**Empathic and Numerate Giving:**

**The Joint Effects of Images and Charity Evaluations**

Robin Bergh

Harvard University and Uppsala University

David Reinstein

University of Exeter

**Author Note**

The Swedish Research Council (#437-2014-231) supported this research. Address correspondence to Robin Bergh, Department of Psychology, Harvard University, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: rbergh@fas.harvard.edu.

**Abstract**

Helping behaviors are often driven by emotional reactions to the suffering of particular individuals, but these behaviors do not seem to be upregulated when many people need help. In this paper we consider if these reactions are also “innumerate” to information about how charities spend their money. In particular, across six experiments we examined how images of identified victims interact with information about charity efficiency (money toward program) and effectiveness (program outcome). We further examined if the images primarily get people to donate at all (yes/no), whereas efficiency/effectiveness might provide a tuning mechanism for how much to give. Results showed that images influenced the propensity to donate and also made participants donate their full bonuses, indicating heuristic effects. Efficiency and effectiveness had no main effect on donations.

*Keywords:* Prosocial behaviors, identified victims, dual-process perspectives, empathy, deliberation, efficiency, effective altruism

**Introduction**

Reacting emotionally to someone else’s suffering, accompanied by an urge to alleviate it, can be a potent force behind helping behaviors (e.g, Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2012). Some scholars have argued, however, that such emotions can ultimately do more harm than good. For instance, Bloom (2016) argued that “empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now […] It is innumerate, favoring the one over the many […] If our concern is driven by thoughts of the suffering of specific individuals, then it sets up a perverse situation in which the suffering of one can matter more than the suffering of a thousand” (pp. 9 & 89).

A proposed cure for such described perversities follows from the philosophy of enlightenment: Give people better information to guide their helping behavior, and encourage them to think rationally, instead of just following their gut feelings (e.g., Bloom, 2016; Singer, 2015). In this paper we take a step back from normative arguments about what people *should do*, to conside the empirical question: “what do donors *actually* *do* when facing empathy-invoking appeals and information that invites logical deliberation?” We examine this question by differentiating mental processes that are spontaneous (empathic responses), from ones that are more deliberate (evaluating the efficiency or effectiveness of a charity).

**The Innumerate (but Generalizable) Features of Empathy**

The description of empathy as being innumerate fits well with the notion of an emotional heuristic (e.g., Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007). Although some definitions and aspects of empathy may involve deliberation (e.g. perspective-taking; Davis, 1983), we focus on the emotional reactions associated with an urge to relieve the suffering of someone else (see also Batson et al., 1981; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). In this sense, empathy is fast and spontaneous, and also evident in species without the analytic abilities of humans (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Like other spontaneous mental processes, empathic reactions are also prone to certain rational biases (see Bloom, 2016).

Perhaps the clearest bias of feeling with a particular person’s distress is that it leaves the person insensitive to the number of people to extend help to. Many studies document that people offer more aid to specific, identifiable victims than anonymous, statistical victims (called the *identified victim effect*; see e.g., Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Lee & Feeley, 2016; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). However, empathy toward one person may still benefit other people sharing the identified victim’s situation, even if the request is not specifically focused on them. In Bloom’s (2016) analogy of shining a light on particular individuals, the question is whether empathy is highly focused (like a laser beam pointed at one person), or if it bleeds into the peripheral and partially highlighting other people as well (like a regular flashlight pointed at a group of people, with someone “identified” in the focal point). This “spill-over effect” is not well-examined in identified victim studies, at least not in the papers included in a recent meta-analysis on this phenomenon (see Lee & Feeley, 2016). For instance, Small et al. (2007) described how “any money that you donate will go to Rokia [the identified victim]” (p. 152), while Kogut and Ritov (2005) asked whether participants “were willing to contribute money to save the victim(s) lives” (p. 160). Thus, it remains unknown from the seminal studies if the identified victim effect also benefits other people.

In one study by Erlandsson, Björklund, and Bäckström (2015), participants were asked if they would be hypothetically willing to help others from the same village as the identified victim, and they observed increased giving in this condition. It is less clear if that prosocial tendency spreads further to distant others, and if it holds up for actual donations. In a large-scale field experiment, Lesner and Rasmussen (2014) sent mail request to previous donors of a charity, and they found that images of particular victims had no effect on donations. Contacting previous donors might operate quite differently from soliciting new donors, however (see also next section), and this highlights a need for more research on the generalized benefits of the identified victim effect. The notion that empathy is innumerate also matters for a discussion about more rationally guided helping behaviors. Innumerate empathy suggests that it should not only be insensitive to the numbers of victims, but insensitive to *any* numerical information about amounts of help – such as the proportion of a charity’s revenue that goes to its programs (henceforth efficiency), and what the programs accomplish (henceforth effectiveness).

