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**THE WHEN AND WHY OF HELPING: INDIVIDUAL AND  
ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKING FROM  
A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Arvid Erlandsson



*The when and why of helping: Individual and organizational decision making  
from a psychological perspective*

Arvid Erlandsson

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The Expert Group for Aid Studies - EBA - is a Government committee analysing and evaluating Swedish international development aid. This report can be downloaded free of charge at [www.eba.se](http://www.eba.se)

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## Introduction

Every day, people make decisions. Many of these decisions primarily concern the very person making the decision (e.g. “should I eat a salad or a hamburger-plate for lunch?”), and because people are, arguably, not very good at making decisions involving longer-term consequences (e.g. they tend to choose the unhealthy alternative), there has been much psychological research investigating when and why people make suboptimal decisions and how to nudge people into making better decisions for themselves (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009).

There are also a lot of decisions that does not only concern the decision maker but also other people. The focus of this paper is *helping decisions* which are decisions that potentially can benefit someone else than the decision maker. Within the fields of experimental psychology and behavioral economy, helping decisions has mostly been investigated at the individual level (e.g. “should I make a one-time donation to this charitable organization or should I spend the money on myself”), but helping decisions can also occur at the organizational level. Decisions made by Swedish politicians regarding how much money to earmark for foreign aid (e.g. 0.8%, 1% or 1.2% of the BNI?) or regarding how to allocate a fixed sum of money between different helping efforts (e.g. helping refugees abroad or helping refugees in Sweden) are examples of important helping decisions with large global consequences. In addition, decision makers at Sida or the Foreign ministry make decisions about which of the many suggested foreign governments, companies and organizations that will and will not receive aid.

Although helping decisions on the individual level and organizational level differ in many ways (e.g. organizational helping decisions are usually made under more careful deliberation than individual helping decisions and also made by a group of decision makers rather than a single person), organizational helping decisions are still made by human individuals meaning that some of the decision processes and biases that occur at the individual level likely occur on the organizational level as well.

This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation which was written in the scientific framework of experimental psychology. As will be obvious, research in experimental psychology differs quite a lot from research in other fields more naturally related to the foreign aid sector (e.g. economics and political science). This paper will therefore focus

not exclusively on the obtained findings and practical relevance of the experiments, but also discuss in which ways experimental psychology in general can provide new insights relevant for people making actual grand-scale helping decisions on the organizational level in Sweden.

Before starting, it is important to recognize what my research aimed to test and what it did not aim to test. First, it focused only on individual decision making in helping situations (individuals read different charitable appeals and rated their helping intention and their reactions towards the appeals). Second, although there are many ways one can help, my research operationalized helping as self-rated donation intentions and actual donations to charitable organizations. Third, the research was not focused on helping toward a single victim-group but tested the hypotheses in different contexts and with different victims possible to help (e.g. poor people in developing countries, sick children in Sweden and threatened animals). Fourth, as often the case in experimental psychology, I have sacrificed external validity to increase internal validity. This means that I focused on one aspect that was expected to influence helping, and kept all other aspects as constant or controlled as possible. In real-world decision making, this rarely or never happens because the world is complex and dynamic and situations never change one aspect at the time. Although these limitations admittedly reduce the practical contribution of my thesis, I argue that some insights from the thesis still are useful for people working with any type of helping decisions.

In an attempt to link my dissertation theses to a concrete example, we begin with a description of a recent event probably well-known for people within the foreign aid and non-profit organizations sectors.

### **Alan Kurdi**

During the first week of September in 2015, the general attitude towards helping Syrian refugees changed in a dramatic fashion in Sweden. The Red Cross and Save the Children received 2,000,000 SEK each during the same single day and basically all organizations that focused their efforts on refugees felt the sudden upsurge of helping motivation among the Swedish people. In fact, not only the established charity organizations received

money. A private initiative called “Vi gör så gott vi kan” (“We do what we can”) received 5,000,000 SEK in just two days despite not even being a licensed organization.

