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The Donor Is in the Details

Recent research finds that people respond more generously to victims described in detail than to equivalent victims described in general terms. In this paper, we propose that this 'identifiable victim effect' is one manifestation of a more general phenomenon: a positive impact of tangible details on generosity. In two experiments, providing details about a charity's activities significantly increased real donations to that charity. Although previous work identifies emotion as the primary mediator between details and giving, structural equation models of both of the current studies shows that the influence of detail can operate through donors' perception that

their contribution will have greater impact. The ability of details to increase perceptions of

impact points to new ways for charities to encourage donor generosity and satisfaction.

Keywords: Decision Making, Generosity, Charitable Giving, Emotions, Impact

The Donor Is in the Details

Charities often emphasize the broad scope of a need. For example, fundraising materials for Oxfam International state that 72 million children in poor countries do not receive formal education (Oxfam, 2009). However, research consistently finds that focusing on specific needy people and describing those people in detail more effectively raises funds than focusing on a problem's large scope (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). In this paper, we show that the ability of details about people to increase generosity towards victims is part of a broader phenomenon in which details of many types prompt generous acts. In addition, we provide evidence that receiving details about a charity's activities increases donors' perception that their contribution will have impact. When someone donates to a general cause, they feel like they are making a miniscule dent in a nebulous problem. In contrast, when someone donates to a detailed need, they feel like they are having a clear impact on a defined problem. The proposition that perceptions of impact drive the connection between details and generosity is novel in the academic literature because previous work has focused on emotion as the primary mediator.

The Identifiable Victim Effect

In a 1968 book chapter about inconsistencies in the valuation of human life, the economist Thomas Schelling noted that in almost all cases, an individual life described in detail is more valuable to us than an equivalent life that is described as a statistic. Simply knowing details about an individual whose life is at stake, such as their age, gender, or hair color makes us value their life more than if the same endangered life is abstract, anonymous, or part of a group. This phenomenon clearly has consequences for how policy makers allocate money for saving citizens' lives, which was Schelling's main focus, but it also has important implications for the types of appeals that are more or less effective in eliciting individual-level generosity.

The majority of research about how details influence generosity focuses on this "identifiable victim effect," whereby people are more generous towards identified victims than towards their equally deserving, but statistically pooled, counterparts. In one famous real-world example, people donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Baby Jessica, a little girl who fell down a well in 1987 and whose plight was followed closely by the media until her rescue two days after the fall (Belkin, 1995). Although the outpouring of generosity to Baby Jessica was impressive, the largess toward this one little girl occurred at the same time that millions of other children were (and are) estimated to die every year from causes that are inexpensive to treat (UNICEF, 2009).

In natural settings, there are two important differences between identified and statistical victims. First, the two types of victims are presented as different in number; statistical victims are presented as a group in need whereas identified victims are presented as a single person in need. The same-sized contribution helps a larger proportion of the problem for a single victim compared to a group of victims, even though total impact may be identical. Previous work finds that people value interventions with a large proportionate impact more than they value interventions with a small proportionate impact, even when absolute impact between these two situations is the same (Baron 1997; Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Frederich, 1997; Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997).

The second difference is that more information, or details, are provided about individual victims compared to statistical victims. When many victims are highlighted, we only know general information about all group members, such as the region they are from or their common difficulty. In contrast, when just one victim is highlighted, we often know their name, what they look like, and their specific plight.

Empirical research has isolated these two differences between identified and statistical victims. In studies examining the "one versus many" effect, participants gave significantly more when a single victim in need of medical treatment was described compared to when a group of victims was described (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a; 2005b). Using another, very subtle manipulation of "one versus many," participants donated significantly more to a victim who already had been chosen from a list, compared to an equivalent victim who had not yet been, but was about to be, chosen from the same list (Small & Loewenstein, 2003). In the former case, potential donors presumably focused on the single individual who had been selected while in the latter case, potential donors likely still considered the entire group.