**Charity Efficiency and Effectiveness**

Effectiveness is a more direct indicator of what good a donation could do, as compared to efficiency, but it is also harder to quantify (Caviola, Faulmüller, Everett, Savulescu, & Kahane, 2014; Singer, 2015). Efficiency can be calculated based on tax records of revenues and overhead costs, and several websites rate charities based on this information (e.g., Charity Navigator and GuideStar). A donor wishing to do the most good, however, would have to weight greater efficiency against the indirect benefits of “inefficient” charity spending (e.g. fundraisers increasing a charity’s revenue), and s/he should consider that a new donation may not generate the same result as earlier ones (see e.g., Steinberg & Morris, 2010). This has led some scholars to argue that efficiency-oriented donors are focusing on the wrong arithmetic (e.g., Singer, 2015; Steinberg, 1986). Nevertheless, efficiency evaluations still involve arithmetic thinking about donations. This is a common feature of efficiency and effectiveness information, and both imply more help from a donated amount *when everything else is equal*. Thus, a numerate donor could be expected to consider information about efficiency and effectiveness, when other factors are statistically or experimentally kept constant. But do they?

The empirical findings addressing that question are mixed. A number of correlational studies suggest that more efficient charities also receive more donations (for a review, see Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Such an association could be due to confounds, however, such as the size and familiarity of a charity. Big charities often have a smaller overhead costs (e.g., Bowman, 2006), and there are many reasons why they generate more donations. Some work further suggests that changes in charity ratings lead to changes in charity revenues (e.g., Gordon, Knock, & Neely, 2009; Yörük, 2016), but it is typically unclear if this is driven by efficiency evaluations per se. For instance, people might respond to various stars given to a charity without much thought about what those stars represent.

In lab experiments it has been shown that people favor efficient charities in forced choice questions, especially when the contrasts are very clear (0% vs 50% overhead; Gneezy, Keenan, & Gneezy, 2014). Yet, other studies show that people mainly attend to efficiency information as a potential excuse for not to donate (Exley, 2016), and peoples’ beliefs about effectiveness are colored by subjective preferences (Berman, Barasch, Levine, & Small, 2018). Overall, there is more evidence that people give based on a subjective sense of making a difference (e.g., when they can help a charity across the finish line with a fundraising goal; Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltman, 2013; Duncan, 2004) than objective metrics of charity efficiency or effectiveness.

Field experiments suggest that most donors will not contribute more when they are informed (versus not informed) about either charity efficiency (Parsons, 2007), or effectiveness (Karlan & Wood, 2017). Karlan and Wood (2017) did find that those who had previously donated large amounts gave more when they received effectiveness information, but the reason for this effect is unclear. For example, it could be due to large/frequent donors experiencing a greater pressure to donate in light of (any) new positive information. Indeed, the compliance literature suggests that people who have already committed to pay for something are more easily persuaded in a later stage to pay more for the same thing (see e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2010).

It is also possible that people use more deliberate thinking when they decide how much to give, thereby being more susceptible to information about charity efficiency and effectiveness, as compared to when first decide to donate at all. In other words, those who have given a lot in the past do not dwell on whether to donate again, but use information such as efficiency or effectiveness to decide how much to give. From this perspective, it is not the case that major donors are dispositioned more toward effective giving (as interpreted by Karlan & Wood, 2017). It might just be that people giving small amounts are pre-occupied with a pre-requisite, potentially more emotion-laden question: Should I support this cause at all?

**Interactions between Empathic Emotions and Deliberation**

We further examine the possibility that combining an empathy-induction with efficiency or effectiveness information will not lead to any greater donations than the empathy-induction on its own. In fact, the literature indicates a potential for a “negative” interaction, in which a rational appeal interferes with the spontaneous empathic reaction and lead to lesser donations than an empathic appeal alone (Small et al., 2007). Other research further suggests that people are prosocial and cooperative when they make more spontaneous decisions, and reversely, act more self-serving when they ponder more on their decisions (e.g., Rand et al., 2012; Rand, 2016; but see also Tinghög et al., 2013).

This raises an unresolved question: Does the empathy-disruption depend on the type of deliberation at play? One possibility is that any form of deliberation disrupts spontaneous empathic responses. Alternatively, there could be good and bad ways to deliberate on helping decisions. For instance, spending cognitive resources on a task that is irrelevant for charitable giving may create a backlash for empathy-driven giving (see Small et al., 2007, study 4), but deliberating on charity effectiveness may not do so.

