

WHO IS THE IDENTIFIABLE VICTIM?: CASTE INTERACTS WITH SYMPATHY IN INDIA

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Abstract

Earlier studies have documented an “identifiable victim effect”: people donate more to help individual people than to groups. Evidence suggests that this is in part due to an emotional reaction to the identified recipients, who generate more sympathy. However, stereotype research has shown that low-ranking groups are often not seen sympathetically; indeed stigmatized groups can be targets of “dehumanized” perception, perceived with disgust. We conducted an internet survey experiment among Indian participants, crossing the identification treatment with the group membership of the recipient. We indicate group membership of identified recipients subtly, with names that connote a social rank. We found an identifiable recipient effect for generically Indian, high caste, and Muslim recipients, but the effect was reversed for low caste recipients. Participants were as willing to donate to statistical low caste recipients as to statistical high caste recipients, but were less willing to donate to identified low caste recipients. However, an identifiable victim effect was seen for all recipient groups among participants open to a love marriage, a coarse indicator of rejecting caste hierarchy in favor of shared humanity. To our knowledge, this is the first study demonstrating that the identifiable victim effect interacts with the identity of the victim.

Keywords: identifiable victim effect; stereotypes; out-groups; caste; Dalit; pro-social behavior;

India

Who is the Identifiable Victim?: Caste Interacts with Sympathy in India

A recent advertisement, fundraising for a non-profit in an Indian magazine, features a smiling girl: “Sarita... Age 10, Muzaffarpur, Bihar.” This ad is psychologically sophisticated in at least two ways. First, although the organization presumably helps many more children than Sarita, the ad takes advantage of the “identifiable victim effect:” people donate more to appeals featuring particular needy individuals than to statistical groups. Second, the ad does not report Sarita’s last name. Although there are many reasons to only use one name, this has the effect of obscuring Sarita’s caste and presenting her as a generically poor Indian girl.

Many experimental demonstrations have established an identifiable victim effect (Jenni&Loewenstein, 1997; Kogut&Ritov, 2005; Small &Loewenstein, 2003): “People are much more willing to aid identified individuals than unidentified or statistical victims” (Slovic, 2007, p. 88). Throughout this paper, we follow this literature in referring to hypothetical beneficiaries of donations who are described in experimental prompts as part of anonymous, quantitative groups as “statistical” (*e.g.* “2 million Biharis”) and hypothetical recipients who are personally named or described as “identified” or “identifiable” (*e.g.* “Sarita, Age 10”). Loewenstein and Small (2007) propose that such helping behavior is explained by the interaction of sympathy and deliberation, where sympathy is “caring but immature and irrational,” and subject to a range of influences (p. 112). Thus, people give more to the identified victim because they feel sympathy for her plight, but the statistical victim evokes no such emotion.

However, emotional reactions to others are not always sympathetic. The stereotype content model predicts different emotional reactions to different out-groups; the lowest ranking groups, judged to lack both warmth and competence, evoke disgust (Fiske et al., 2002). Very

low-ranking people may not even be mentally represented as eligible for human sympathy. Harris & Fiske (2006) find that when U.S. experimental participants think about extreme out-groups – in particular, homeless people and drug addicts – the medial prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain necessary for social cognition, is not activated; in participants’ mental representations, these out-groups are neurally “dehumanized.”

Indian society is divided into a complex hierarchy of castes. Traditionally “untouchable” groups – sometimes referred to as “scheduled castes” or “Dalits” – remain stigmatized, low ranking, and subject to deep social and economic exclusion. We study whether caste and religious identities in India interact with the identifiable victim effect: does identifiability encourage donations to low-ranking out-groups?

The caste system, despite its changing manifestations over time, is inherently hierarchical, such that it endows individuals with an underlying sense of superiority (or its converse, inferiority), flowing from their birth into a particular caste. While it has been legally abolished in India since 1950, caste identity continues to define hierarchy and status significantly and is an important marker of economic inequality, although not the only one. Caste hierarchy is neither linear nor fixed, and debates over its changing forms continue; however, there is consensus on which groups constitute the bottom of the system. These are the ex-untouchable castes, traditionally associated with menial, dirty and degrading occupations (such as scavenging, handling corpses and so forth). Although untouchability is illegal and punishable, overt and covert instances of untouchability, such as violence, abuse, and humiliation, continue to occur; individuals from these castes suffer from the consequences of their “stigmatized ethnic identity” in their daily lives, even when they are not engaged in their traditional roles. It is not surprising that these groups are also disproportionately poor, with limited access to productive assets or

decent employment and lower educational outcomes compared to the upper castes. For more information on caste in India, please see Deshpande (2011).

