Correction

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE SCIENCES


The authors note that, due to a printer’s error, a reference to Fig. 1 appeared incorrectly on page 1, right column, first full paragraph, line 4. A reference to Fig. 1 should instead appear following the sentence that ends, on line 16 of that paragraph, with “at the time of publication of Aylan’s photo.”

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Iconic photographs and the ebb and flow of empathic response to humanitarian disasters

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The power of visual imagery is well known, enshrined in such familiar sayings as “seeing is believing” and “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Iconic photos stir our emotions and transform our perspectives about life and the world in which we live. On September 2, 2015, photographs of a young Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, lying face-down on a Turkish beach, filled the front pages of newspapers worldwide. These images brought much-needed attention to the Syrian war that had resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and created millions of refugees. Here we present behavioral data demonstrating that, in this case, an iconic photo of a single child had more impact than statistical reports of hundreds of thousands of deaths. People who had been unmoved by the relentlessly rising death toll in Syria suddenly appeared to care much more after having seen Aylan’s photograph; however, this newly created empathy waned rather quickly. We briefly examine the psychological processes underlying these findings, discuss some of their policy implications, and reflect on the lessons they provide about the challenges to effective intervention in the face of mass threats to human well-being.

empathy | iconic photographs | humanitarian disasters | psychic numbing | Syrian refugees

In June 2016, 51 US State Department officials who had been involved in the US government’s response to the Syria crisis during the past 5 y sent a message to their Director of Policy Planning. The message was remarkable in its angry and strongly worded dissent toward the Obama administration’s policies of restraint, especially because it was drafted and signed by so many individuals who had been party to the creation of those policies. The dissenting document implored the Obama administration to use military force to compel the Syrian regime to cease its attacks on civilians and negotiate a political solution to a crisis that has left “over 400,000 people dead, hundreds of thousands still at risk from regime sieges, and 12 million people from a population of 23 million displaced from their homes” (1). The dissenters concluded that “the moral rationale for taking steps to end the deaths and suffering in Syria, after five years of brutal war, is evident and unquestionable.”

What is also remarkable is that, during the relentless and well-publicized buildup of casualties and displaced persons over this 5-y period, it took so long for these gruesome statistics to motivate a public call by top-level government officials for aggressive action against the Syrian regime. This is a dramatic testament to the inability of statistics to convey the meaning of mass atrocities and impel action. Psychological research helps explain this statistical impotency and the powerful but fleeting success of one iconic image in sensitizing the world to the grim realities beneath the surface of the numbers.

Imagery, Emotion, and Meaning

The power of visual imagery is well known, enshrined in such familiar sayings as “seeing is believing” and “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Iconic photos stir our emotions and transform our perspectives about life and the world in which we live. Who has not seen and been moved by such images as the mushroom cloud, the young Vietnamese girl fleeing naked from a napalm bombing, the Chinese man facing down a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square, the view of earth from space, and the jetliner flying into the World Trade Center? Psychological research confirms the greater impact of images over statistics, even when the amount of exposure is roughly equal (2–5).

More recently, on September 2, 2015, another striking photograph joined the list. A photograph of a young Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, lying face-down on a Turkish beach, was viewed by more than 20 million people on social media (6) (Fig. 1). (The boy’s name was Alan Shenu, however we have chosen to use the name given by Turkish authorities and publicized in media reports, Aylan Kurdi.) The next day, the photo was on the front pages of newspapers worldwide. This photograph brought much-needed attention to the Syrian war and the plight of its refugees, which resulted in short-term but important increases in individual aid and refugee policy changes in many countries (6). However, the Syrian crisis had been ongoing for more than 4 y before Aylan’s death. During that time, sources such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights had been regularly releasing updates on the steadily rising death toll, conservatively estimated at 250,000 at the time of publication of Aylan’s photo. Clearly, the statistics of a massive human catastrophe and their “moral rationale” were available for people and governments to act on, but little response was evident.

New behavioral data from information searches and donations demonstrates that, in this case, an iconic photo of a single child was worth more than hundreds of thousands of statistical lives. People who were unmoved by the relentlessly rising death toll in Syria appeared to care much more about the crisis there after

Significance

We cannot assume that the statistics of mass human crises will capture our attention or move us to take action, no matter how large the numbers. The data that we present show that the world was basically asleep as the body count in the Syrian war rose steadily into the hundreds of thousands. The iconic image of a young Syrian child, lying face-down on a beach, woke the world for a brief time, bringing much-needed attention to the war and the plight of its many victims. But this empathic response was short-lived. We outline the need for better laws, institutions, and decision-making procedures to channel empathy into appropriate and effective humanitarian actions by individuals and their governments.