In a study that varied only the level of detail, participants who were given information about a child in need of medical treatment were willing to donate over 75% more when the child was identified by age, name, and picture, compared to when the child was described without these identifying features (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). In another demonstration involving real donations, participants gave 60% more on average when a victim was identified by age, name, and picture, compared to when the victim was not described with these details (Kogut & Ritov, 2005b). Similarly, in a laboratory experiment using the "dictator game" (Forsythe, Horowitz, Savin, & Sefton, 1994; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986), college students who received $10 and were given the opportunity to share any portion of that money with a fellow student, were more generous when they were informed of the would-be recipient's name, hometown, major, and hobbies than when they were not given this personal information (Bohnet & Frey, 1999; see also Charness & Gneezy, 2008).

Proposed Mediators

Heightened emotion typically is identified as the causal mechanism that drives increased generosity towards identified victims. People report greater sympathy for a victim when that victim is pictured alone compared to when that victim is pictured within the presence of other victims (Dickert and Slovic 2009). People also report greater emotional distress when confronted with victims described in detail than when confronted with those described without detail, and this emotional distress correlates with increased donations (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a). Priming people to be calculating instead of emotional before making donation decisions, for example by having participants solve arithmetic problems, eliminates increased generosity to victims described in detail (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). It seems, therefore, that emotion plays an important role.

Emphasizing details can, however, have other consequences. Specifically, details can increase donors' perceptions of the likely impact of their contribution. They can do so in at least two ways. First, details can increase donors' confidence that their donation will be used effectively. Providing details enhances the credibility of an information source, for example, when trial eyewitnesses provide more detail about past events and then are viewed as more credible and as having better memories than eyewitnesses who provide less detail (Bell & Loftus, 1989). When charities provide details about their activities, they may seem more competent, and consequently, seem more likely to make a positive difference. Furthermore, details about tangible needs may provide the donor with confidence that their donation will go towards a pressing tangible need (that was described in detail) instead of a seemingly less pressing overhead cost. Donors do not perceive overhead costs to be as worthy of support as specific program needs (Rooney & Frederick, 2007), even though overhead costs are arguably just as urgent.

The second way that details can enhance perceptions of impact is by making the contribution itself feel more weighty. Without knowing the specifics, a donation to an abstract fund can feel like a meaningless drop in the bucket. Details make it easier for donors to imagine how their donation will be used and thus to appreciate its influence. As a result, details may enhance the impact that donors believe that their contribution will make and potentially the emotional satisfaction (Andreoni, 1990; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Moll et al., 2006) that donors will receive from making the contribution. Based on this notion about the importance of imaginability and previous work documenting the importance of images in spurring generosity (Small & Verocchi, 2009; Slovic, 2007), we explicitly measure ease of imagination in our studies.

To the extent that details enhance perceptions of impact, details of many types, not just about needy victims, should increase generosity. In this paper, we test whether details about a charity's activities can increase charitable donations. In addition, we test whether perceptions of impact can explain the relationship between details and increased giving.

<div align="center">Experiment Overview</div>

Two experiments measuring individuals' real donations tested the influence of detailed information on generosity. The first objective of both experiments was to test whether detailed information about a charity's activities, not just about human victims, increases giving. The second objective was to test, using structural equation modeling, the extent to which emotions versus perceptions of impact mediate the relationship between details and giving.

Study 1

Participants

One-hundred and nineteen adults walking in a commercial area of a northeastern U.S. city participated in a 5-minute decision making study in exchange for $2. A separate sample of data collected from this location within 2 months of the study included 64% men, 36% women, and individuals with an average age of 25 years. [1]

Procedure

Participants were informed that the researchers conducting the study were interested in understanding decisions about donating to charity, and that in the current study, participants could make an actual charitable donation. Participants then read about a charity to which they could donate. Participants in the *detailed charity* condition read about Oxfam International, and read that one example of how Oxfam provides aid is ensuring that villagers in West Africa have access to clean water. This detailed information provided participants with a specific way that their money could be used. Participants in the *general charity* condition also read about Oxfam International, but read that Oxfam was a large international aid organization that provides a broad range of aid to people across the globe. All other information provided about Oxfam between the two conditions was identical (see Appendix A).