**The Current Studies**

Our research addresses a series of unsettled questions about the role of spontaneous empathy and deliberate thinking in charitable giving. When people are empathically moved to help a particular individual, they consider if their actions will have the desired effect or not (i.e. effect information facilitates empathic help; e.g., Sibicky, Schroeder, & Dovidio, 1995). However, it remains unclear whether effects of empathy on donations also depend on information about how charities spend their money (i.e. more or less efficient and effective help). One possibility is a “positive interaction,” such that information about efficiency or effectiveness amplifies empathy-based giving, as triggered by images of particular victims (similar to the findings for interpersonal help behaviors). Another possibility is a “negative interaction,” such that an evaluation of efficiency or effectiveness information instead disrupts emotionally-induced generosity (similar to findings by Small et al., 2007, suggesting that analytic thinking decreases donations to identified victims). It is also possible that the effects of individual victim images are independent from deliberating on efficiency and effectiveness (i.e. no interaction).

In addition to exploring potential interactions between identified victim images and effiency/effectiveness information we also examined hypotheses about the respective main effects. Conventional wisdom suggests that images of identified victims can generate help toward many others in the same situation (see also Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson, & Gregory, 2017). Yet, some have argued otherwise (Bloom, 2016; Lesner & Rasmussen, 2014). We predicted that victim images increases donations, especially by increasing the willingness to donate anything (versus nothing). In other words, victim images should push participants past the initial hurdle to do anything. This would be consistent with an innumerate and heuristic nature of emotionally-driven prosociality (Bloom, 2016; Slovic, 2010).

To the extent that efficiency or effectiveness information increases donations, it seems reasonable that this would instead impact *amounts* given. Dickert, Sagara, and Slovic (2011) argued that initial decisions to donate anything are different from decisions about how much to give. Extending their reasoning, we tested whether victim images are more relevant for the first decision, whereas charity efficiency and effectiveness matter more for how much to give. To test these different effects, we first estimated the effects of our treatments on donating incidence (donating: yes/no), and secondly, the effects on non-zero amounts (i.e. two outcomes equivalent to those estimated in a two-part model; see Humphreys, 2013; see also supplemental materials for alternative modeling strategies and a discussion about these different approaches).

**Methods**

**Participants**

Except for study 6, all experiments involved participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, and we recruited Americans with a hit approval rating of 98% or higher. Further, participants could only have completed 100 hits, or less, to assure that they were somewhat naïve about psychological experimentation (100 hits may still sound like a fair amount of experience, but it is unlikely that this experience would be from similar psychological or economic experiments). Respondents were excluded if they failed simple attention checks (e.g., “to monitor quality, please respond with a seven for this item”). There were two such screening questions in all studies, except for study 5 that had one and study 6 that adopted another form of attention check.

Study 6 was conducted with university students at a British university [add inclusion criteria] (see LINK for pre-registration). In this study we assessed attentiveness by asking about details in the text where we manipulated information about charity effectiveness. One charity was described as addressing river blindness and we checked if participants could recall which regions in the world that the charity was operating (Latin America and Africa). The results reported in the manuscript focuses on participants who recalled at least one of these two regions. In the supplementary materials we also report results only for those who reported both regions (most attentive) as well as the full sample (including inattentive respondents). There we also present results with inattentive participants in all the other studies as well. Based on these inclusion and exclusion criteria the final sample sizes were 398, 614, 611, 608, 433, and 319 in Studies 1-6, respectively (variation tracking design complexity). The percentage of women varied between 57 and 60%, the median age across all studies was 29-30 years (*SD*s from 9.55 to 10.64). In Study 1, 2, 3, and 5, participants received $1.50 as a baseline payment, whereas those in Study 4 received $2 (slightly longer study); these baseline payments could not be donated within the study. In addition participants were offered a bonus payment, or entered into a raffle, from which they could donate (main dependent variable). Studies 1 and 2 involved a bonus of $3, Studies 3 and 4 involved a raffle for $50 (1:25 odds in Study 3 and 1:100 in Study 4).Study 5 had a bonus of $5. Study 6 involved a raffle for a £50 Amazon giftcard (odds of winning not disclosed).

We aimed to have around 100 participants per experimental cell. The experiments were originally designed to examine effects of victim imagery and efficiency information for the whole range of donation amounts, and they were powered accordingly[[1]](#footnote-1). In ordinary least-square regression, we would have a power of .80 for detecting a weak effect (*Δ* *R*2 = .02) in a 2 × 2 between-subject design with 400 participants, or .93 in a 2 × 3 design with 600 participants (estimated in GPower 3.1; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Taking all main and interactions into account, the power would have been .65 and .76. Given that the distribution of donations turned out to be trimodal (most people giving nothing, half, or everything), we updated some analytic procedures, and this led to lower ex-post power for some analyses. For example, analyzing mid-range donation amounts (roughly normally distributed), and setting aside the minimum and maximum donations, the actual power to detect a small effect, given the current *Ns*, would be >.70 for one predictor and >.45 for all five predictors in the 2 × 3 design (all other analyses had better power). To get better estimates of effect sizes and confidence intervals we also we conducted mini meta-analyses (see Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2016).

