"Compassion Fade" and the Limitations of Student Subjects in Social Science Research

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Compassion fade—the phenomenon of decreasing sympathy and willingness to donate when the number of victims of a crisis increases—has been invoked to help explain a variety of human failings, including our failure to take decisive action in the face of known genocide and to respond effectively to terrible humanitarian crises like the refugee crisis in Syria. Thus, a fuller understanding of this phenomenon is critical to solving the most important problems in the world—those that affect the most people. This project explores different factors that could affect the amount of money individuals choose to donate, when presented with a donation request tied to a single victim versus a group of victims. We administered test surveys to over 4,200 adults, and our experimental findings from this large data set (approximately ten to twenty times that of typical studies) support the hypothesis that compassion fade varies with age. Our results suggest that—contrary to the conclusion of other studies—compassion fade is not a general phenomenon that exists among the general population. Instead, the data demonstrates a statistically significant relationship between age and compassion fade ($p < 0.024$), in which younger age cohorts sometimes exhibit compassion fade, but older age cohorts do not. Our findings have important implications not only for efforts to study and mitigate compassion fade but also for social science research more generally: the vast majority of published social science research, across a wide variety of fields, is derived from college-student samples, which may not be as generalizable to other population cohorts as has often been assumed, even in research areas in which there are not obvious reasons to expect significant variations among age cohorts.

Awards Won:

Second Award of $2,000