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having seen Aylan’s photograph. Here we briefly examine the psychological processes underlying these findings, discuss some of their policy implications, and reflect on the lessons they provide about the challenges to effective intervention in the face of mass threats to human well-being.

We first examined two datasets to assess the effect of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi on the public’s interest in and concern about the Syrian refugee crisis. We collected Google trend data on searches worldwide for the terms “Syria,” “refugees,” and “Aylan” from before (August 2015) and after Aylan’s photo was published. Such publicly available data track how often a particular search term is entered relative to the total search volume (7). As can be seen, these data show a dramatic increase in searches for the terms “Aylan,” “refugees,” and “Syria” on the days after publication of the photo (Fig. 2). These searches declined during the subsequent weeks, but still remained above the August 2015 baseline.

We also obtained data on monetary donations to the Swedish Red Cross for a fund specifically designated to aid Syrian refugees. The funding campaign started on August 4, 2015, almost a month before Aylan’s photo appeared, and continued until November 30, 2015. Thus, we can use these data to estimate the photograph’s effect in this specific context.

Fig. 3 shows the number of daily donations to the Red Cross, and Fig. 4 shows the total daily donation amounts during this period (excluding single donations exceeding 1,000,000 SEK). As can be seen, both increased greatly from the week before to the week after the publication of Aylan’s photo. The mean number of daily donations during the week after publication of the photo was more than 100-fold greater compared with the week before. This effect was sustained until 5 wk after the photo’s appearance, when the number declined to a level no different from that in the week before publication.

Similarly, the mean amount donated daily during the week after the photo’s publication was 55-fold higher compared with the week before (1,908,437 SEK vs. 34,284 SEK). During the second week after the photograph appeared, donation amounts were lower (404,626 SEK), but still approximately 11-fold greater than the week before publication. It was not until 6 wk after publication that the mean donations were at a level (57,990 SEK) that was not significantly different from that in the week before publication.

These data illustrate the iconic victim effect. The photograph of a single identified individual captured the attention of people and moved them to take interest and provide aid in ways that were not motivated by statistics of hundreds of thousands of deaths. The data also show that this form of empathy quickly faded and donations subsided, even though the number of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Sweden was relatively high and consistent throughout the period that we sampled (36,000–40,000 per month).

Does the iconic victim response diminish rapidly as the image fades from memory and the media lose interest? Judging from the foregoing data, this appears to be the case. Additional data from the Swedish Red Cross are somewhat more encouraging, however. The number of monthly donors signing up for repeated contributions increased by a factor of 10 (from 106 in August 2015 to 1,061 in September 2015), and only 0.02% of those monthly donors had opted out by January 2016. This suggests that the iconic victim effect may lead not only to large and immediate increases in the number of one-time donors and average donations per person, but also to more prolonged and sustained commitment when individuals sign up for repeated donations.

Nonetheless, close to 1 y after the appearance of Aylan’s photo, and despite the publication of other touching images of imperiled refugee children, little seems to have changed (8, 9). After a string of boat disasters claimed 2,510 lives between January and May and put year 2016 on course to be the deadliest ever for refugees, Aylan Kurdi’s father said that “my Aylan died for nothing” (10). By the end of May 2016, leaders at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul appeared to show little interest in addressing what has been described as the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II, angering many of the aid organizations in attendance (11). In June, the State Department dissenters could no longer keep silent. Other prominent statesmen, diplomats, and journalists have since joined the call for some form of military intervention to stop the relentless slaughter of innocent people in Syria (12–14). Even US Secretary of State John Kerry expressed (privately) dissatisfaction with the administration’s lack of forceful response (15).

What Have We Learned from the Story of Aylan?

One of the important lessons from the story of Aylan is that we cannot assume that the statistics of mass human crises will capture our attention or move us to take action, no matter how large the numbers. Our search data show that the world was basically asleep as the body count in Syria rose steadily into the hundreds of thousands. Perhaps this should not surprise us. A famous saying, sometimes attributed to Josef Stalin, observed that “One man’s death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.” Similarly, economist Thomas Schelling (16) wrote that “the death of a particular person evokes anxiety and sentiment, guilt and awe, responsibility and religion...[but] most of this awesomeness disappears when we deal with statistical death” (p. 142).