**Designs**

All studies involved a manipulation of a victim image (versus no image), crossed with a manipulation of efficiency or effectiveness information. Study 1 used a 2 (Victim image: Yes/No) × 2 (Positive efficiency information: Yes/No) between-subject design. In Study 2 and 3, we extended the second factor to three levels to manipulate positive and negative efficiency information (or no efficiency information, resulting in a 2 × 3 between-subject design). Study 4 used a 2 (Image: Yes/No) × 3 (Efficiency evaluation: Early /No /Late comparison) between-subject design (see procedure for rationale). Study 5 employed the same 2 × 2 design as in Study 1, except here we manipulated information about effectiveness instead of efficiency. Study 6 involved a conjoint evaluation of the effectiveness of two charities, but was otherwise similar to Study 5.

**Procedures and Materials**

This section provides a brief overview of the procedures and materials. More detailed information is provided in the Supplementary materials. The first four experiments focused on the civil war in Syria, and participants in all conditions were initially shown a news headline about the humanitarian crisis in the country (Gladstone, 2016). We presented this information (and asked about their familiarity with such news) to establish a baseline problem description, and to rule out that only those in the image condition would perceive the crisis as more acute. For the image manipulation we used a highly publicized picture of an injured boy in an ambulance, following an airstrike. A brief caption from the Guardian included the boy’s name (see Nott, 2016), hence introducing an identified victim (see also Kogut & Ritov, 2005).

We asked participants to describe their spontaneous reactions to seeing the image. Common responses were “sad,” horrified,” “heartbreaking,” and “poor child.” Some of these reactions appear more like personal distress than empathy, but these two types of emotions are not mutually exclusive (they tend to be positively correlated; e.g., Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990). The data would further suggest that the image triggered empathic reactions to the extent that it increases donations, as personal distress tends to rather predict avoidance of the situation (e.g., leaving the survey) when that option is available (see e.g., Dovidio et al., 2012).

We further manipulated information about efficiency with ratings from charitynavigator.org. Charity Navigator rates charities in terms of financial health and accountability/transparency. The financial score represents a metric of efficiency that is based on, for example, percentage of total expenses that are dedicated to the charity operations. As such, we manipulated if participants had access to positive efficiency evaluations, presented in a realistic and ecologically valid format. In Study 4 we could also rule out any impact of information about accountability/transparency; see next paragraph. Experiments 2 and 3 further included a negative information manipulation, describing donations as unavailable for their intended use. In particular, we used information that aid programs had been suspended when U.N. convoys were attacked (Cunningham, DeYoung, & Roth 2016), implying that donated money would not be put toward any program in Syria at that time-point.

In Study 4 the efficiency information involved a conjoint evaluation of two charities, one with high efficiency (see charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.history&orgid=4438 [2016, June report]) and the other having mediocre efficiency (see charitynavigator.org/index.cfm? bay=search.summary&orgid=8166 [2016, June report]). The conjoint presentation was motivated by the notion that some information is difficult to evaluate on its own, but becomes meaningful in relation to some comparative standard (Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999; see also Caviola et al., 2014). We tested if people would pay more attention to efficiency if they could directly compare charities based on this metric. The other charity navigator dimension, accountability/ transparency, was rated similarly for the two charities. The charities were presented side-by-side, with a randomized left-right assignment. We also manipulated when participants received the efficiency information – before or after an initial commitment to donate (see below for more procedure details).

In Study 5 we focused on information about the outcome effectiveness, instead of (internal) charity efficiency. Participants either read a text about the effectiveness of the Polio Eradication Initiative, including positive conclusions from an economic cost-benefit analysis (see Tebbens et al., 2010), or a control text describing the spread and detection of Polio (no mention of effectiveness). Here the image manipulation focused on a young girl paralyzed from Polio (see https://www.flickr.com/photos/91311153

@N02/8290596191).

Study 6 focused on charity outcome effectiveness for helping blind individuals (similar to an example given by Singer, 2015). Like study 4, it also involved a conjoint evaluation of two charities. The effectiveness information described how the lifetime cost for a guide dog is around £55,000 (cost-ineffective charity), as compared to estimates of £75 to avert 10-50 years of serious debilitation from river blindness (cost-effective charity). The image depicted a blind teenage girl (see supplemental materials).

In all studies, except the last one, participants were asked if they would be willing to donate (yes/no) before being asked about actual donations. The timing of the commitment question, or rather the information seen before or after it (but before actual donations) varied across the current studies, in order to test different hypotheses about how images interact with efficiency information at different stages of the decision-making process to donate (see Supplementary materials for details). More systematic follow-up studies on the order effects (not reported here, due to different focus) showed no systematic differences in terms of whether empathic and rational appeals occured before or after donation commitments.