One major reason for the helping-explosion in early September 2015 was Alan Kurdi – the Syrian boy who drowned while trying to pass the Mediterranean Sea in a rubber boat together with his family and other refugees. The boat capsized and everyone but Alan’s father drowned. Alan’s small dead body, wearing a red shirt, blue shorts and sneakers, float ashore on a beach in Turkey. Photographers nearby took pictures of Alan’s dead body both when lying face down in the water shore and when it was carried away by a Turkish police officer. The distressing pictures quickly found their way to the social media and the established media chose to publish the disturbing pictures as well, this time. During the Wednesday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, it was more or less impossible to avoid seeing a picture of Alan if reading a newspaper, watching TV or using social media. Within short, the pictures were complemented with a name of the dead boy, a narrative about his life and emotional interviews with Alan’s father describing his agony about losing Alan and the rest of his family. In just a couple of days, Alan Kurdi became an iconic symbol for the ongoing refugee crisis. The impact Alan had on people’s helping behavior can be illustrated with the organization Radiohjälpen’s campaign about fleeing refugees. The campaign was launched on Monday September 1<sup>st</sup>. The received amount for the first two days was around 250,000 SEK per day. The pictures of Alan emerged in media in the morning of September 3<sup>rd</sup> and in the late evening that day, more than 4,000,000 SEK had been donated in only 20 hours. Although there are possible alternative explanations, it seems pretty clear that the pictures of Alan made people donate more to charity. One can view this series of events from different perspectives and ask oneself many important questions. In order to link this event to the topic of the dissertation, I will focus on the *when*-question and the *why*-question of helping.

The *when*-question of helping is about situational factors that make people help more or less. In the context of the helping-explosion towards Syrian refugees in early September 2015, one must take into account the situational factors both before, and after this time. The civil war in Syria began more than four years earlier - in July, 2011. Although not always on the front page, media did report about the humanitarian crises and the growing refugee camps in Lebanon and Turkey. In addition, charity organizations

tried to make the Swedish population aware of the crisis in order to obtain donations. These campaigns was at best moderately successful and most Swedish people did not increase their helping very much despite being aware of the constantly increasing numbers of Syrian families fleeing their homes and people drowning while trying to pass the Mediterranean Sea.

That is, they did not increase their helping until early September 2015 when donations and other types of helping behavior exploded in Sweden. Specifying which situational aspects that triggered this sudden boom in helping is central for explaining the when-question. As already noted, it seems obvious that the picture of Alan did at least partially cause it, and below I go into a little more detail about the specific situational aspects that could have played a role.

The *why*-question is less focused on the situational aspects of helping but more focused on the different psychological mechanisms that can motivate or demotivate people to help others. Which types of feelings, thoughts and beliefs made people donate so much money during the first week of September compared to the weeks before? Traditionally, emotions such as compassion, sympathy and empathic concern have been assumed to be the main reason for people helping, but I will later argue that although emotional reactions are important, other psychological mechanisms are important as well.

### The when-question of helping

As noted, the when-question is not only about which situational aspects that make us more likely to help, but also about which situational aspects that should, but does not make us help more. Most strikingly is the fact that decision makers in general are very bad at adjusting their amount of helping when the amount of need increase or decrease.

### Scope-insensitivity

Scope-insensitivity (also known as psychophysical numbing; Dickert, Västfjäll, Kleber & Slovic, 2014; Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson & Friedrich, 1997) refers to the very weak correlation between actual need (e.g. the number of victims one can help) and helping motivation. As noted by Bekkers & Wiepking (2010) many of the largest charities in the USA focus on extremely rare diseases (e.g. illnesses affecting only 0,006% of the



population). In one study, both number of casualties and numbers of survivors that needed help was manipulated (Evangelidis & van den Bergh, 2011). Nicely showing how easy it is to forget the actual need when making help decisions, the number of dead people predicted helping motivation but the number of affected people (who actually could benefit from help) did not. Also, one study asked for people's emotional reactions after reading about either 5 or 10000 dead, and found no differences (Dunn & Ashton-James, 2008). In relation to the refugee-crisis, scope-insensitivity seems to explain the tendency to be equally motivated to help 100 refugees in need at place X, as when hearing about 100,000 refugees in need at place Y.