After participants read about a charity, they decided how much, if any, of their $2 participation payment they wished to donate to Oxfam International. In addition, they could donate extra money from their pocket. Participants next answered several questions about the charity that they had read about, including a question about how easily they could imagine how their donation would be used, "How easy is it for you to imagine how your donation will be used?" a question about sympathy, "How much sympathy do you feel for the charitable cause in

this study?" and two questions about impact, "To what extent do you think that your donation would make a positive difference" and "How strongly do you believe that it is valuable to make a donation to the charity in this study?" Participants also answered a question about how familiar they were with Oxfam, "Before today, how familiar were you with the charity Oxfam?" All questions were answered on a 7-point Likert Scale. After participants finished, they placed the questionnaire and any donation in a blank envelope, sealed it, and placed the envelope in a box with other participants' blank envelopes. After donation amounts were recorded, the donations were sent to Oxfam.

Main Results

Participants in the *detailed charity* condition donated significantly more than did participants in the *general charity* condition, $M_{Detailed} = \$0.88$ ($SD = 1.27$), $M_{General} = \$0.48$ ($SD = 0.77$), $t(115) = 2.07$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.38$, an increase in donations of over 80%.[2]

We also observed mean differences in responses to several questions about participants' donation decisions. Participants in the *detailed charity* condition reported that it was significantly easier to imagine how their donation would be used, $M_{Detailed} = 3.88$ ($SD = 2.11$), $M_{General} = 2.68$ ($SD = 1.90$), $t(115) = 3.24$, $p < 0.01$; they also reported feeling significantly more sympathy for the cause, $M_{Detailed} = 4.67$ ($SD = 1.74$), $M_{General} = 3.24$ ($SD = 1.91$), $t(114) = 4.22$, $p < 0.001$. The two remaining questions asked about the anticipated impact of a donation; as expected, these items were highly correlated in both studies (r's > 0.60), so we averaged them to create a single impact score. Participants in the *detailed* condition reported significantly higher impact scores than did participants in the *general* condition, $M_{Detailed} = 3.68$ ($SD = 1.59$), $M_{General} = 2.97$ ($SD = 1.65$), $t(115) = 2.36$, $p < 0.03$. There was no difference between conditions in reported familiarity with Oxfam ($p > 0.70$).

Structural Equation Modeling

To investigate the mechanisms by which our experimental manipulation (Details) influenced charitable giving, we used Structural Equation Models (Bollen, 1989). A structural equation model, or SEM, models each outcome as a linear function of its immediate causes and independent Gaussian noise (Bollen, 1989; Pearl, 2000; Spirtes, Glymour, and Scheines, 2000). The causal structure of the model, which can be represented with a simple path diagram, imposes testable constraints on the observed covariance matrix. For example, the model $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ entails a constraint among the correlations: $\rho_{XZ} = \rho_{XY}\rho_{YZ}$, equivalently: $\rho_{XZ.Y} = 0$, i.e., that there is no relationship between X and Z once Y is taken into account. The set of constraints that are simultaneously entailed by a model's structure can be tested with a likelihood-ratio test statistic distributed as χ^2 with appropriate degrees of freedom (Bollen, 1989). It is important to note that using *p*-values to assess SEM fit is the reverse of using *p*-values to assess significance of a coefficient or difference in means. In SEM, the *p*-value (roughly) reflects the probability that the deviance between the implied covariance matrix (at the maximum likelihood estimate) and the observed covariance is as big or bigger than observed. Thus, the model is rejected for low *p*-values and fits the data well for high *p*-values (Bollen, 1989).

Although each individual SEM entails a set of testable constraints, many distinct models can entail the same set of testable constraints, making them statistically indistinguishable. For example, without resorting to background theory, in an observational study $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ cannot be distinguished from $X \leftarrow Y \rightarrow Z$ or from $X \leftarrow Y \leftarrow Z$. What we can and cannot learn about the causal structure of a model from statistical evidence on X, Y, and Z can be characterized by an equivalence class of models, in this case one we can represent with a graphical object called a

pattern:[1] X – Y – Z. Instead of reporting on a single model, therefore, it is more scientifically informative to report the fit of an equivalence class of models.   Further, unless one has clear theoretical reasons to prefer one model over others, the most conservative approach to SEM is to report all models that are theoretically plausible and that exhibit a reasonable fit with the data. As there are now several asymptotically reliable search procedures for SEM,[2] we searched for all models that fit the data and were consistent with our background knowledge.[3] The statistical support for mechanisms from our data consists of whatever mechanisms are common to *all* the models that fit the data, and not more.