The primary outcome of interest was how much participants decided to donate, either from a bonus payment or prospective raffle winnings. Answers were given on a slider scale, and these had 1c increments for the $3 and $5 bonuses. For the $50 raffle winnings the scale had $1 increments (see *Participants* for details about the payments). Decisions were consequential, and participants in Studies 1-3 were told that donations were going to the Syria Fund of Save the Children (and the efficiency information also specified the charity name). The two charities in Study 4 were not named, and participants in the efficiency comparison conditions chose one of them from a display of their Charity Navigator ratings. Participants in Study 5 learned that donated amounts would go to the Polio Eradication Initiative. In study 6, participants first chose between supporting guide dogs or river blindness interventions, or neither, and then decided on an amount to give.

Studies ended with a brief personality and value survey, followed by demographics and debriefing. The survey included measures of, for instance, empathic concern (Davis, 1983), and intellect (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). These two variables were tested as moderators for the experimental effects. However, we found no reliable moderation effects, and being secondary to our current aims, we report no results for these variables (analytic scripts and results are open to request). The experimental manipulations in Study 6 were embedded within a larger survey, collecting a range of demographic and attitudinal measures (see Supplemental materials).

**Results**

We first examined the experimental effects in ANOVAs, including null-donations. There was a significant main effect of the image manipulation in every experiment, except study 2. There were no main effects of efficiency or effectiveness manipulations, and no significant interactions (see Table 1).

We further conducted a mini meta-analysis (Goh et al., 2016) for the image and efficiency/effectiveness effects, and their interactions. Here we used a regression framework, and point-biserial correlations as effect sizes, as in the main analyses. Given the experimental design, and matching the ANOVAs, we used effect coding (+/-.5). The meta-analysis included positive efficiency/effectiveness only (as we only had negative information in two studies), and in study 4 we used the average effect of early and late presentation. This analysis indicated a robust effect of the image manipulation, no reliable influence of efficiency/effectiveness, and a borderline significant interaction between these factors. The interaction suggested that the image effect was suppressed when presented together with efficiency or effectiveness information (see Figure 1 and right-hand column in Table 1).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1. *Analysis of Variance Results for Experimental Effects of Empathy-Inducing Imagery and Efficiency/ Effectiveness Information on Donations (including zeros).* | | | | | | | |
|  | Study | | | | | | Meta-analytic effect |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | *rpb* [*CI*] |
| Empathy-inducing  image |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *F* | 8.56 | 2.46 | 7.62 | 11.70 | 5.95 | 1.28 | .09 [.06,.13] |
| *p* | .004 | .117 | .006 | .001 | .015 | .259 | <.001 |
| *ηp2* | .021 | .004 | .012 | .019 | .014 | .004 |  |
| Bayes factor10 a | 6.39 | 0.30 | 13.91 | 23.67 | 1.86 | 0.23c |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Efficiency  (/effectiveness) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *F* | 0.02 | 0.54 | 0.11 | 2.08 | 0.01 | 0.79 | -.03 [-.06,.01] |
| *p* | .878 | .583 | .893 | .126 | .945 | .372 | .169 |
| *ηp2* | <.001 | .002 | <.001 | .007 | <.001 | .003 |  |
| Bayes factor10 | 0.11 | 0.03 | 0.07 | 0.12 | 0.11 | 0.18 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Image × efficiency  (/effectiveness) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *F* | 1.15 | 2.02 | 0.10 | 0.76 | 0.07 | 1.77 | -.03 [-.06,.01] |
| *p* | .283 | .133 | .905 | .469 | .792 | .184 | .170 |
| *ηp2* | .003 | .007 | <.001 | .003 | <.001 | .006 |  |
| Bayes factor10 b | 0.28 | 0.22 | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.16 | 0.38 |  |
| *Note*. *rpb =* point-biserial correlation.  a Estimated in JASP using a non-informative prior (default).  b Comparing interaction + main effects to main effects only.  c Effect in unanticipated direction. | | | | | | | |

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*Figure 1.* Graphs are showing average donations (/prospective donations from raffle winnings) in each study as a function of efficiency/effectiveness and an image of an identified victim. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

**Predicting Donation Incidence and Given Amounts.** To test if images impact the decision whether to donate or not, while efficiency information impacts the amount given, we conducted logistic regression analyses for the first decision (no [0], yes [1]), followed by regressions on the non-zero amounts.

We also ran linear regressions on mid-range donations, setting aside a spike of maximum donation responses (12-17% in each study The rationale here was that donating everything may seem like a heuristic, emotional decision, whereas mid-range donations may have been most influenced by deliberation (about efficiency/ effectiveness).

