Perceived Utility (not Sympathy) Mediates the Proportion Dominance Effect

Erlandsson, Arvid; Björklund, Fredrik; Bäckström, Martin

2012

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Perceived Utility (not Sympathy) Mediates the Proportion Dominance Effect.

Arvid Erlandsson, Fredrik Björklund, Martin Bäckström
Lund University, Sweden

The Proportion Dominance Effect

The Proportion Dominance Effect (PDE) refers to the tendency to focus on the proportion rather than the absolute numbers of victims in helping situations. Keeping the actual numbers of victims possible to save constant, people are more motivated to help when the reference group is small (i.e. the rescue proportion is high = HRP) than when the reference group is big (i.e. the rescue proportion is low = LRP).

Phase 1: Replicate PDE

48 students read six vignettes created by Bartels (2006), each describing an emergency situation and rescue project. All participants read three vignettes in the LRP-condition and three in the HRP-condition (6×6 balanced within Latin-square design). After each vignette participants stated their attitude towards supporting the rescue project (0 = would not support at all; 6 = would give strongest possible support).

Results:
- Perceived utility of the rescue project was higher in the HRP-condition (M = 3.54, SD = 0.83) than in the LRP-condition (M = 2.14, SD = 0.95, p < .001; Cohen’s D = 1.65).
- Sympathy towards the victims did not differ in the HRP-condition (M = 2.14, SD = 0.87) and the LRP-condition (M = 2.14, SD = 0.95, ns).
- Perceived rights of the victims did not differ in the HRP-condition (M = 2.65, SD = 0.83) and the LRP-condition (M = 2.53, SD = 0.83, ns).

Phase 2: Only the mediators

48 students participated. The design and vignettes were identical to phase 1. After each vignette participants responded to nine statements about the emergency situation or the rescue project. Each statement measured one of the following reactions or perceptions:
- Sympathy felt towards the victims
- Perceived utility of the rescue project
- Perceived rights of the victims to receive help.

Results:
- Perceived utility of the rescue project was higher in the HRP-condition (M = 3.54, SD = 0.83) than in the LRP-condition (M = 2.14, SD = 0.95, p < .001; Cohen’s D = 1.65).
- Sympathy towards the victims did not differ in the HRP-condition (M = 2.14, SD = 0.87) and the LRP-condition (M = 2.14, SD = 0.95, ns).
- Perceived rights of the victims did not differ in the HRP-condition (M = 2.65, SD = 0.83) and the LRP-condition (M = 2.53, SD = 0.83, ns).

Conclusion

The results indicate that PDE is driven by increased perceived utility rather than increased sympathy. As the study was divided into three phases, each link could be confirmed independently. The results suggest that the PDE is the result of a cognitive bias rather than an affective bias and hence that it is fundamentally different from the identifiable victim effect or the singularity effect in helping situations.