

Empathy as an Indicator of Subsequent Altruistic Behavior

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Helping behavior and its motivation has been a popular topic of discussion throughout the centuries. Some researchers suggest that we are able to help others for altruistic reasons if we feel empathy for them. Others say that there are always egoistic reasons involved, such as managing one's bad mood at the sight of seeing someone in need. By using different instructions we attempted to manipulate three groups of students to feel different levels of empathy for a poor orphan, and then we measured how much they helped in a subsequent and unrelated situation. Students in all of the experimental conditions reported feeling high levels of empathy for the orphan, and the majority also helped in the unrelated situation. There were no significant differences between the groups. Possible reasons for the obtained results are discussed.

In social psychology, the term altruism refers to behavior that pursues another person's welfare over our own, and the act of helping another without personal gain. Altruism has been the topic of intense debates for a long time and when Darwin developed his theory of evolution, psychologists mostly accepted the conclusion that humans must be egoistically motivated in order to survive. This means that even if people care about others they will only exhibit altruistic behavior to the degree that it benefits themselves in some way. In order to challenge this popular assumption some psychologists approached the question of altruism by researching situational and dispositional factors that increase helping. Coke, Batson and McDavis (1978) developed a two-stage model that suggested not only did perspective taking increase empathic emotional response, but empathic emotion increased the motivation to help selflessly. Today, this is widely known as the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

As a response, Cialdini, Baumann and Kenrick (1981) proposed an egoistically based explanation. According to their research, the average person has internalized selfless helping as self-gratification. Usually children get reinforced for altruistic behavior, so that by the time they reach adulthood selfless helping works as a conditioned reinforcer. These results can be combined with other research which proposes the idea that feeling empathy for a needy other is equivalent to feeling sad. The person who is helping is therefore not doing it primarily to relieve the sufferer's plight, but

to relieve his own sad mood by doing something good. This is known as the negative-state-relief model. Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan, Arps, and Fultz (1987) collected evidence for this model in an experiment that showed people who thought their mood could not be improved to be significantly less helpful than those who thought their mood was flexible.

In one of the studies conducted to contest this model, Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, and Birch (1981) manipulated participants to be either high or low in empathy for a suffering other. Then they provided them with the opportunity to help under two different conditions. In one condition it was easy for them to escape without feeling guilty, and in the other condition it was difficult. As predicted by Batson et al. (1981), the participants with high empathic emotions helped regardless of the ease of escape. These findings supported the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

Another interesting approach was offered by Maner et al. (2002). These researchers conducted a study that attempted to separate empathy from perceived oneness with the victim. The theory of perceived oneness proposes that people help those they feel similar to because it suggests a shared amount of genes. In a 3 x 2 between-subjects factorial design, participants were told that a person in need had very similar brain wave lengths, or very different brain wave lengths from them (the control group was told that their wave lengths differed from the victim's by an expected average amount). Then, the participants heard a sad story about the person, and were given the chance to help. The results indicated that people did indeed help more if they felt that they were physiologically similar to the victim (almost equal brain wave lengths).

However, in all of the above experiments, the object of empathy and the recipient of potential help was always the same

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person. That makes it difficult to distinguish whether the perceived altruism is a response to the empathy felt for the particular person, or just an act of trying to make oneself feel better by committing a nice act. In order to clarify this we wanted to establish whether helping was directly connected to the person in need or to the feeling of empathy. Following the logic of the negative-state-relief model, people who are empathically aroused by a sad situation should help in any subsequent situation to relieve their sad mood. The people who are not empathically aroused should help significantly less.

It was hypothesized that participants who were manipulated to take the perspective of a needy person in a video clip would be high in empathy towards that person and would show significantly more helping behavior than low empathy students when provided with an opportunity to help that was not directly linked to the object of their empathy (the needy person in the movie clip).

Method

Participants

Participants for the experiment were 30 students from psychology classes at a public northeastern university. By participating in the experiment they earned credits for a class requirement. The selection was restricted to a convenience sample because of time constraints.

Materials

All the participants watched the same short movie clip. This movie clip was provided by World Vision Inc., and described the life of Maggie, a nine-year-old orphan from Zambia who was suffering under the AIDS epidemic. Her parents, and most of her family members had died, which left her with her great-grandmother in a desperate struggle for survival.

Other materials included an instruction sheet (see Appendices A, B, C) which described to the participant what to pay attention to in the clip, a factual questionnaire about the clip (see Appendix D), and a request form for additional and unrewarded future cooperation (see Appendix E).

Procedure

Upon arrival at the research facility, each participant chose an envelope from one of three piles that corresponded to the three conditions (objective viewing, subjective viewing and grammatical viewing) and ensured random assignment for preservation of internal validity. All other variables (room, time of day, experimenter) were kept the same for each student. The participants were instructed not to open the envelopes before we officially started the experiment.