We recognize that such “conditional on positive” estimates are imperfect: if a manipulation impacts donation incidence then its effects on non-zero amounts becomes difficult to interpret (see Supplementary materials for alternative analyses addressing this issue). [[2]](#footnote-2) Yet, we included separate analysis of non-zero and mid-range amounts because they are informative about experimental effects that are independent of donation incidence. Such effects could also be synthesized in meta-analysis, based on the same regression framework used for the initial ANOVA results. All effects on donation incidence and given amounts are presented in Table 2, along with meta-analytic estimates.

Although varying in terms of significance, the overall evidence suggests that victim images influenced the decision to donate or not, as well as amounts given (see the highly-significant meta-analytic effects). However, there were no significant image effects on mid-range amounts. Efficiency/ effectiveness did not have a statistically significant influence on any of the outcomes (although confidence intervals were rather wide). However in study 2 it interacted with image manipulation relation to donated amounts, including mid-range donations. In particular, information about efficiency/effectiveness suppressed amounts given, compared to the image alone. There were similar trends in Study 1 and 4 (see Figure 1). Aggregating across studies, these interaction trends were significant in the meta-analysis.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 2. *Logistic and Linear Regression Analyses for Effects of Victim Imagery and Efficiency/Effectiveness Information on Decisions to Donate (No/Yes) and Amounts Given.* | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Donation: Yes/No | | |  | Donation amount (positive donations only) | | |  | Donation amount  (Mid-range) | | |
|  | *B* [CI] | *OR* | *p* |  | *B* [CI] | *rpb* | *p* |  | *B* [CI] | *rpb* | *p* |
| Experiment 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim  image | 0.43 [0.02, 0.87] | 1.54 | .04 |  | 0.25 [0.01, 0.49] | .13 | .04 |  | 0.09 [-0.08, 0.27] | .07 | .33 |
| Positive  efficiency | -0.19 [-0.61, 0.22] | 0.83 | .38 |  | 0.09 [-0.15, 0.32] | .04 | .46 |  | 0.11 [-0.07, 0.28] | .09 | .23 |
| Image × Pos.  efficiency | -0.21 [-1.08, 0.65] | 0.81 | .62 |  | -0.26 [-0.73, 0.23] | -.07 | .29 |  | -0.12 [-0.47, 0.24] | -.05 | .52 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Experiment 2 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim  image | 0.11 [-0.23, 0.45] | 1.11 | .52 |  | 0.13 [-0.05, 0.31] | .08 | .16 |  | 0.04 [-0.09, 0.18] | .04 | .53 |
| Positive  efficiency | -0.17 [-0.65, 0.32] | 0.85 | .48 |  | 0.02 [-0.24, 0.28] | .01 | .86 |  | 0.05 [-0.15, 0.24] | .00 | .62 |
| Negative  efficiency | -0.25 [-0.73, 0.23] | 0.78 | .31 |  | 0.01 [-0.26, 0.28] | .01 | .94 |  | -0.13 [-0.32, 0.06] | -.06 | .18 |
| Image × Pos.  efficiency | 0.09 [-0.83, 1.04] | 1.09 | .85 |  | -0.58 [-1.11, -0.06] | -.17 | .03 |  | -0.43 [-0.83,-0.05] | -.16 | .03 |
| Image × Neg.  efficiency | 0.29 [-0.68, 1.27] | 1.33 | .55 |  | -0.31 [-0.84, 0.24] | -.14 | .25 |  | -0.06 [-0.46, 0.33] | -.10 | .76 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Experiment 3 ($50 raffle) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim  image | 0.32 [-0.07, 0.76] | 1.38 | .11 |  | 3.11 [0.30, 5.82] | .10 | .02 |  | 1.18 [-1.03, 3.26] | .05 | .28 |
| Positive  efficiency | -0.26 [-0.81, 0.33] | 0.77 | .37 |  | 2.00 [-1.92, 6.02] | .03 | .31 |  | -0.36 [-3.74, 2.86] | -.02 | .82 |