If people were totally scope-sensitive, all lives (and everyone's well-being) would be equally valued. This would imply that the number of people possible to help would be perfectly correlated with the amount of help. This is not the case. People are scope-insensitive implying that some individuals are valued more than others, which in turn means that some victims will receive disproportionately much help whereas other victims will receive disproportionately little help.

The finding that the objective need and number of victims possible to help does not predict helping among individuals is very important but only takes us half way. Rather than focusing on aspects that do not influence helping, we can be more specific and aim to learn more about all the situational aspects that actually increase or decrease helping.

### Helping effects

An important part of the *when*-question concerns what kind of situational differences that increase or decrease our helping behavior or helping motivation. In other words, does the story about Alan Kurdi make us more motivated to help than a statistical news story using numbers to describe the scope of the Syrian crisis. In this, and in many other situations, the answer seems to be yes. However, in this example, as in almost all real-life situations, the two helping stories differ on several aspects.

Pinpointing which kinds of situational aspects of a helping story that increase or decrease helping is a very important task for researchers within this field. Experimental psychological research usually does this by presenting hypothetical helping scenarios and varying only a single aspect. If two scenarios that differ on only one aspect elicit different

degrees of helping, then we have good reason to believe that this very aspect plays a unique role in increasing (or decreasing) helping. This is called a *helping effect*. There exists many different helping effects but below is a presentation of the three helping effects most relevant for the current paper.

### *The identified victim effect*

The *identified victim effect* refers to the human tendency to be more motivated to help when learning about an identified victim than when learning about statistical victims. Using the example from the introduction, whereas Alan Kurdi was an identified victim (his name and picture were in the newspaper every day), many of the other stories in media described statistical victims. In the literature, this effect is often assumed to include one or more of three factors – *determinedness*, *vividness* and *singularity*.

A determined victim means that there already exists a victim (e.g. your blood will be given to a person that currently is in great need). An undetermined victim means that the identity of the victim will be determined at a later stage (e.g. your blood will be given to the next person that is in great need).

Vividness refers to more or less arousal-eliciting information about victims. Adding vivid information of a victim is without doubt a stronger manipulation of identifiability and the picture of Alan scored very high on vividness. Vividness can refer to many things but for example Kogut and Ritov (2005a), showed that adding the age and name of a child increases helping motivation and that an additional picture increases it further.

One very important boundary condition of the identifiable victim effect is that it works primarily when there is a single identified victim. An individual but not a group is seen as a psychologically coherent unit (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996) and when presenting either eight identified children with name and picture or eight statistical children, there is either no difference, or even a higher helping motivation towards the eight statistical children (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b). The number of victims may even create a helping effect in itself. As long as the victims are identified, one victim in need elicits more motivation to help than does eight victims (*the singularity effect*; Kogut & Ritov 2005a, 2005b, 2007, Västfjäll, Slovic, Mayorga & Peters, 2014).

Although the identified victim effect traditionally refers to situations where there exist one identified victim whom you can help (e.g. your money is earmarked for Ranim), I suggested in my thesis that the effect also might apply in situations where the pictured identified victim is one among many (if you donate money, it will go to Ranim but also to other children in the refugee camp), or when the pictured identified victim cannot personally no longer be helped (Ranim's life could not be saved, but if you donate money it will go to other children like her). The story about Alan Kurdi clearly represents the latter type of the identifiable victim effect.

### *The proportion dominance effect*

This effect refers to people being more motivated to help when learning that one can help a relatively high proportion of the victims at risk (e.g. you can save 94 out of 100 victims) than when learning that one can help a relatively low proportion of victims at risk (e.g. you can save 94 out of 100000 victims; Bartels, 2006).