SEM Results

We used the GES algorithm implemented in Tetrad 4 to search for all path models consistent with our background knowledge, which consisted of the constraint that the *details* variable was experimentally manipulated, and hence it was the effect of no other variable.[3] Tetrad found two distinguishable path models (Fig. 1), both of which fit the data from study 1 well but in several respects are theoretically similar to one another.

Both models indicate that our manipulation had a direct effect both on the sympathy subjects felt for the charitable target and the ease with which participants could imagine how their donation would be used. In model 1, we also observed two relationships that were difficult to interpret. First, sympathy increased perceived impact and second, perceived impact increased imaginability. In model 2, these relationships became easier to interpret. In model 2, perceived

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[1] See Pearl, 1988. Further, we are conveniently assuming away the existence of unmeasured confounders of X, Y, and Z.
[2] See Tetrad 4, for example: www.phil.cmu.edu/projects/tetrad.
[3] By asymptotically reliable we mean that, if the true model lies within the class searched, then as the sample size grows the probability that the equivalence class output by the procedure includes the true model converges to 1 (Spirtes, et al., 2000).   We again stress that using such a search procedure is far more scientifically conservative than specifying a single hypothesis and showing that it cannot be rejected by the data.

impact was a consequence of enhanced imaginabiliy and also directly increased amount donated. In summary, model 2 shows that details increase the ease with which donors can imagine how their donation will be used. This increase in imaginability increases perceived impact, which ultimately increases amount donated.

Discussion

In Study 1, a highly controlled manipulation of detail, in which all participants read either detailed or general information about a single charity, led to a significant difference in charitable donations. Consistent with the hypothesis that detailed information can increase generosity, participants who read a detailed description of Oxfam donated significantly more than did participants who read a general description of Oxfam. We also observed that details can lead to an increase in how easily donors can imagine how their donation will be used. Finally, we see that the increase in perceived impact that is associated with reading detailed information about a charity plays drives the relationship between detailed information and increased generosity.

Though there are some differences between model 1 and model 2 in how the relationship between imaginability, impact, and, sympathy operates, most importantly, we see in both models that the effect of details on the amount donated was mediated entirely by the perceived impact of the donation. In study 2, we further explore the relationships between these variables.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to test the impact of details observed in Study 1 using a more naturalistic manipulation that used two different charities with inherently different levels of specificity in their aid programs. The first charity was Oxfam, the general international aid organization that was used in Study 1. The second charity was Nothing But Nets, a charity that

provides a very specific type of aid: mosquito-protection bed nets for families living in malaria-prone environments. In study 2 we also hoped to resolve discrepancies between model 1 and model 2 about the precise paths of influence between imaginability, impact, and sympathy.

Method

Participants

Eighty-eight individuals walking in the same location as those in study 1 agreed to participate in a 5-minute decision making study in exchange for $2. Individuals who had already participated in study 1 were giving an alternate task so that there was no participant overlap between studies 1 and 2.

Procedure

Procedures in Study 2 were identical to those from Study 1, except that the descriptions of the charities in the *detailed charity* and *general charity* conditions were new: the descriptions were taken from an inherently specific and an inherently general non-profit organization. In the *detailed charity* condition, participants read two sentences about Nothing But Nets, a charity that provides "bed nets that protect against mosquito-borne malaria to families in Africa" (Appendix B). In the *general charity* condition, similar to study 1, participants read two sentences about Oxfam America, a large international aid organization that provides "a broad range of aid to people across the globe."

Participants then answered questions similar to those from Study 1, including how easy it was to imagine how their donation would be used, how much sympathy they felt for the charitable cause, to what extent they believed their contribution would make a positive difference, and how valuable they believed it was to make a donation to this charity. All questions were answered on a 7-point Likert Scale. After they finished answering questions,

participants placed the questionnaire and any donation in a blank envelope, sealed the envelope, and then placed the envelope in a box with other participants' blank envelopes. After donation amounts were recorded, the donations were sent to their designated charity.