| Negative  efficiency | 0.12 [-0.46, 0.73] | 1.12 | .69 |  | -1.58 [-5.21, 2.07] | -.01 | .42 |  | -0.56 [-3.33, 2.41] | -.03 | .71 |
| Image × Pos.  efficiency | -0.05 [-1.19, 1.09] | 0.95 | .93 |  | -1.02 [-9.03, 6.82] | -.02 | .80 |  | -1.35 [-7.80, 4.89] | -.03 | .67 |
| Image × Neg.  efficiency | 0.55 [-0.61, 1.73] | 1.72 | .35 |  | -0.10 [-7.54, 7.25] | -.01 | .98 |  | 0.16 [-5.51, 5.64] | -.01 | .96 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Experiment 4 ($50 raffle) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim  image | 0.31 [-0.10, 0.75] | 1.37 | .13 |  | 4.31 [1.74, 6.86] | .14 | .00 |  | 1.38 [-0.60, 3.34] | .06 | .17 |
| Early efficiency  comp. | 0.24 [-0.35, 0.91] | 1.27 | .43 |  | -2.72 [-6.26, 0.96] | -.08 | .15 |  | -0.68 [-3.32, 1.92] | -.03 | .62 |
| Later efficiency  comp. | -0.54 [-1.11, 0.01] | 0.58 | .06 |  | -0.23 [-4.16, 3.56] | -.05 | .90 |  | -0.37 [-3.29, 2.45] | -.03 | .80 |
| Image × Early  efficiency | 0.86 [-0.28, 2.23] | 2.37 | .15 |  | -6.35 [-13.53, 0.63] | -.08 | .09 |  | -4.14 [-9.43, 1.22] | -.08 | .14 |
| Image × Later  efficiency | -0.79 [-1.97, 0.34] | 0.45 | .16 |  | 0.99 [-6.65, 8.46] | -.04 | .79 |  | 0.54 [-5.31, 6.19] | -.03 | .85 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Experiment 5 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim  image | 0.54 [0.16, 0.94] | 1.71 | .01 |  | 0.11 [-0.28, 0.48] | .03 | .60 |  | -0.07 [-0.39, 0.24] | -.04 | .65 |
| Effectiveness | -0.07 [-0.46, 0.31] | 0.94 | .74 |  | 0.13 [-0.25, 0.53] | .03 | .51 |  | -0.16 [-0.47, 0.14] | -.08 | .32 |
| Image ×  Effectiveness | 0.41 [-0.35, 1.19] | 1.50 | .30 |  | -0.66 [-1.45, 0.12] | -.10 | .10 |  | -0.30 [-0.92, 0.34] | -.07 | .36 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Experiment 6 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim  image | -0.09 [-0.54, 0.35] | 0.92 | .70 |  | -2.40 [-6.58, 1.85] | -.09 | .25 |  | -2.52 [-5.43, 0.41] | -.13 | .10 |
| Effectiveness | 0.01 [-0.44, 0.45] | 1.01 | .98 |  | -2.41 [-6.53, 1.64] | -.09 | .25 |  | -2.61 [-5.54, 0.38] | -.13 | .09 |
| Image ×  Effectiveness | 0.16 [-0.77, 1.06] | 1.18 | .72 |  | 5.97 [-2.25, 14.08] | .10 | .16 |  | 5.42 [-0.37, 11.26] | .13 | .07 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Meta-analytic effects | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Victim image | *ORmean* = 1.28 [1.10, 1.50] | | .002 |  | *rpb mean* = .09 [.04,.13] | | <.001 |  | *rpb mean* = .02 [-.02,.07] | | .32 |
| Efficiency  /Effectiveness (+) | *ORmean* = 0.86 [0.73, 1.03] | | .09 |  | *rpb mean* = .00 [-.04,.05] | | .85 |  | *rpb mean* = -.02 [-.07,.02] | | .32 |
| Image ×  Effectiveness (+) | *ORmean* = 1.06 [0.88, 1.29] | | .52 |  | *rpb mean* = -.07 [-.11,-.02] | | .003 |  | *rpb mean* = -.05 [-.10,.00] | | .04 |
| *Note.* We used effect coding (+/- .5) for to estimate the main effects of victim images and efficiency/ effectiveness information. “No information” was the reference category in the studies with two efficiency manipulations (e.g., positive and negative), and we specified one image interaction for each efficiency variable.Meta-analytic effects for efficiency/effectiveness based on contrasts between positive versus no information only (negative information was examined in two studies only). Effects of early and late presentations of efficiency information were averaged in Study 4 in these those analyses. CIs in each study are based on bootstrapping with 5,000 samples. | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Discussion**