Although this effect is not as easy to link to the situation with Alan, one could argue that by not mentioning the great masses of children in need, but instead only focusing on the very limited tragedy of Alan and his family, people go from perceiving the problem at hand as a very big one (solving the whole refugee-crisis) to perceiving the problem at hand as something much smaller (helping one family cross the ocean safely). Similarly, if one learn that 90-95% of the 2000 children at a small camp can be helped if funding Project A, this will, according to the proportion dominance effect, elicit more helping motivation than if learning that 10-15% of the 30,000 children at a big camp can be helped if funding Project B, despite the absolute number of children helped being higher in Project B.

According to a related phenomenon called pseudo-inefficacy, our helping motivation is not only a function of the number of people possible to help, but also a function of the number of people not possible to help. Therefore, knowing about victims that we cannot save reduces positive feelings and motivation to help victims that we can help (Västfjäll, Slovic & Mayorga, 2015).

### *The in-group effect*

This effect refers to the human tendency to be more motivated to help victims from the in-group than victims from the out-group. The in-group effect is widely researched in social psychology (see Stürmer & Snyder 2010). It can be driven by either an aversion towards the out-group, a liking towards the in-group, or a combination (Brewer, 1999). Although, degree of in-groupness could be seen as a subjective evaluation, some natural types of in-groups have received relatively more attention than others rather universally influence people's attitudes and behavior.

Shared kinship is probably the strongest type of in-group. Burnstein, Crandall and Kitayama (1994) show that people help those they share more genes with, those who have greater productive capacities and those who are in good health. Another natural type of in-group is nationality (Baron, 2009; Baron & Miller, 2000). Levine & Thompson (2004) manipulated in-group and out-group as European vs. South American disaster victims and found that if making European group membership salient (for British students), they were more motivated to help in-group victims. In-group can also be constituted by the degree of similarities of people's opinions. In one study, male Manchester United fans that had their team-belonging made salient helped an injured person wearing a Manchester United shirt in 92% of the observations. If the injured person instead wore a neutral shirt or a Liverpool-shirt, observed helping was 50% and 30% respectively.

Although Alan Kurdi was probably considered an out-group member by most Swedish people, the very fact that he died while trying to reach Sweden might have made people more motivated to help other Syrian refugees than if he would have been on the way to Germany. Also, in the weeks following the picture of Alan, Swedish people's attitudes toward newly arrived Syrian refugees changed very much to the better. In many cities, volunteers actively welcomed refugees to Sweden and did their best to make them feel as members of the Swedish community. Possibly, as long as the refugees only fled to neighboring countries like Lebanon and Turkey, most Swedish people considered them out-group victims, but having refugees arriving to Europe and eventually to Sweden, increased the sense of them belonging to Swedish people's in-group, at least among some groups in the Swedish society.

## The why-question: Psychological mechanisms

This chapter deals with a different question. Whereas the *when* of helping referred to the tangible, concrete, situational differences between helping scenarios or charity appeals, the *why* question refers to the intermediating psychological factors (feelings, thoughts and beliefs) that can make us more motivated to help. These factors will be referred to as *psychological mechanisms*.

### Three psychological mechanisms

The taxonomy that has inspired the classification in this paper was first proposed by Elke Weber (1998, see also Weber, Ames & Blais, 2004). She suggested that we make decisions in several qualitatively different decision modes and that depending on what decision mode we use, the outcome could be very different. In later publications, Weber and Lindemann (2007) had narrowed down the number of decision modes to three neatly referred to as *deciding with the heart* (i.e. the emotional decision mode); *deciding with the head* (i.e. the calculative decision mode) and *deciding by the book* (i.e. the recognition/relational decision mode). In their classification, deciding with the heart means that decisions are governed by conscious or unconscious drives or feelings; deciding with the head means decisions that are based on analytical thought and deciding by the book means decisions that involve recognition of the situation as one of a type for which the decision maker knows the appropriate action (Weber & Lindemann, 2007, p. 192).