Our experiment is methodologically similar to “correspondence studies” of discrimination that randomly assign names associated with social groups to fictional persons in experimental prompts in order to test for an effect of group membership. For example, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) sent resumes to prospective employers with typically African-American names (*e.g.* Lakisha) or typically white names (*e.g.* Emily), and found that white names received 50 percent more callbacks for interviews. We subtly manipulated the apparent caste status of identifiable victims using names associated with religion and caste rank.

If the identifiable victim effect operates through sympathy, it could be absent or reversed when recipients are members of low-ranking groups associated with aversive emotions. The primary hypothesis of our study is that the identifiable victim effect will be replicated for generic and high-ranking recipients, but reversed when identifiable recipients have recognizably low-caste names. We further hypothesize a triple interaction: this reversal should not occur among participants with more liberal social attitudes, especially if these attitudes avoid aversive emotion towards and dehumanized perception of low-caste groups. Finally, as a verification of our data’s validity, we plan an analysis of how willingness to donate to recipients of high and low ranking groups interacts with the participant’s own self-perceived group membership.

Method

We implemented an internet survey experiment in September of 2011. Participants from India were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and completed the experiment using Qualtrics online software. The experiment randomly assigned each participant to one of nine prompts, each describing poor people in India, and then asked about participants’ willingness to

donate to help. The informed consent described the study as “a five-minute survey about people in India;” the survey was not explicitly about caste or religion.

After agreeing to participate and providing informed consent, participants were first shown the experimental prompt, and immediately afterwards asked to rate their willingness to donate. Next, the participants were asked a set of multiple choice survey questions. Finally, participants rated the similarity of their family to typical members of ten groups (e.g. Brahmin, poor, urban). The mean participant took 6.51 minutes to complete the survey experiment; the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentile participants took 4, 6, and 7 minutes, respectively.

Participants

Participants were paid US\$0.20 through Amazon Mechanical Turk for completing the experiment. Paolacci, *et al.* (2010) and Buhrmester, *et al.* (2011) both provide evidence that “MTurk” produces high-quality experimental data that replicate well-documented lab findings. The software was set to only allow participants using computer IP addresses within India, and to allow each user to complete the survey only once.

As recommended by Oppenheimer, *et al.* (2009), the sample was screened using two instructional manipulation checks. Within the survey questions, participants were asked “how often have you suffered a fatal heart attack?” Only those who selected “never” were included in the analyzed sample. Similarly, participants were prompted with “On many important issues, people have different opinions. Some people agree, and some people disagree, even very strongly. Here in this question, please select the number four in the slider below, to rule out random clicking.” Only those who selected 4 were included.

These filters resulted in a sample of 475 participants (318 male, 157 female; 359 participants between the ages of 20 to 34, inclusive). Table 1 presents the distribution of the

sample by age and sex. Two-thirds of the participants are male and three-fourths are from 20 to 34 years old. Table 2 presents the distribution by caste group and location. Among the survey questions, participants were asked “Are you a member of any of the following categories?,” and selected one of “Brahmin,” “Upper caste, non Brahmin,” “General caste or other caste,” “Other backward caste (OBC),” “Dalit or Scheduled caste (SC),” “Adivasi or Scheduled tribe (ST),” or “None of these.” The survey also asked “Where do you live?,” allowing as options “A major metropolis (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad),” “A state capital, or other large city,” “A district capital, or other small city,” “A smaller town,” and “A rural area.” Unsurprisingly, most participants lived in larger cities, and there were very few participants from the lowest castes. Additionally, 41 participants, or 8.63 percent of the sample, report being Muslim.