Main Results

Participants in the *detailed charity* condition donated significantly more than did participants in the *general charity* condition, $M_{Detailed}$ = \$0.74 (SD = 0.88), $M_{General}$ = \$0.40 (SD = 0.75), $t(86)$ = 1.98, p = 0.05, d = 0.42, a increase in donations of 85%.[4]

Similar to study 1, participants in the *detailed* condition reported that it was significantly easier to imagine how their donation would be used, $M_{Detailed}$ = 4.14 (SD = 1.91), $M_{General}$ = 3.23 (SD = 1.78), $t(92)$ = 2.47, p < 0.02, they reported significantly more sympathy for the cause $M_{Detailed}$ = 5.04 (SD = 1.58), $M_{General}$ = 3.55 (SD = 1.80), $t(92)$=4.17, p < 0.0005, and they reported significantly higher perceived impact than did participants in the *general* condition $M_{Detailed}$ = 4.18 (SD = 1.55), $M_{General}$ = 3.35 (SD = 1.63), $t(92)$ = 2.47, p = 0.02.

SEM Results

We first used the data from study 2 to test the statistical fit of each of the structural equation models from study 1. The two models shown in Fig. 1 (originally found by the GES search in Tetrad 4 that was applied to the data from study 1) fit the data remarkably well when tested on the data from study 2. Table 1 shows the relevant statistics from all models on both data sets.

In addition, we used the GES algorithm on data from study 2 to search for alternative causal structures. Given the same background knowledge from study 1, that the experimental condition is exogenous, Tetrad found the same pair of models as it had for data on study 1. This

gives us reasonable confidence that the mechanisms common to the two models that fit data from both studies are stable and robust. In our judgment, these mechanisms are:

- The experimental condition has a direct effect on Sympathy and Imaginability
- If Imaginability influences Donations, it is mediated by Impact, not by Sympathy
- The only proximate cause of Donations is Impact

As a side note, the data from each study, considered individually, are not capable of informing us about the direction of the causal relations between Sympathy and Impact. Although in both model 1 and model 2 the two are directly connected, the models disagree about the direction of the relation. Similarly, the data cannot disambiguate the causal direction between Imaginability and Impact. If we impose from background theory a restriction that the causal relation between Imaginability and Impact must run from Imaginability to Impact, we observe superior fit for the causal connection between Impact and Sympathy that runs from Impact to Sympathy (as in model 2).

Further, if we input both datasets from studies 1 and 2 simultaneously to a new search algorithm, Images (Ramsey, et al., 2010), which is capable of applying GES to multiple datasets simultaneously, then the output is model 2, in which Imaginability → Impact → Amount Donated.

Discussion

Study 2 examined participants' charitable responses to information about an inherently tangible charity, Nothing But Nets, which provides a concrete product of bed nets to a specific location of Africa, versus an inherently general charity, Oxfam, which provides a broad range of aid to people across the globe. Participants who could donate to Nothing But Nets donated significantly more to that charity than did participants could donate to Oxfam International. We

also observed for a second time via structural equation modeling, the importance of imaginability and impact in linking highly detailed information to increased generosity. Across both studies, we see support for the hypothesis that the degree of detail influences how easy it is for donors to imagine how their donation will be used, which subsequently increases perceived impact. This increase in perceived impact ultimately increases donations.

General Discussion

In two studies, increasing details about a charity's activities increased generosity. This effect occurred when people donated to the same charity (Oxfam) described in a detailed versus general way. The effect also occurred when participants donated to an inherently tangible charity, Nothing But Nets, versus a more general charity, Oxfam International. The increase in the impact that donors believed their contribution would make was the main driver of this effect. When a donor knew specific ways that a charity uses funds, it was easier to imagine how a specific contribution would be used, and hence easier to imagine how the contribution would make a difference.

Previous work that varied the scope of a donation target found that interventions that have greater proportionate impact (holding absolute impact constant) are deemed more valuable than are interventions that have less proportionate impact (Baron 1997; Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Frederich, 1997; Jenni and Loewenstein 1997). In this paper, we did not vary the actual scope of the target, but simply varied the amount of detail. This manipulation of amount of detail was sufficient to prompt an increased feeling of impact, and to increase giving.

