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Friends of Victims:

The Impact of Personal Relationships with Victims on Generosity Toward Others

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Word Count: 3563 (text) + 77 (notes) = 3640

Abstract

This paper shows that personally knowing a victim increases caring for *other* victims of the same misfortune. In Study 1, we find that having a personal relationship with a victim of a particular misfortune is correlated with causes for which people volunteer. In Study 2, we find that participants randomly matched with a victim (a fellow participant who lost an initial endowment of \$10) subsequently gave away more of their own endowment to another (anonymous) victim than did participants who were matched with a non-victim. Since all participants were privy to the same information, the results suggest that having a personal relationship with a victim provides a unique altruistic motivation independent of information effects. (Word count = 114)

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Intuition, abundant experimental evidence, and charitable donations totaling \$250 billion in the United States in 2004 (Giving USA Foundation, 2004), all demonstrate that people are willing to make personal sacrifices to help others.

Although the precise nature of prosocial behavior is still debated ((for recent reviews see Davis, 1996; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005; Piliavin & Charng, 1990), people's willingness to engage in it is clearly not constant across victims and situations. As we summarize in the following paragraphs, the existing literature on the antecedents of sympathy has concentrated on the characteristics of victims that affect sympathy, and the types of interventions that heighten sympathy for a given victim. It has not addressed, however, why people feel different levels of sympathy for a given misfortune, independent of the specific victims involved. We argue here that personal relationships with victims of a particular misfortune greatly influence the degree to which people care about other victims of the same misfortune.

Social distance and prosocial behavior

Many of the factors that influence sympathy and prosocial behavior can be characterized as varying the social distance between potential benefactors and victims. While there is debate about whether social distance reduction leads to self-other merging (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, and Neuberg, 1997) or to pure altruism (Batson, 1998), there is little debate that it increases the motivation to help.

Many studies have shown that people care more for others in their in-group than in their out-group (e.g. Dovidio, Gaertner, Validzic, Matoka, et al, 1997; Flippen, Hornstein, Siegal, &

Weitzman, 1996; Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, 2002). For example, Dovidio et al. (1997), using a minimal group paradigm, found that students were more likely to offer help to another student in need when she was believed to be an in-group member.

Manipulations of both similarity with and perspective-taking of a victim have been shown to influence empathy and in turn prosocial behavior. For example, Krebs (1975) showed that when a stranger was ostensibly about to receive an electric shock, individuals led to believe that they were similar to the stranger in terms of values and traits exhibited a stronger physiological stress response and reported feeling worse than those led to believe that they were dissimilar (see also Stotland & Dunn, 1963). Batson and colleagues have consistently shown greater empathy and altruistic behavior by individuals who are primed to take the victim's perspective (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Batson, Lishner, Carpenter, Dulin, et al., 2003; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978).

Research has also shown that people are more sympathetic to identifiable victims than to statistical victims, even if aid could save more lives if spread among victims in need rather than concentrated on a single victim (Loewenstein & Jenni 1997; Kogut and Ritov 2005a,b). This effect has even been demonstrated when no meaningful information is provided about the identified victim (Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Presumably, this discrepancy in generosity occurs because an identifiable victim is more concrete and psychologically proximate than a statistical victim.

Although each of these social distancing factors can explain some of the heterogeneity in caring for different victims, they do not address why people care differently about a given *misfortune*, independent of the specific victims involved. Why do some people donate money to research on Alzheimer's and others to help nourish children in Africa? Why do some people

‘race for the cure’ of breast cancer while others cycle for multiple sclerosis? We address this gap here by examining the role of a personal relationship with a victim of a specific misfortune, on caring for other victims of that same misfortune.

Personal experience with misfortune

Two lines of research on personal experience are relevant to the current paper: one assesses the effects of personal relationships with victims on self-protective behavior, while the other compares self-reported empathy of victims themselves and non-victims, towards other victims of the same misfortune. We briefly review each of these research streams below.