Based on recent debates about empathy, efficiency, and effectiveness in charitable giving (e.g., Bloom, 2016; Gneezy et al., 2014; Singer, 2015), we examined how these factors relate to each other: Are donations triggered by a single victim innumerate in the sense that they are unaffected by how charities spend their money? Does the availability of efficiency/effectiveness information disrupt or facilitate spontaneous giving due to victim images? Is the decision to donate at all spontaneous and emotionally driven, and does efficiency and effectiveness play a greater role in deciding on an amount to give?

These studies suggest that donations based on images of particular victims are not up-regulated by information that the charity was efficient or effective. This finding aligns with arguments that empathic helping is innumerate (Bloom, 2016) and not underpinned by logical deliberation (see also Slovic, 2010), at least not in the same way as interpersonal helping behaviors. There is evidence that empathically moved people care about the impact of their aid to particular individuals (e.g., Sibicky et al., 1995), but that does not seem to translate into a concern for the effectiveness of charities. Some of our studies rather indicated a “deliberation backlash” on empathic giving (see also Small et al., 2007), but those interactions should also be interpreted with caution here. The mixed results and especially the Bayesian analyses suggest that those interactions are highly compatible with the null hypothesis (no interaction effect) in these data.

In general, images of identified victims increased the propensity to donate, independently of variations in charity effectiveness. Unlike the notion of empathy being a spotlight that only benefits the person in focus, the reactions to seeing a single victim can benefit others in a similar situation. This is not a surprising finding (see also Slovic et al., 2017), but it is a relevant for debating the notion that empathy is fundamentally parochial (Bloom, 2016). This further supports the idea that emotions operate in a heuristic manner (Slovic et al., 2007). Extending Bloom’s analogy of empathy as a light source, an image of single victims might be thought of as the on/off switch, while lacking a function for tuning how much to give.

We predicted that information about efficiency or effectiveness (on its own) would in itself provide a better tuning mechanism for amounts to give, but we did not find that. In fact, we found no positive effects at all of providing people with information about charity efficiency or effectiveness. This might be an issue with our methods, as others have manipulated the factors and found effects on donation behaviors. On the other hand, previous studies with successful manipulations have involved hypothetical donations, forced choices between charities, and/or fairly extreme contrasts in efficiency or effectiveness (see e.g., Caviola et al., 2014; Gneezy et al., 2014). We aimed to use naturalistic stimuli, real charity evaluations, and actual donation decisions. In these regards, our experiments are closer to the field experiments on this topic, which have also failed to find any overall effects of providing information about charity efficiency (Parsons, 2007) or effectiveness (Karlan & Wood, 2017). Taken together, this suggests to us that there might be circumstances when some people make decisions based on efficiency or effectiveness, but that these may not be overly abundant in real life. In our data, the Bayesian analysis strongly favors that interpretation as well.

From this perspective, the success of Effective Altruism movement – working to maximize the impact of giving – might not be a story of many people being attracted by effective charities. Perhaps it is instead a matter of relatively few large donors looking for efficiency or effectiveness (see also Karlan & Wood, 2017). High capacity donors may be driven by other motives than modal donors (see Levin, Levitt, & List, 2016), but more research is needed to determine if they care intrinsically more about effectiveness. Aside from facing greater compliance pressure, they may also consider effectiveness for reputational reasons: A person donating $5 to an ineffective charity is unlikely to pay a reputational cost, but a person donating $1,000,000 would look thoughtless and careless.

**Implications and Future Work**

In relation to the individual variation, all effect sizes were small in these studies. More work could be done to map that variation, especially work to identify who might respond more strongly to information about efficiency or effectiveness, and for what reasons. Individual variation aside though, the identified victim images had a substantial effect on total donation amounts – money that was not earmarked for the identified victim. In fact, those who were exposed to an identified victim donated roughly 25% more than those who were not (see Figure 1). Thus, unless one can demonstrate alternative means to generate the same donation amounts, or show that redirected donations still do more good with a smaller revenue, it would seem counter-productive (not to say irrational) to discourage empathic giving (Bloom, 2016). It would seem more fruitful to harvest people’s empathic impulses *and* try to direct their efforts to more effective causes. Indeed, redirecting amounts raised on empathic grounds is also a different goal compared to trying to convince people to give larger amounts, or to just give in “smarter” ways. More broadly, just because a behavior can be defined as more or less rational it does not mean that deliberation is the key to encouraging it. Anti-smoking campaigns also work to encourage a rational behavior, but they are not solely based on convincing people with numbers and philosophical argumentation. In fact, these campaigns use a range of “dumbed down” strategies, including emotion-evoking imagery (e.g., Durkin, Brennan, & Wakefield, 2012; Farrelly et al., 2012). Effective altruists could learn from such pragmatism, and research in social psychology and marketing could offer guidance about how to approach donors to maximize the impact of their charitable giving. Hopefully, the current research provides a step in that direction.

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1. An initial hypothesis was that deliberating on efficiency/effectiveness would sometimes disrupt a spontaneous empathic effect, depending on when the deliberation would take place (before versus after a commitment to donate had been made). Additional studies (not reported here) suggest that initial evidence for that notion was unreliable, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. If the treatments lead to a different composition (in terms of potential-donation-outcomes) of “positive donors” in each treatment group, this leads to a biased measure of the impact of the treatment on “donations among those who would have donated in either treatment or control.” See Lee (2009). Future work should employ statistical bounding procedures to address this. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)