In addition to the instructional manipulation checks, the last page of the survey asked participants which country they were in (with a multiple choice list) and whether they had taken the survey before. Seven participants who reported being in Sri Lanka, rather than India, and one who reported having taken the experiment before were excluded from data analysis; we interpret these responses as markers of inattention.

Although the important source of variation in this study was randomly assigned experimental treatment, not individual differences, it is important to consider of whose behavior the participants are representative. The participants are certainly not representative of all Indians: to complete the survey, they had to understand English and have internet access. Therefore, this study is at best representative of certain high socioeconomic status Indians. However this is not necessarily a defect; this group is perhaps the population most able or likely to donate to or influence poverty relief.

Crossed experimental manipulations: Identifiability and recipients' group identities

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of nine experimental treatments, which varied the version of an introductory prompt. Participants read a description of need:

[Many GROUP families are/ The family of NAME is] very poor. For much of each year, they cannot find work. [Thousands of families / His family] frequently cannot afford enough basic food to eat. As a result, [millions of children / his children] go without medicine if they get sick, and often go to bed hungry.

The first dimension of randomized assignment was to identified or statistical recipients. Participants assigned to statistical recipients read the text at the beginning of each set of brackets; participants assigned to identified recipients read the text at the end of each set of brackets. This was crossed with the second dimension of treatment, the group membership of the recipients. The prompt described one of four social groups: generically Indian (as a control treatment), high caste, low caste, or Muslim.

In the identified recipient case, the identification of the recipient's category was done only implicitly by his name, using well-known names commonly associated with each of the groups. Thorat&Attewell (2007) and Siddique (2011) both use a similar strategy to document caste-based discrimination in Indian labor markets by randomly assigning names to job applications.

Our experiment used 20 names, 5 for each of the four groups, and each participant assigned to read about an identifiable recipient read one of these five names, randomly presented. For the control treatment, we used names that are commonly found across caste levels and are unable to be identified with a particular group. The names used are listed in the Appendix.

In the statistical recipient case, the group name was substituted into the blank: “Indian,” “Brahmin” (high-ranking), “Scheduled Caste (SC)” (low-ranking), or “Muslim.” An additional low-ranking statistical recipient treatment used the word “Dalit” – a common synonym for scheduled caste descended from the Sanskrit word for “oppressed” – for a total of nine experimental treatments.

Dependent variable: Willingness to donate

Immediately after the experimental prompt, on the same computer screen, all participants were asked “How much money would you be willing to donate to a charity working with such people?” Participants answered using a slider bar ranging from 0 to 100, labeled *none at all*, *some*, *much*, and *very much* at four evenly spaced points. The median participant took 55 seconds to read the experimental prompt and respond.

Observed heterogeneity among participants

Openness to love marriage. Participants answered the multiple choice question “Are you married? Did you have or would you have a love marriage?” In India, a love marriage is a marriage where the partners are selected by the couple individually, in contrast with an “arranged marriage,” where family or kin are involved in the selection of partners, matched by their caste, among other dimensions. Each participant selected one of the four options (percent of participants in parentheses): “I am married, and I had a love marriage” (16 %), “I am married, and I did not have a love marriage” (32 %), “I am not married, and I would have a love marriage” (30 %), “I am not married, and I would not have a love marriage” (22 %). The order of the four options was randomly counterbalanced across participants. We collapsed participants who had or would have a love marriage into a single indicator of “openness to love marriage.”

This question was included as a coarse measure of participants' social liberalism and of their commitment to caste distinctions. A small but increasing minority of Indians choose their own marriage partners based on compatibility, rather than by conforming to rules of caste endogamy (Mines, 1988). Love marriages typically transcend caste boundaries, sometimes involving castes with very different ranks (Corwin, 1997). We interpret those who either had a love marriage or are willing to have one as, all else equal, more cosmopolitan or liberal in their social views.

Ratings of similarity. The penultimate page of survey questions asked participants to rate their self-perceptions of similarity with ten groups. An introductory question asked "How much do you believe your family is like a typical family of each of the following types?" The ten groups were "Brahmin," "Forward/Upper Castes," "OBC" [other backward castes], "Dalit/SC," "Adivasi/ST," "Muslim," "Poor," "Middle class," "Rural," and "Urban." The ten groups were listed in a randomly counterbalanced order. Participants answered on using sliders from 0 to 100, marked with 7 evenly spaced labels *Not at all like my family*, *Not like my family*, *Not much like my family*, *Neutral*, *Somewhat like my family*, *Like my family*, and *Just like my family*.