There is a vast literature examining the impact of personal experience on self-protective behavior (see Weinstein, 1989, for a critical review). While the majority of studies examine effects on victims themselves, a few assess the impact of knowing a victim as a form of personal experience. For example, Manheimer, Mellinger & Crossley (1966) found that drivers who had a friend or close relative involved in an accident reported higher usage of seat-belts, Schiff (1977) reported that people whose relatives had been exposed to various hazards were more likely to adjust to them. More recently, Macintyre, Brown, & Sosler (2001) documented that men who know somebody who died of AIDS were more likely to engage in safer sexual behavior (but see Camlin & Chimbwete, 2003).¹

We know of but a few studies examining the impact of a person’s own experiences as a victim on empathy toward others victims. Barnett, Tetreault, Esper & Bristow (1986) found that participants who had been raped reported greater empathy when watching a video tape about a rape victim than did those who had never been raped. Batson, Sympson, Hindman, Decruz, Todd, et al. (1996) found that the expectation of oneself receiving a shock affected self-reported empathy when observing a same-sex peer receive a shock for females but not males. Christy &

Voigt (1994) found that those who reported being abused as a child indicated that they would be more likely to intervene if they saw a child being abused than those who had never been abused. These studies focus on self-reported feelings and intentions, however, and do not examine prosocial *behavior* per se.

The present research

To the best of our knowledge no research has explored the consequences of having a personal relationship with a victim of a specific misfortune on generosity towards other victims of the same misfortune. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that “friends of victims” do act more generously towards other victims suffering from the same ailment as their loved ones. For example, celebrities such as Nancy Reagan, Mia Hamm, and Rob Lowe all promote charities that benefit victims who suffer from an affliction from which a family member suffered. We believe that knowing a victim might be one of the most powerful factors influencing altruistic decision making.

Having a personal relationship with a victim might encourage sympathy for other victims of the same misfortune for a few reasons. First of all, it could provide information about that ailment simply through exposure. Second, a personal relationship with a victim may increase the frequency of confronting that information and thus its salience.

The third, and surely the most interesting possibility, is that a relationship with a victim has a direct effect on caring, independent of informational content and salience, by decreasing social distance. Although the first two factors might otherwise be obtained without knowing a victim, through teaching and advertising for example, the third is purely experiential and thus might create a unique and special motivation to help.

In this paper, we report results from two studies that explore the possible link between having a relationship with a victim of a specific misfortune and generous behavior towards other victims of the same misfortune. The first study compares misfortunes previously experienced by friends and relatives of volunteers at three charitable organizations. The purpose of this study is to substantiate the anecdotal evidence that real world charitable behavior is related to the misfortunes suffered by people in an individual's social network. This study, however, does not allow us to differentiate between an information-based and a *caring*-based mechanism, nor does it rule out the possibility that an association between charitable behavior and personal relationships with victims is spurious. The primary contribution of this paper, therefore, lies in Study 2--a controlled experiment that assesses the causal impact of personal relationships on caring for other victims.

Study 1 - Volunteering Survey

We surveyed volunteers at several local charitable organizations. The survey asked volunteers about their relationships with victims prior to volunteering. We predicted that a relationship with a victim who has suffered from a particular ailment would be correlated with volunteering choices.

Participants

We posted the survey on the web, and asked volunteer coordinators from six local organizations to forward the survey link to their volunteers. Three of the organizations followed through with their commitment to forward our request, resulting in a total of 116 respondents: 26 from *Action AIDS*, 75 from the *Alzheimer's Association* and 15 from the *Special Olympics*. The request, of course, did not disclose our hypothesis.

Procedures

The survey included a form where respondents could indicate if they knew somebody that experienced each of six different ailments *prior* to volunteering at the current organization. For each of the ailments they could specify if they had an acquaintance, colleague, casual friend, close friend, distant relative, parent, sibling, spouse and “other”, who suffered from that ailment.

Results and Discussion

Our hypothesis was that having a personal relationship with a victim of a specific misfortune increases caring for other victims of the same misfortune, and hence we expected that a higher proportion of volunteers at organizations that target a specific ailment would have personally known someone who had suffered from that ailment, prior to volunteering, than volunteers at organizations that target other ailments.

Consistent with this prediction, 81.6% of volunteers had a personal relationship, prior to volunteering, with a victim of the misfortune targeted by their organization, compared to an average of 46.2% for the two misfortunes not targeted by it ($\chi^2(1) = 40.6, p < .0001$).