The decision modes suggested by Weber have a clear resemblance to the three psychological mechanisms suggested in this paper. I will refer to Weber's helping with the heart as the *emotional reaction mechanism*, to Weber's helping with the head as the *perceived utility mechanism* and to Weber's helping by the book as the *perceived responsibility mechanism*.

### *Deciding with the heart: Emotional reactions*

Affect and emotions have been intimately linked to moral attitudes and moral behavior in general (Haidt, 2001; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley & Cohen (2001) and even stronger so to attitudes about helping and helping behavior (Loewenstein & Small, 2007;

Slovic, 2007). Both affect and emotions are often strongly related to helping motivation and feeling more is sometimes equalized to helping more.

In the dissertation, emotional reactions was limited to include immediate emotions that a helper experiences as a response to being presented to a helping situation (e.g. hearing the story and seeing the picture of Alan Kurdi). The two types of emotional reactions most commonly discussed in this context are personal distress and sympathy towards the victim. Distress refers to a self-directed negative emotion (I feel bad, so I help in order to feel better) whereas sympathy refers to an other-directed negative emotion (I feel sorry for the victim, so I help in order to make the victim feel better). These two emotional reactions are here defined in a way very reminiscent of Batson (2011) and both distress (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a) and sympathy (Kogut & Ritov, 2005b; Davis, 1983) have previously been shown to predict helping. It is important to acknowledge that in this definition, more emotional reactions can, and often do, increase the motivation to help. However, this is not the same as to say that more emotional reactions necessarily increase helping. Also, it is not the same as to say that an increase in helping is always a result of an increase in emotional reactions. Instead, emotional reactions can increase even without a subsequent increase in helping, and helping can increase even without a preceding increase in emotional reactions.

#### *Deciding with the head: Perceived utility*

Although different types of emotional reactions are often mentioned first when discussing underlying reasons for helping, a central assumption in this paper is that there are other, more deliberate, psychological mechanisms that can motivate us to help as well. One such mechanism is the *perceived effectiveness* of helping (alternative terms for the same mechanism are perceived impact, utility or efficacy). A higher perceived effectiveness has been shown to increase helping motivation. Non-profit organizations perceived as professional and efficient will elicit more support in the US (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). A common argument for not donating money to established charity organizations is that some of the donated money does not reach the beneficiaries but are instead used to pay administration, marketing and the salaries of executives. In line with this, a recent field study by Gneezy, Keenan and Gneezy (2014), showed that if a large

sum of money is used to cover all overhead costs of a charity organization (implying that 100% of the subsequently donated money will reach the beneficiaries) donations from the public will increase much more than if the large sum of money is used as seed money or as matching money. The authors suggested that this is because people perceive that the impact of their contribution is greater. Overhead costs are habitually (but often mistakenly; see Caviola, Faulmüller, Everett, Savulescu & Kahane, 2014) understood as a marker of how effective a charity organization is, and high overhead costs will likely decrease motivation to donate money to a certain organization (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). Perceived effectiveness has in recent years often been included as a variable in studies about helping and it is also a very important (if not the most important) explicit aim of Swedish foreign aid according to EBA (Biståndsanalys 2015). Especially relevant for this paper, it has been included as one possible psychological mechanism underlying helping, and tested as a complement to emotional reactions (e.g. Cryder, Loewenstein & Scheines, 2013; Cryder, Loewenstein & Seltman, 2013; Cameron & Payne, 2011; Dickert, Kleber et al., 2011; Friedrich & McGuire, 2010).