One way that details increase donors' perception that their contribution will have impact is by making it easier for donors to imagine how their donation will be used. We were able to explicitly test for this relationship in the structural equation models and we found that details do

indeed increase the "imaginability" of one's donation. This increased ease of imaginability subsequently increases donors' perceptions that their contribution will have impact.

We believe, however, that there is at least one additional way that details increase perceived impact. Details can lend credibility to a charity and enhance the extent to which donors think the charity will use the donation where it is needed most urgently. Although we did not explicitly test for a link between details and credibility, previous work (e.g., Bell and Loftus, 1987) suggest that it exists and future work should explore to what extent this increase in credibility can boost giving.

Although detailed descriptions of a charity's activities increased the sympathy that participants felt for the potential recipients of aid, this increased sympathy did not explain the increase in donations once impact was controlled. It is possible that sympathy and related prosocial emotions are more important when concrete information focuses on people, such as with the identified victim effect, instead of when it focuses on general charitable activities, such as in our experiments. Future work could directly test whether affective responses are more likely to be mediating factors when a solicitation highlights people, and perceived impact is more important when a solicitation highlights organizations or situations. Understanding these mediating factors is not just interesting theoretically; it could have important implications for soliciting donations over time. For example, it is possible that a donation driven by perceptions of increased impact could beget more future donations by the same donor than a similar donation that was driven by a desire to eliminate uncomfortable feelings of sympathy. There are many other possible patterns as well, and these different patterns between mediators could have important effects on charities' bottom line.

In conclusion, details increase charitable giving by making it easier for donors to imagine how their contribution will be used and subsequently increasing donors' perceptions of impact. The findings in this paper help not only to document the influence of detail on donations, but also to understand the source of the effect. Details matter, in part, because they increase the perceived impact of a contribution.

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Appendix A

Study 1 Stimuli

"GENERAL" CONDITION

Oxfam International is one of the most effective international aid

"TANGIBLE" CONDITION

Oxfam Internati

Appendix B

Study 2 Stimuli

"GENERAL" CONDITION

Oxfam International provides a broad range of aid to people across

"TANGIBLE" CONDITION

Nothing But Nets provides bed nets

Footnotes

[1]We did not collect demographic information in these studies because we promised

participants such a brief participation time requirement (5 minutes).

[2]Two statistical outliers (one large donation from each condition) were excluded from

analyses. Throughout this paper, statistical outliers are excluded if the case has an externally

studentized deleted residual value of $\pm$ 3.0 for the main dependent variable (Cohen, Cohen, West,

& Aiken, 2003).

[3]The GES algorithm (Chickering, 1996) is implemented in TETRAD 4

(www.phil.cmu.edu/projects/tetrad/tetrad4.html). Its asymptotic correctness and the general

theory of causal model search are described in Spirtes, Glymour, & Scheines (2000).

[4]Six statistical outliers (four large donations in the *detailed* and two large donations in the

general condition) were excluded.

Table 1

SEM Statistics

Model	Study	χ^2	Degrees of Freedom	*p*-value
Model 1 (Fig. 1)	Study 1	3.99	5	0.55
Model 1 (Fig. 1)	Study 2	7.48	5	0.19
Model 2 (Fig. 1)	Study 1	5.88	5	0.32
Model 2 (Fig. 1)	Study 2	8.23	5	0.14

Figure Captions

Figure 1: Two path analytic models for Study 1. Path coefficients, all $p < .05$, are attached to

each edge. Means appear below and to the right of each variable.

Figure 1.

Model 1

$\chi^2 = 3.99$, df = 5, p-value = 0.55

Impact 3.7660

0.5671

0.3838

Details 0.5000

0.4656

Imaginability 3.7021

0.5771

AmountDonated 0.851

1.4894

Sympathy 4.2979

Model 2

$\chi^2 = 5.88$, df = 5, p-value = 0.32

Impact 3.7660

0.4717

0.3838

Details 0.5000

0.9362

Imaginability 3.7021

0.6710

AmountDonated 0.8511

0.9325

Sympathy 4.2979