Results

Interchangeability of labels "Dalit" and "Scheduled Caste"

Half of the participants who were assigned to low-caste statistical recipients read about "Scheduled Caste (SC)" recipients and half read about "Dalit" recipients. These two group names refer to the same people. This difference in terminology had no effect: Participants expressed willingness to donate of 54.07 and 54.11, respectively, to the two groups (two-sided

$p = 0.993$). For the rest of this analysis, these two prompts are therefore pooled as one treatment: low caste statistical recipients.

An overall identified recipient effect

Pooling the data over all recipient groups, this experiment replicated earlier findings of an identifiable victim effect. On average, participants reported a willingness of 51.06 to donate to statistical recipients and a willingness of 56.67 to donate to identified recipients. This difference of 0.22 standard deviations is statistically significant, according to a non-parametric Wilcoxon signed rank test (two-sided $p = 0.014$).

Main result: The overall effect of identification reversed for low-caste recipients

The identified recipient effect found for the entire sample and for the control (generic “Indian”) group was reversed for low caste recipients, but not for high caste or Muslim recipients, as Figure 1 shows. Strikingly, willingness to donate to statistical recipients is essentially identical among high caste and low caste recipients. The recipients’ group matters only in the case of identified recipients, where participants were much less willing to donate to help members of low-ranked castes (interaction: 0.52 standard deviations; two-sided $p = 0.04$).

Table 3 confirms the statistical significance and robustness of the interaction between identifiability and low cast identity of the recipient. The negative interaction between an identifiable recipient and low caste is statistically significant (two-sided $p = 0.04$). This is unchanged – as would be expected in a randomized experiment – when controls for the respondent’s age, sex, city size, and education are included. Using the mean willingness to donate to each name – a data set with 20 observations (see Appendix) – a non-parametric Wilcoxon rank-sum finds that willingness to donate to the 5 low caste names is statistically

significantly lower than willingness to donate to the other 15 names (two-sided $p = 0.016$), suggesting that the result is not driven by only a few of the names used.

Openness to love marriage

45.6 percent of participants reported being open to a love marriage. Unlike the full sample, these participants exhibited an identifiable victim effect even when assigned to low caste recipients. Figure 2 plots this triple interaction among openness to love marriage, recipient caste, and identification of the recipient (triple interaction one sided $p = 0.03$). Because every recipient group other than low caste prompted an identifiable victim effect, these groups are combined in a split of the treatments into “low caste” and “other.” Only among participants who were not open to love marriage and who were presented with low caste recipients does willingness to donate to statistical recipients exceed willingness to donate to identified recipients.

Regression analysis further confirms the statistical robustness and significance of this result. Table 4 presents the results of estimating this triple interaction as a linear regression. Verifying the pattern in figure 2, the triple interaction among openness to love marriage, low caste recipient, and statistical recipient is statistically significant (coefficient one sided $p = 0.03$). Because openness to love marriage was not a randomly assigned treatment, endogeneity is a concern: Perhaps what appears to be an effect of social attitudes is, in fact, merely an effect of some correlated demographic or other heterogeneity. To guard against this possibility, column 2 of the table includes regression controls for six age category dummies and indicators for being female, having high and low education relative to the sample, and ever having spent the night in a village; the result is very similar. Column 3 adds further controls for economic status: participants’ self-ranking as similar to typical urban, rural, middle class, and poor families, and indicators for the size of the participants’ city or town. Finally, column 4 includes controls for

the participants' own religious and caste categories. None of these additional controls importantly changes the triple interaction or its statistical significance, suggesting that the apparent effect of openness to love marriage does not reflect spurious endogeneity.