Psychological research supports these observations. A single individual in distress, with a name and a face, often evokes a
stronger response than multiple persons (3, 17, 18). We have found that this “compassion fade” may begin when an incident involving a single person expands to as few as two people. In one study (19), participants were asked to make donations and to report how they felt about donating to either a single needy child or two needy children, each of whom was identified with a photograph, name, and age. Positive feelings about donating declined substantially when the group size was two, and this decline in feeling was predictive of lower levels of donation. If we begin to lose feeling and response at two persons, it is no wonder that we experience “psychic numbing” when the numbers reach the thousands (18, 20).

Various psychological factors appear to drive psychic numbing and compassion fade. It may be natural and relatively easy to empathize and feel compassion with a single identified individual, but it is difficult to “scale up” this emotion when we need to consider more than one individual. If one feels strongly about one person in distress, the appearance of a second needy individual will not lead to twice the level of emotion. Limitations of imagery and attention also play a role. Research reported by Hamilton and Sherman (21) and Thompson et al. (22) has demonstrated that a single individual, unlike a group, is viewed as a psychologically coherent unit. This leads to more focused attention, more extensive processing of information, and stronger feelings about individuals than about groups. The failure of large numbers to convey images and emotions is well known and documented in research studies and in popular narratives and discourse (ref. 20; www.arithmeticofcompassion.org). Thousands of wrenching photographs, much like statistics, can also quickly leave us numb (23).

Thus, the valuation of human lives not only may be characterized by a decreasing sensitivity as the numbers increase, but may sometimes even show a decline as imagery fades and attention falters. We have described these tendencies as failings in “the arithmetic of compassion” (20). The strong reaction to the image of Aylan coupled with indifference toward the statistics of thousands of lives lost in Syria illustrates this problematic arithmetic.

Recognition of these shortcomings has led some to argue “against empathy” (24). Bloom (24) has pointed out that the problem with empathy is that it is biased in its focus on the single individual and is innumerate in its failure to increase or even be sustained with the growing number of individuals in need.

Nonetheless, we do believe that empathy is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for action by both individuals and societies. Aylan woke the world briefly, providing a window of opportunity during which people and their governments began paying attention to the Syrian refugee crisis, understood its severity, and were motivated to act. Where there was a need that was relatively easy to fill, such as with donating to the Red Cross, the response was swift and sizeable, at least for a while. Without that empathic response, the donations shown in Fig. 4 likely would have been consistently small. Thus, empathy can create a strong motivation to act. But lacking a political solution to the underlying warfare in Syria, little progress was made in halting the killing or stemming the tide of refugees. This failure to react can be viewed in part as a failure of society to provide compelling action alternatives once empathy is aroused.

**Incoherent Values for Lifesaving**

Simply put, the US government does not have an established, coherent policy for preventing and responding to genocide and mass atrocities (25, p. 3).

Given enough time and suffering, the statistics of mass crises may finally gain attention and motivate attempts at intervention, as with the State Department dissent noted earlier. President Obama has certainly seen the statistics from Syria and agonized over them. Strong efforts to protect civilian lives would be consistent with his assertion that “preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States” (26). However, the dissent memo also makes it clear that there are many serious obstacles to intervention that must be weighed against the potential lifesaving benefits. US and Russian relations might well deteriorate and lead to conflict. The military might suffer losses, and aggressive actions might increase the threat of domestic terrorism or hinder attacks against the Islamic State.

Conflicting objectives inevitably arise as challenges to efforts to manage human and environmental crises; as noted by America’s United Nations (UN) Ambassador Samantha Power, “you have to take into account the other collateral issues that you’re dealing with on the international stage” (27). We are concerned that without a systematic method of analysis that carefully assesses the desired trade-offs among objectives, decisions will reflect a value for protecting human lives that is far lower than intended. This hypothesis is derived from theoretical models of judgment and choice, research on social cognition, and careful reading of official pronouncements. Its centerpiece is the “prominence effect” (28), which describes conditions that lead values revealed by choices to differ systematically from expressed judgments of value. Specifically, choices need to be justified or defended in ways that expressed values do not. Prominent attributes enhance justifiability; thus, the more prominent attributes of a proposed action likely will be weighted more heavily in choice than would be expected based on the decision maker’s explicit expressions of the values under consideration.

We argue that the prominence effect may underlie what we see as a disconnect between expressed and revealed values regarding whether or not to act to protect large numbers of civilian lives under attack in foreign countries. Specifically, we