Moreover, as shown in Figure 1, the data for each of the three misfortunes are consistent with our hypothesis. The figure contrasts the percentage of volunteers that know a victim afflicted by the misfortune targeted by the organization where they volunteer, with the percentage of volunteers that do from the other two organizations. We collapsed across the two organizations not targeting the misfortune because there were no significant differences between them for any of the three misfortunes.

In the case of AIDS, for example, the figure shows that 65% of *Action AIDS* volunteers had a relationship with someone who had AIDS prior to volunteering, compared to 43% of volunteers from the Alzheimer’s Association and the Special Olympics combined. This difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 3.97, p = .046$). Such comparison also proved

statistically significant for Alzheimer's ($\chi^2(1) = 20.48, p < .0001$) and intellectual disability ($\chi^2(1) = 3.88, p = .049$).²

Although these results are consistent with the anecdotal evidence of the impact of personal relationships with victims of specific misfortunes on giving to other victims of the same misfortune, the correlational nature of the survey precludes us from making inferences about causality. For example, it is possible that people tend to volunteer for organizations near where they live, and organizations are located in areas with higher concentrations of victims. This would generate a spurious relationship between volunteering choices and personal relationships.

Furthermore, as we discussed earlier, the correlational procedure confounds informational content and salience of particular misfortunes with the purely experiential aspect of having a relationship with a victim. For example, a friend of an AIDS victim may be more inclined to volunteer for *ActionAIDS* because she knows more about AIDS patients than someone without such a friend, or because she is constantly reminded of AIDS by her interactions with, or memories of her friend. In order to both assess causality and control for informational confounds, we conducted an experiment which we report next.

Study 2 - Giving Experiment

We conducted a controlled laboratory experiment that first induced friendship between randomly-matched participants and then made some "friends" into victims (by having them give up their initial \$10 endowment). We then examined the impact of being friends with a victim, on generosity to either another (anonymous) victim, or to a university scholarship fund. Thus, the experiment consisted of a 2 (friend status: friend is victim/friend is not victim) x 2 (recipient: victim/scholarship fund) between subject design.

We manipulated the recipient of the allocation (friend or scholarship fund) as a means of ruling out two plausible alternative explanations for why the friend status manipulation might affect generosity towards another victim. The first is that a relationship with a victim may have a global effect on sympathy, such that friends of victims may give more to all causes. The second is that participants may use the outcome of their friend as a reference point and hence may be more likely to part with their own money (since their friend has less) than friends of non-victims (whose friend has \$10). If either of these explanations were true, we would expect friends of victims to give more than friends of non-victims, both to another victim and to the scholarship fund.

Method

Participants

We conducted the study in classrooms at the end of six undergraduate classes (ranging in size from 24-97). A total of 280 individuals (62.6% female) participated in exchange for the amount they earned as a result of the allocation task.

Relationship induction

Rather than examining naturally-occurring friendships, participants were randomly paired and friendship was induced. This way, there is less variation in the quality of relationships across pairs of friends. We paired up participants with the person sitting directly in front of/behind them and moved seats so that they could engage in conversation. Each dyad engaged in an abridged version of the relationship closeness induction task (RCIT) (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999). The RCIT has been used successfully in a variety of experiments (see Sedikides et al., 1999 for a review).

The relationship induction was labeled “Communication task” and consisted of two sets of questions. It instructed each pair of participants to engage in as natural a conversation as possible, using the questions listed. The first set of questions included: 1) *What is your first name?* 2) *Where are you from?* 3) *What year are you in school?* 4) *What are your hobbies?* and 5) *What would you like to do after graduating?* The experimenter kept time and asked participants to move from the first list to the second list after 2 minutes. The second set of questions included: 1) *If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?* 2) *What is one thing happening in your life that makes you stressed out?* 3) *If you could have one wish granted, what would that be?* and 4) *What is one recent accomplishment that you are proud of?* They had 3 minutes to discuss the second set of questions. When time was up, the experimenter instructed participants to return to their seats.

Allocation task

The allocation task was based on a paradigm referred to as the “dictator game,” which consists of one participant making an anonymous allocation of an initial endowment between herself and a randomly-assigned recipient. It is a good approximation of true sacrificial caring since anonymity minimizes participants’ concerns about monetary or social retribution for their action (see chapter 2 in Camerer, 2003 for a recent review of the dictator game and other related paradigms).