Participants' self-perceptions interacted with recipients' caste

We constructed an index of participants' self-perceived identities as high caste, rather than low caste. Each participant ranked his or her family's similarity to ten groups. From these ten rankings, we constructed a mean and standard deviation for each participant. We constructed, for each participant, a z-score of self-perceived similarity to typical high caste ("Brahmin") and low caste ("Dalit / SC") families, using that participant's own mean and standard deviation across groups. Finally we made the index by subtracting each participant's low caste z-score from his or her high caste z-score. Thus the index is $([high_i - mean_i]/sd_i) - ([low_i - mean_i]/sd_i)$, where means and standard deviations are over participant i 's ten responses.

Figure 3 presents local polynomial, kernel weighted regressions of willingness to donate on this index. Willingness to donate is plotted separately for high and low caste participants, pooling data across experimental treatments. The identity of the recipient interacts with the identity of the participant: Participants who perceive their family as more similar to typical high caste, rather than low caste, families are more willing to donate, on average, to high caste recipients and less willing to donate to low caste recipients. This interaction is statistically significant using the full sample (one-sided $p = 0.043$; $p = 0.038$ with regression controls for participant's sex and six age categories) and almost significant when the sample is restricted to participants experimentally assigned only to high or low caste recipients (one-sided $p = 0.055$).

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate that the familiar “identifiable victim effect” interacts with the identity of the recipient. Despite an overall identifiable victim effect, participants gave more to statistical low caste recipients than to help a named family. Yet, participants were as willing to donate to statistical low caste recipients as to statistical high caste recipients. One explanation is that Loewenstein and Small (2007) are correct that responses to statistical victims are governed by deliberation while responses to identifiable victims depend on emotion, but Fiske *et al.* (2002) are also correct that low-ranking out-groups can generate aversive emotion, rather than sympathy. The identity of the identified victim matters.

Appendix

For each name, we report the mean willingness to donate and number of participants in parentheses: (μ , n). The generic or unidentifiable names were: Sanjeev Kumar (46, 10), Sunil Chowdhary (59, 12), Yash Pal (64, 10), Aman Das (55, 12), and Raghav Chandra (66, 7). The high caste names were: Akhilesh Sharma (49, 13), IshanChaturvedi (61, 9), Mahesh Pandit (64, 13), Kunwar Rajesh PratapRathore (64, 10), and Mrigank Gupta (70, 11). The low caste names were: NathuValmiki (43, 12), Rajesh Paswan (53, 8), Om PrakashChamar (44, 9), Ashok Mochi (59, 11), and Ramesh Teli (47, 10). The Muslim names were Rashid Khan (54, 6), Imtiaz Ali (52, 11), YousufSaeed (61, 11), Mohammad Ansari (59, 11), and Imran Hussain (62, 10).

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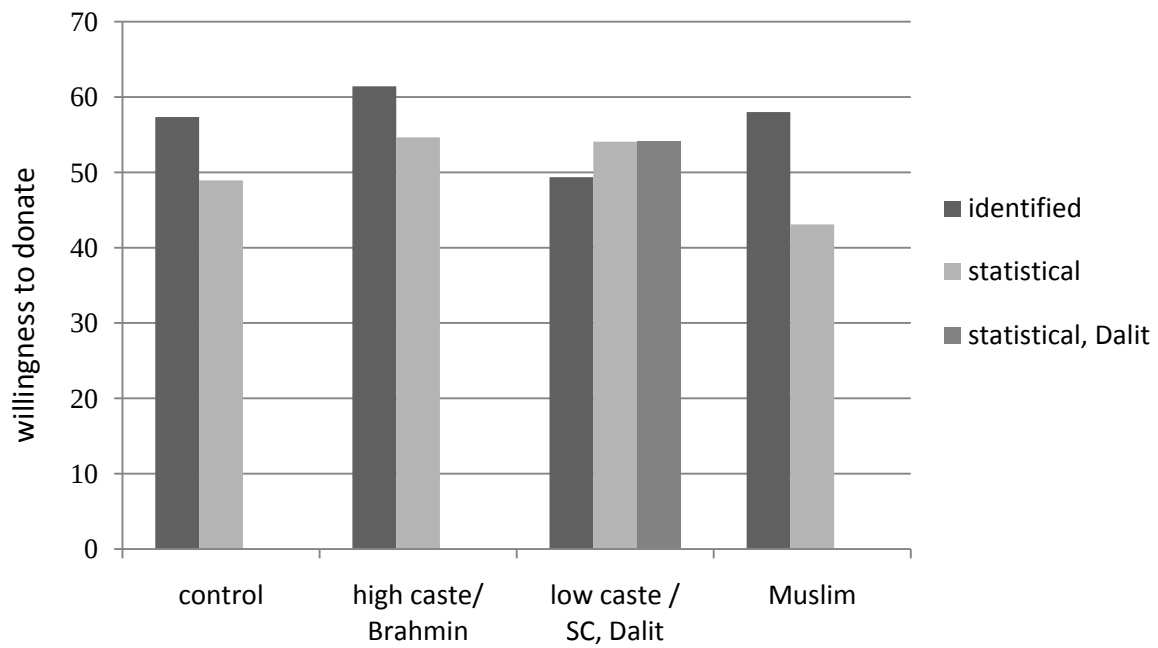


