequently, the harm experienced seems deliberately self-inflicted. One possible extension of the authors' research would be to revisit this earlier work on victim responsibility, and examine whether cognitive empathy influences willingness to help victims when their responsibility is salient. Under these conditions those high in cognitive empathy may be especially likely to assume that victims should have known better, and thus be especially *unwilling* to donate money to relieve their suffering.

One final consideration is that intentionality can also be perceived in actions that are not directly caused by human agents. Just as people may sometimes fail to consider the mental states of human actors when thinking about their role in a natural disaster, at other times they may interpret natural or supernatural forces in agentic terms (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007; Guthrie, 1993), leading people to inadvertently apply social cognitive knowledge structures when interpreting their actions (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010; Kim & McGill, 2011). Consequently, although attributing the suffering of victims to nature may reduce donor behavior, people may donate to alleviate suffering caused by human agents and "Mother Nature" in similarly high amounts.

In sum, the observation that highly empathic people who are particularly likely to donate when considering government responsibility should serve as the starting point for understanding the finding that human responsibility predicts helping behavior in these data. When juxtaposed with earlier research that finds that people are less likely to help disaster victims who seem partially responsible for their fate, this research highlights the importance of considering not just whether people are responsible for harm, but which people are responsible for harm and how their actions are interpreted. Future work could fruitfully extend this finding by examining the interactive effects of variables that increase perceived intentionality (as suggested by the authors), increase cognitive empathy (Chandler, Griffin, & Sorensen, 2008; Mitchell, Banaji, & Macrae, 2005), and manipulate the salience of the minds of victims and other actors.

## References

- Brown, R. S., Williams, C. W., & Lees-Haley P. R. (2006). The effects of hindsight bias and causal attribution on human response to environmental events. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 661–674.
- Chandler, J., Griffin, T., & Sorensen, N. (2008). In the "I" of the storm: First name initial influences donations to disaster relief efforts. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 5, 404–410.

- Chandler, J., & Schwarz, N. (2010). Use does not wear ragged the fabric of friendship: Thinking of objects as alive makes people less willing to replace them. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 20*, 138–145.
- Darley, J. M., & Huff, C. W. (1990). Heightened damage assessment as a result of the intentionality of the damage-causing act. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 29*, 181–188.
- Davis, M. H. (1996). *Empathy: A social psychological approach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Epley, N., Keysar, B., Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2004). Perspective taking as egocentric anchoring and adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*, 327–339.
- Epley, N., Waytz, A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2007). On seeing human: A three factor theory of anthropomorphism. *Psychological Review, 114*, 864–886.
- Fischhoff, B., & Beyth, R. (1975). "I knew it would happen": Remembered probabilities of once-future things. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Performance, 13*, 1–16.
- Gray, K., & Wegner, D. M. (2008). The sting of intentional pain. *Psychological Science, 19*, 1260–1262.
- Guthrie, S. (1993). *Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion*. New York: Oxford.
- Henkel, K. E., Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L. (2006). Institutional discrimination, individual racism, and hurricane Katrina. *Analysis of Social Issues and Public Policy, 6*, 99–124.
- Ickes, W., Stinson, L., Bissonnette, V., & Garcia, S. (1990). Naturalistic social cognition: Empathic accuracy in mixed-sex dyads. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59*, 730–742.
- Kim, S., & McGill, A. L. (2011). Gaming with Mr. Slot or gaming the slot machine? Power, anthropomorphism and risk perception. *Journal of Consumer Research, 38*, 94–107.
- Knobe, J. (2006). The concept of intentional action: A case study in the uses of folk psychology. *Philosophical Studies: An international journal for philosophy in the analytic tradition, 130*, 203–231.
- Marjanovic, Z., Struthers, C. W., & Greenglass, E. R. (this issue). Who helps natural-disaster victims? Assessment of trait and situational predictors. *Analysis of Social Issues and Public Policy*.
- Mitchell, J. P., Banaji, M. R., & Macrae, C. N. (2005). The link between social cognition and self-referential thought in the medial prefrontal cortex. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, 17*, 1306–1315.
- Mueller, P., Lawrence, M. S., & John, M. D. (2011). When does knowledge become intent?: Perceiving the minds of wrongdoers. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1884518>.
- Nickerson, R. S. (1999). How we know—and sometimes misjudge—what others know: Imputing one's own knowledge to others. *Psychological Bulletin, 125*, 737–759.
- Ross, L., Greene, D., & House, P. (1977). The "False Consensus Effect": An egocentric bias in social perception and attribution processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 13*, 279–301.
- Rudolph, U., Roesch, S. C., Greitemeyer, T., & Weiner, B. (2004). A meta-analytic review of help giving and aggression from an attributional perspective: Contributions to a general theory of motivation. *Cognition and Emotion, 18*, 815–848.
- Schkade, D. A., & Kahneman, D. (1998). Does living in California make people happy? A focusing illusion in judgments of life satisfaction. *Psychological Science, 9*, 340–346.
- Smith, C. A., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1985). Patterns of cognitive appraisal in emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48*, 813–838.
- Wiener, B. (1995). *Judgments of human responsibility: A foundation for a theory of social conduct*. New York: Guilford Press.

JESSE CHANDLER is a postdoctoral research associate at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy at Princeton University. His scholarly interests focus on social cognition and decision making with a particular emphasis on how contextual cues can lead to the activation and application of metaphorically related information to attitudes, judgment, and choice.