An instruction sheet provided complete information about the procedures of the allocation task. It informed participants that one person within each pair of friends would be making an allocation decision, but that the decision would not affect their friend; rather the allocator would be dividing money between herself and another anonymous participant. Highlighting the anonymous nature of the task, participants were told that they would only know

the *number* of the person affected by their decisions but would never learn to whom that number refers.

All participants began the study with an endowment of \$10. Each *pair* of friends was assigned a unique number. Within each pair, one person was assigned role 'A' (soon to be allocators) and the other was assigned role 'B' (half of which would lose their money).

Therefore, each participant knew of their own number and letter and their friend's number and letter (e.g., if a participant is assigned 6A, then her friend must be 6B), but did not know anyone else's number or letter.

We then created victims by randomly selecting some participants to lose their money. Specifically, half of the *B* participants in each session lost their money. To do this, the experimenter flipped a coin in front of all participants; if it came up heads, odd-numbered *B* participants lost their money, if it came up tails, even-numbered *B* participants lost their money.

After the coin flip, all *A* participants drew a piece of paper designating the recipient to whom they could give money. Before the drawing, instructions informed them that their recipient would be either the scholarship fund or a number representing a *B* participant who had lost their money. Therefore, some slips of paper were labeled with the fund name and some with a number. If an *A* participant drew her own number, she returned the paper and drew another one (i.e. no *A* participant was ever able to give to her own friend). There were no slips of paper representing *B* participants who kept their money.

In sum, all *A* participants could give between \$0 and \$10 to either a *B* participant who lost money or to the scholarship fund, half of the *B* participants lost their \$10 and could receive some money from a randomly determined *A* participant, and the other half of *B* participants kept their \$10.

After the allocation task, participants filled out a short survey that asked their gender, and asked them to report whether the person with whom they were paired in the communication task lost money as a result of the coin toss in the allocation task, to ensure that participants understood the instructions.

Result and Discussion

When asked whether their friend had lost their money as a result of the coin toss, no participants misreported this query, which suggests that all participants knew what the outcome of the coin toss meant for themselves and for their friend.

Figure 2 shows the average contribution in each of the four conditions. To test the prediction that *A* participants would give more to an anonymous *B* participant who lost money if their friend from the previous task had lost, but would give no more to the scholarship fund in this condition, we conducted a 2(friend's state) X 2(recipient) ANOVA on contributions. Results reveal no main effect of either friend's state ($F(1, 138) = .339, p = .56$) or recipient ($F(1, 138) = .394, p = .53$), but there is a significant interaction between the two factors ($F(1, 138) = 4.31, p < .05$). This interaction reflects that friend's state had a significant effect on contributions to another participant who lost money ($t(71) = -2.25, p < .05$) but not on contributions to the scholarship fund ($t(67) = .913, p = .36$).

This pattern supports the hypothesis that individuals are more generous to victims of a particular misfortune when they have a personal relationship with someone who has endured the same misfortune. Furthermore, the fact that average contribution towards the scholarship fund was not influenced by the friend's state rules out the two alternative explanations alluded to earlier. That is, effects of being paired with a victim cannot be attributed to an increase in overall generosity or to a reference-point effect with respect to the friend's outcome.

Thus in support of our hypothesis, a relationship with a victim causally increases generosity to other victims of the same misfortune. This effect occurs even when we control for information, since all participants had the same information during the task: all knew that half of the *B* participants had lost their \$10 endowment. The only difference was that some *A* participants were “friends” with one of the *B* participants who lost their endowment and others were not.

Conclusions

The current results are consistent with the anecdotal evidence that friends and relatives of victims are especially sympathetic toward other victims of the same misfortune. More importantly, they demonstrate that the effect of such a relationship is causal, and furthermore, that it is not due only to information obtained by having a personal relationship with a victim.

Although charity recipients are typically anonymous to benefactors, friends of victims nonetheless may feel a connection to and responsibility for them as if they actually knew them personally. Future research should explore the precise mechanism involved in transferring one’s experience with a friend or loved one into caring for other victims. It could be that personal relationships with a victim facilitate perspective-taking, which has been shown to drive altruistic behavior (Batson, 1998). It could also be that victims of a specific misfortune became less “statistical” once a friend or loved one represents their plight. Either of these mechanisms, or possibly others, could be involved in reducing social distance.