Figure 1. Mean willingness to donate by recipient category and identified/statistical presentation. “SC” indicates “Scheduled Caste.”

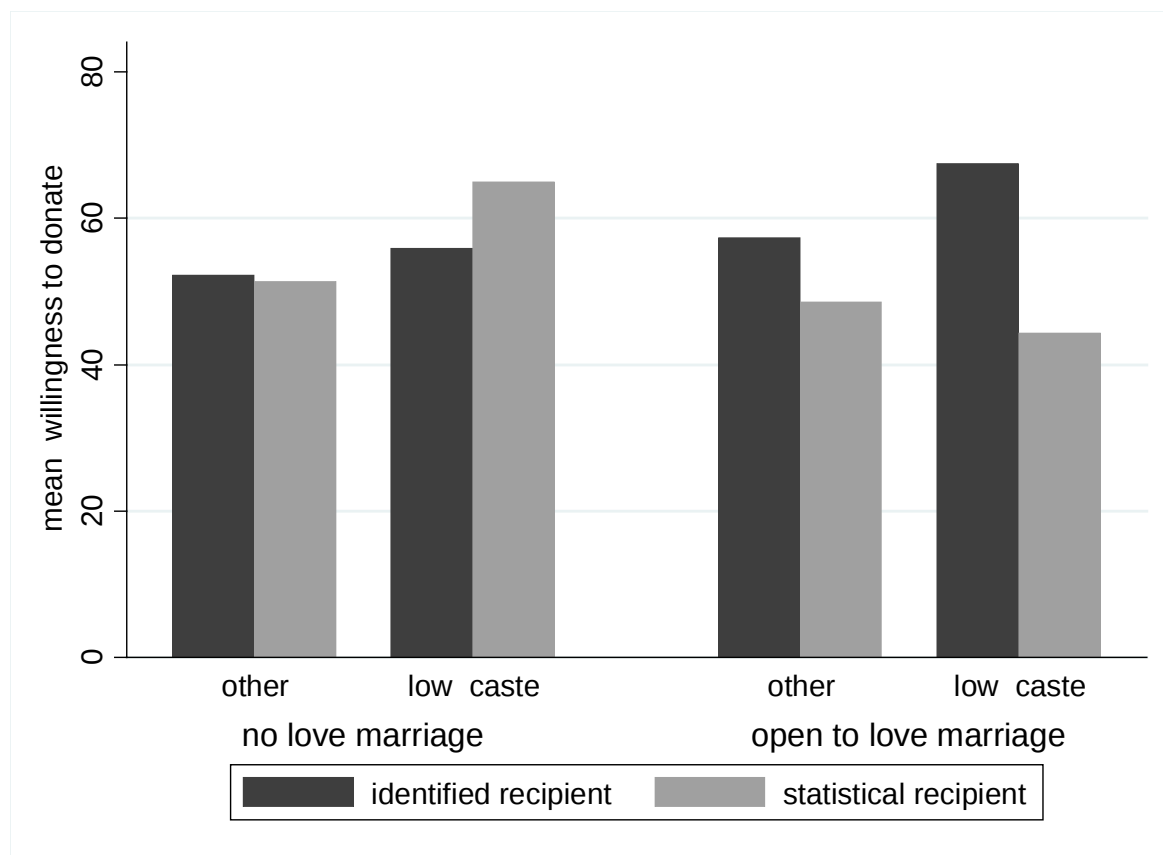


Figure 2: Mean willingness to donate, by recipient's caste status and participants' openness to love marriage.