#### *Deciding with the book: Perceived responsibility*

The third type of psychological mechanism is neither emotion-based nor calculation-based but based on personal norms regarding moral rules and moral principles. This paper will refer to this type of psychological mechanism as perceived responsibility but the notion of responsibility is only one of the many moral principles that could make us more motivated to help (other examples are fairness, rights, justice and equality). To illustrate what is meant by perceived responsibility; if a victim is suffering because of a mistake that you made, you are more likely to help than if the victim is suffering because of her own mistake or because of someone else's mistake. One could argue that the reason you help more in this situation is not primarily because you feel more sympathy towards the victim (emotional reactions), nor because you think that you can do more good (perceived utility), but because you believe that you are responsible to help when you have caused the problem (but not when someone else have caused the problem). In one study where different costs of helping and different costs of not helping were tested as predictors of helping motivation, having caused the situation was the best predictor (Fritzsche,

Finkelstein & Penner, 2000). Although causing the situation might be the most obvious example of when perceived responsibility motivates us to help, there are also other types of situations that can increase our perceived responsibility (e.g. role-responsibilities, Jeske, 2008; and promise-based responsibilities, Vanberg, 2008). Ascription of responsibility has been suggested as a dispositional variable that determines people's motivation to engage in helping behavior (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2010). Likewise, Wilhelm & Bekkers (2010) suggest that the predictive power of emotional reactions drop in magnitude and often lose significance after moral principles about helping are controlled for. Even mere self-focus might increase helping via perceived responsibility. One study primed participants with themselves (either by seeing a picture of themselves or by writing a short self-presentation) and then presented them with a helping situation. Participants primed with a higher self-focus reported more personal responsibility to help and did report a stronger intention to actually help (Duval, Duval & Neely, 1979).

### The when × why interaction

The overarching purpose of the dissertation thesis was to investigate if different helping effects can be specifically linked to different psychological mechanisms. The three articles included in the thesis investigated the interaction between helping effects and psychological mechanisms in different ways but I will here focus on the single study that best summarizes the whole thesis (Study 4 in Erlandsson, Björklund & Bäckström, 2015).

This study systematically tested the three psychological mechanisms (emotional reactions, perceived effectiveness, and perceived responsibility) as possible mediators of three clearly separated helping effects (the identifiable victim effect, the proportion dominance effect, and the in-group effect). To say that a psychological mechanism mediate a helping effect means that the observed helping effect can be fully explained by the psychological mechanism. The hypotheses were that the identifiable victim effect would be primarily mediated by emotional reactions, that the proportion dominance effect would be primarily mediated by perceived effectiveness and that the in-group effect would be primarily mediated by perceived responsibility.



### *Experimental design*

All 432 participants in this study (primarily undergraduate students) read three helping scenarios each representing one helping effect (identified victim effect, proportion dominance effect and in-group effect). Each scenario was written in two versions and all participants read one of the two versions for each scenario (e.g. either the identified victim version or the statistical victim version in the identifiable victim effect scenario).

The identified victim effect scenario presented a charity appeal from an organization focusing on child cancer. Participants reading the identified victim version read a charity appeal including a touching letter from two parents to their daughter who passed away one year ago (i.e. an iconic identified victim). The daughter was identified with name and picture and the letter included vivid information about her and her relationship with her parents. Participants reading the statistical version instead read about child cancer prevention and about the organization. The last section of the appeal, where the organization asked for donations, was identical in the two versions.

The proportion dominance effect scenario presented a charity appeal from an organization focusing on distributing Polio-vaccines. Participants reading the high rescue proportion version read a charity appeal where they were told that if the organization reached the expected amount of private donation, it would be possible to save almost all of the 500 children who annually die from Polio in Botswana. Participants reading the low rescue proportion version read the same appeal, but were told that it would be possible to save 500 of the 60,000 children annually dying from Polio in Africa.

The in-group effect scenario presented a charity appeal focusing on protecting the rights of children. The content of the two versions were identical except that the in-group version was written in Swedish, ostensibly written by a Swedish organization and described how donated money could benefit Swedish children. The out-group version was written in English, ostensibly written by a Canadian organization, and described how donated money could benefit Canadian children.