These findings have important practical implications in addition to advancing psychological understanding. Charities could strive to create personal relationships between victims and potential benefactors as a means of increasing donations. If a relationship created in

the lab in a few minutes can significantly increase giving, as our results show, then surely a charity could instill a connection between a victim and a benefactor through its solicitations.

In sum, the results show that having a personal relationship with a victim has a powerful impact on generosity towards other victims of the same misfortune. More generally, they highlight the important impact of unique life experiences on altruistic decision making.

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Author's Note

We thank Jessica Goldenberg, Laura Hotaling, Kwan-Kit Lui, Nicole Verrochi, Wesley Williams, and Yingyin Zhou for help with data collection, and the volunteer coordinators from Action Aids, Alzheimer's Association, and the Special Olympics.

Figure 1. Percentage of volunteers who had a personal relationship with a victim prior to volunteering for their chosen organization.

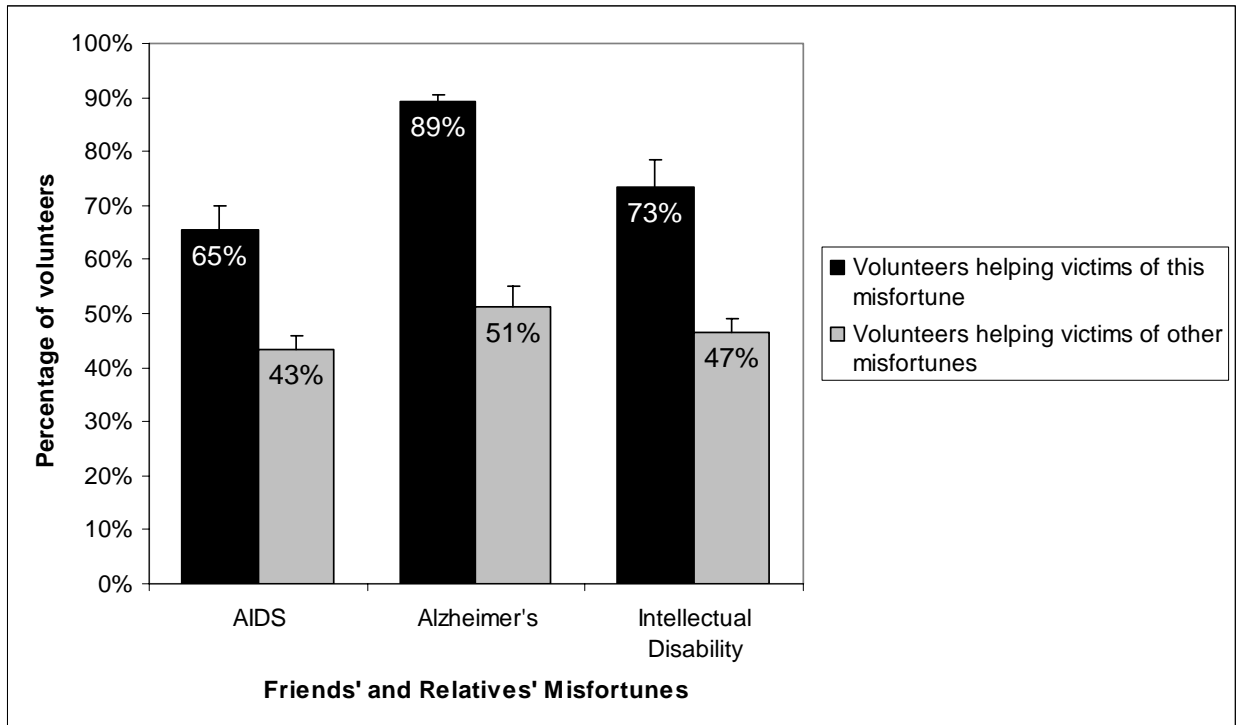
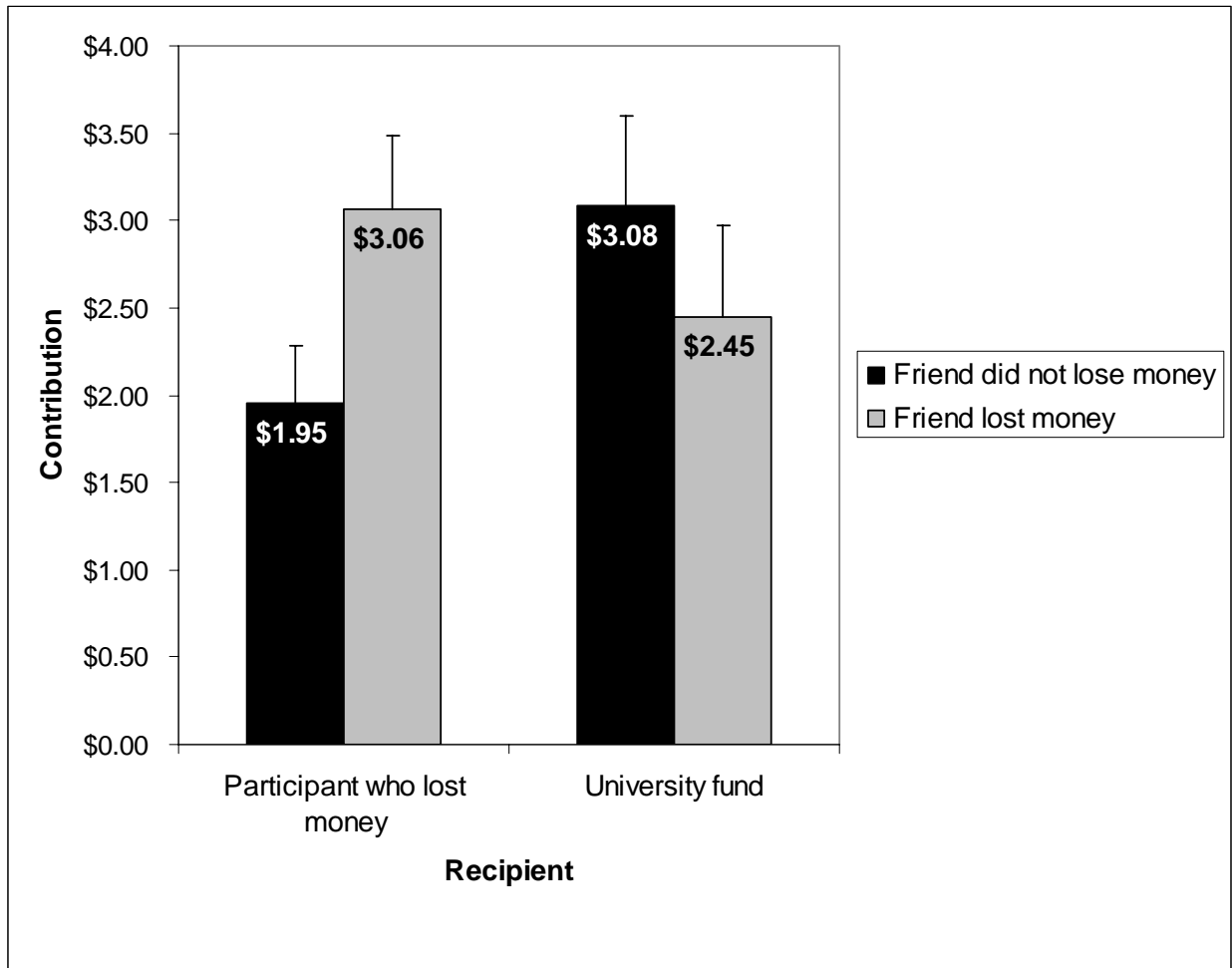


Figure 2. Contributions in the giving experiment



Footnotes

¹ Weinstein (1989) points out that much of this research suffers from serious methodological problems, such as lack of control of preexisting differences between people who experience and do not experience the misfortune, crude all-or-none measures of past experience, and the common use of self-report measures of behavior as the dependent variable.

² Similar results are obtained if instead of using a dichotomous variable (1 if knew someone, 0 otherwise) we compare the *total* number of personal relationships.