Figure 3. Mean willingness to donate by participants' self-perception as high caste, rather than low caste. Local polynomial regressions with Epanechnikov kernel. $n = 267$ participants experimentally assigned to high or low caste recipients.

Table 1

Demographic composition of the sample

age	male	female	Total
16 to 19	14	3	17
20 to 24	129	34	163
25 to 34	118	78	196
35 to 44	38	28	66
45 to 54	14	13	27
55 to 64	4	1	5
65 or over	1	0	1
total	318	157	475

Table 2

Composition of the sample by caste status and location

	where does the participant live?					total
	metropolis	state capital	district capital	town	rural	
Brahmin	31	17	9	5	1	63
Upper caste	24	21	11	6	6	68
General caste	35	24	24	14	9	106
Other Backwards Caste (OBC)	38	27	49	30	13	157
Scheduled Caste (SC)	1	2	5	3	0	11
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	0	0	0	0	1	1
None of these	30	14	10	8	7	69
Total	159	105	108	66	37	475

Table 3

No “identifiable victim effect” for low caste recipients

	(1)	(2)
	willingness to donate (0-100)	
identifiable recipient	8.401*	8.552*
	(4.730)	(4.753)
high caste	5.708	5.887
	(5.134)	(5.197)
identifiable × high caste	-1.613	-2.453
	(7.051)	(7.052)
low caste	5.158	6.293
	(4.101)	(4.147)
identifiable × low caste	-13.13**	-13.47**
	(6.384)	(6.549)
Muslim	-5.830	-4.116
	(4.460)	(4.534)
identifiable × Muslim	6.497	5.879
	(6.401)	(6.501)
Controls		□
Constant	48.93***	45.18***
	(3.383)	(4.108)
<i>N</i>	475	475

Note: One-sided p values: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.025$, *** $p < 0.005$. Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls are an indicator for being female, an indicator for being in the lower half of the sample age distribution, indicators for having high and low education relative to the sample, and a set of four indicators for the size of the participant’s city or town.

Table 4

Participants open to love marriage exhibit a low-caste “identifiable victim effect”

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	willingness to donate (0-100)			
low caste	3.651 (5.954)	4.027 (5.899)	4.763 (6.021)	4.286 (6.198)
statistical recipient	-0.865 (3.710)	-1.583 (3.648)	-2.016 (3.616)	-2.124 (3.696)
low caste × statistical	9.963 (8.236)	8.410 (8.340)	8.040 (8.202)	7.429 (8.367)
open to love marriage	5.093 (3.954)	3.092 (4.065)	3.471 (4.099)	3.333 (4.065)
love marriage × statistical	-7.904 (5.168)	-7.273 (5.133)	-6.092 (5.241)	-5.462 (5.305)
love marriage × low caste	6.453 (7.905)	5.423 (8.000)	4.490 (8.052)	6.001 (8.003)
love marriage × low caste × statistical	-24.28** (11.16)	-21.08* (11.20)	-21.89** (10.94)	-23.51** (11.03)
participant controls		✓	✓	✓
economic controls			✓	✓
caste & religion controls				✓
constant	52.21*** (3.011)	67.83*** (7.493)	51.29*** (11.04)	52.94*** (11.55)
<i>F</i> test on triple interaction	3.61	3.09	3.04	3.13
<i>p</i> value of triple interaction	0.0008	0.0034	0.0039	0.0031
<i>N</i>	475	475	475	475

Note: One-sided *p* values: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.025$, *** $p < 0.005$. Heteroskedasticity robust standard errors in parentheses. Participant controls are an indicator for being female, six indicators for age categories, indicators for having high and low education relative to the sample, and an indicator for having spent a night in a village. Economic controls are the participant’s rankings of his or her family’s similarity to “urban,” “rural,” “middle class,” and “poor” families, and a set of four indicators for the size of the participant’s city or town. Religion & caste controls are seven indicators of religious category and six of caste status.