After each scenario, participants rated their emotional reactions, perceived effectiveness of helping, and perceived responsibility to help (each measured with two items). On the same page they also rated their helping motivation (two items) and the amount of money they would donate to this project if asked (hypothetical donations).

On the last page, after responding to all the scenarios, participants could also allocate 10 Swedish kronor between the three projects they had read (this money was later donated to the organizations that inspired the included vignettes).

### *Results*

Participants who read the identified victim version wrote higher hypothetical donations and allocated more real money to the child-cancer organization compared to participants who read the statistical version. Emotional reactions were more influenced by the identifiability manipulation than perceived effectiveness and perceived responsibility. A bootstrap mediation analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) showed that only emotional reactions significantly mediated the identified victim effect when controlling for the influence from the other mediators.

Participants who read the high rescue proportion version had higher self-rated helping motivation and allocated more money to the organization distributing vaccines compared to participants who read the low rescue proportion version. Perceived effectiveness was clearly more influenced by the rescue proportion manipulation than emotional reactions and perceived responsibility. The mediation analysis showed that only perceived effectiveness mediated the proportion dominance effect when controlling for the influence from the other mediators.

Participants who read the in-group version rated higher on all the included measures of helping motivation compared to participants who read the out-group version. Perceived responsibility to help was more influenced by the in-group manipulation than emotional reactions and perceived effectiveness. The mediation analysis showed that although all psychological mechanisms mediated the in-group effect, perceived responsibility was the comparably better mediator of the effect.

### *Conclusion*

The take home message and novel finding in this article was that the three helping effects are primarily mediated by three different psychological mechanisms. Specifically and in line with the hypotheses, the identifiable victim effect is primarily driven by emotional

reactions; the proportion dominance effect is primarily driven by perceived utility and the in-group effect is primarily driven by perceived responsibility.

### Relevance for foreign aid decision makers

Although the dissertation focused more on systematic basic research and less on the applied aspects of helping decisions, I do believe that people in the foreign aid sector as well as non-profit organizations can benefit from the theories and obtained empirical findings.

The main insight from the empirical results is that that we can, and do, make helping decisions in several different ways. A group of decision makers responsible for foreign aid might chose to support helping project A rather than project B because project A make them much more emotionally touched (choosing with the heart), because project A seems more cost-effective (choosing with the head) or because they believe they have a more profound responsibility to help project A (choosing by the book). Sometimes these decision modes are in conflict so the decision makers has to choose e.g. between supporting helping project X that include victims that make them more emotionally touched, helping project Y that seems to be more efficient and helping project Z where there for some reason is an extra responsibility to help.

Even among people in organizations where effectiveness is the primary goal, it seems probable that strong emotional reactions or intense responsibility-beliefs sometimes influence helping-decisions. For example, imagine that a board of officials needs to decide which of two foreign aid projects (Project 1 and Project 2) that should be supported. Although Project 1 is well above the average when it comes to effectiveness Project 2 is still slightly better. However, Project 1 takes place in the very same village where your best friend was adopted from whereas Project 2 takes place at another continent. In this situation it is possible that your efficiency-estimations (deciding with the head) and emotional reactions (deciding with the heart) pulls in opposite directions and that the helping decision will be influenced. Alternatively, imagine that you previously accidentally made an informal (non-juridical) promise to the person running Project 1 that her project would receive support, but that it later turns out that Project 2 is slightly more efficient and that you need to choose which project to support. In this situation your efficiency-

estimations (deciding with the head) and responsibility perceptions (deciding by the book) might pull in different directions and this could influence your decision, or at the very least make the decision more difficult to make.

As previously noted, a key difference between individual decision making (the focus of the dissertation) and organizational decision making is that the latter is usually done in a more deliberative and time-consuming way and in a group rather than alone. There are much research on group decision making in general but unfortunately not very much research on group decision making related to helping. Merging the theme of this dissertation with the theme of group decision making would be a fruitful path for future research.

### **How can experimental psychology contribute in the foreign aid sector?**

In this last part, I will try to argue in what ways experimental psychology as a field can be useful for politicians, foreign aid officials and other people routinely making decisions that concern other people (including helping decisions).

First and foremost, a greater knowledge in how human decision making processes work is one of the best ways to improve one's decision making. Most of the heuristics (i.e. mental short-cuts) that we use in our daily life works usually well and allows us to make good decisions quickly. However, heuristics also creates systematic biases which can lead to decisions that in turn lead to suboptimal consequences. Importantly, bad decision making can be caused by many other things than ill intent or egoism. Even very conscientious and compassionate people occasionally make suboptimal decisions simply because they are human. Just knowing about the common heuristics and biases (both non-conscious biases and logical biases consciously used to strengthen weak arguments) reduces the likelihood that these will interfere with good decision making. The field of psychology has done much research on heuristics and biases, and there are several books which are both entertaining to read and provide a good summary of research on heuristics and biases (e.g. Baron, 2008; Kahneman, 2011, Ariely & Jones, 2008).

Second, experimental psychologists are the natural scientists of the social sciences. Just like physics, chemistry and medicine, we come up with hypothesis based on existing theories and use statistical methods to test the hypotheses. Some questions about human

beings are admittedly difficult or impossible to test with these methods, but not all questions. National surveys are a common way to investigate attitudes and opinions among different groups in the society but most surveys focus exclusively on correlations and do not include experimental manipulations. To illustrate, imagine we find a correlation between having experience of living in a developing country and positive attitudes toward refugees. This could be interpreted such as that experience of living abroad causes positive attitudes. Importantly however, correlation does not imply causation (maybe people who were originally positive toward refugees are more likely to go abroad or maybe some unmeasured factor caused both going abroad longings and positive attitudes). To test causation, we need to conduct an experiment. This would mean that we randomly allocated people into two conditions 1) going abroad for 3 months, 2) staying in Sweden for 3 months, and then measured how the two groups' attitude toward refugees changed. Controlled experiments are not suitable for all types of questions, but it can surely be a useful complement to other methods more commonly used in the foreign aid sector.

Third, at least some of the more philosophically oriented psychologists could be useful in the foreign aid sector because they are often trained in spotting vague definitions and alternative interpretations of key concepts. To illustrate, when reading *Biståndsanalys 2015*, the aim to increase effectivity in the foreign aid was explicitly and repeatedly mentioned. I am very aware that there might be a clear definition of effectiveness that I am not aware about, but different people might nevertheless have different ideas about what effectiveness means. I could come up with at least four possible interpretations 1) helping where the need is the greatest or helping the people worst of in the world, 2) minimizing overhead costs and making sure no money is used for unintended purposes, 3) making a large impact in a specific region or being able to solve an existing problem, 4) maximizing the amount of gained well-being (or number of lives saved) per krona. Agreeing on what effectiveness means is necessary (but far from sufficient), if one want to evaluate the effectiveness of different projects. A related and interesting debate on the issue of effective and ineffective helping is currently kept active by philosopher Peter Singer (2015) and others. Although his arguments are primarily directed toward wealthy

private donors, many of the thoughts and ideas are relevant for decision makers in wealthy nations as well.

## Conclusion

Understanding and improving decision making is always important but understanding and improving helping decisions is even more important because they concern life and death of potentially many others. This holds especially true for people making grand-scale helping decisions on the political level or decisions about foreign aid. Heuristics and biases influence all kinds of decision making, and helping decisions made by foreign aid officials and politicians is surely no exception to this rule. Experimental psychology can contribute by 1) communicating knowledge about existing heuristics and biases to the decision makers; 2) conduct new experimental research in order to better understand situational and psychological aspects of helping decisions and 3) suggest and scientifically test different methods and routines to improve decision making in helping situations.

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