To start the study, each person was asked to read and sign an informed consent. After everyone was finished with that, we asked each to open the envelopes and read silently through the first sheet of instructions. The manipulation of the independent

variable (empathy) took place by means of this assignment sheet. In other words, the participants' level of empathy was manipulated by different sets of instructions on how to watch the clip. There were three types of instruction sheets (see Appendices A, B and C). This kind of manipulation is a close simulation of the Toi and Batson (1982) design. The first group was instructed to be objective towards the orphan's fate, and just concentrate on the facts of the story. The second group was told to be very subjective, and try to mentally put themselves into the orphan's position. We added a third group, which also watched the clip, but focused on superficial features. This group was labeled the grammar group and served as a control group.

Upon reading the instructions, all three groups watched "Maggie's Story," a short clip about an AIDS orphan in Zambia. After the clip was over, they were all asked to move on to the next sheet, which was a brief questionnaire about information from the video clip (see Appendix D). The questionnaire was a distracter, and its questions were not used for the study, except for the last question, which served as a manipulation check. It asked the participants to indicate their sympathy for the character in the clip. After they were done with the questionnaire, the participants were asked to look at the next sheet (see Appendix E), which was a request for future cooperation on this study. This request was the actual dependent variable (altruism). Participants could freely choose the extent to which they were willing to help further. If they were indeed willing to help, they were asked to write down their name and e-mail address or phone number on the sheet of paper, fold it and put it in a box by the door. If they were not willing to help they could just check off the appropriate section on the sheet, fold it and also deposit it in the box by the door. This was to insure the participants' feelings of anonymity. The participants were unaware of the fact that the sheet was marked with an indicator of which condition they were in, but not who they were.

Results

This study had three levels of the independent variable (empathy) and continuous data for the dependent variable (altruism). Therefore, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was used to evaluate the collected data. The groups did not show significantly more or less helping behavior in the unrelated task, which involved helping a person who was not in the movie clip, and whom they consequently did not feel empathy for, $F(2, 27) = 1.19, p > .05$. On this task, the subjective group ($M = 3.7, SD = 4.3$) helped slightly more than the grammar group ($M = 2.0, SD = 1.9$), and the objective group helped least ($M = 1.8, SD = 2.3$). However, the manipulation check for empathy revealed a mean of 7.6 for the group with objective instructions, and also for the group with subjective instructions on how to watch the clip ($SD = .52$ and $SD = 0.7$, respectively). The group who had received the instructions to concentrate on the grammar and syntax of the clip had a slightly lower mean on the measurement of empathy ($M = 6.8, SD = 1.6$). A one-way ANOVA showed this difference to be nonsignificant, $F(2, 27) = 1.90, p > .05$.

Discussion

In the past few decades, many experiments have been conducted to shed light on whether people can be selfishly motivated to help others. Batson and his colleagues developed the empathy-altruism-hypothesis which states that selfless helping is more likely whenever a person feels empathy for another person in need (Batson et al., 1981; Coke et al., 1978; Toi & Batson, 1982). Cialdini and his colleagues proposed an alternative model, the negative-state-relief model, which is very much influenced by behaviorism. According to this model, our society successfully reinforces helping behavior while we grow up. Thus, we end up feeling good whenever we help, and we can use this positive emotion to regulate our mood whenever we feel sad (Cialdini, Baumann & Kenrick, 1981; and Cialdini et al., 1987).

Watching the short movie about Maggie, the AIDS orphan from Zambia, under three different instructions of perspective taking weakly influenced our sample of people in regard to their self-reports on empathy. Thus, the hypothesis test revealed that the differences between the groups were not large enough to draw conclusions with regard to the population. Interestingly, the participants who were supposed to take Maggie's perspective and the participants who were instructed to watch the clip objectively both reported feeling extremely sympathetic towards her fate. In recent research this had not been the case (Maner et al., 2002). As reported by many studies the participants who were taking the perspective of the needy other were usually much more sympathetic towards the sufferer's plight than the participants who had listened to the situation in a somewhat detached manner (Toi & Batson, 1982). One difference that might account for this is that the previous experiments all used an audio recording for their manipulation, whereas the students in our study watched a movie clip. Being objective might be harder when presented with visual stimuli about a suffering other. Follow-up research should clarify this possibility.

Anticipating difficulties, a third group was formed in addition to the subjective and the objective groups. The participants in this group had the instruction to pay attention to superficial features of the clip, such as grammar and syntax. Those students reported feeling less sympathetic towards Maggie overall, but the scores were not significantly different from the other two groups. It is therefore inappropriate to suspect this insignificant difference to have resulted from anything else but chance. Perhaps the instructions on how to watch the clip had no effect on the participants. Another possibility is that the instructions had too much effect in that they urged the participants not to be subjective, which may have been the very reason they were. Or as Daniel Wegner put it, "Trying not to think of X makes us think of X, as vividly, frequently, and efficiently as if we had decided to think of X from the start" (1989, p. 60). This effect should be considered when composing the instructions for future experiments. Simply stating what the participant should do, instead of what he or she should not be doing, may alter the results.

However, considering the restrictions in designing the study, it is very likely that a larger number of participants would signifi-

cantly change this outcome in future studies. That is, with a limit of 10 participants per group the power of the statistical analysis was small. All of the other studies that were cited used much larger sample sizes. In addition to this, the participants in our study may have felt too uncomfortable to admit low empathy toward the orphan in the clip. A room with relatively few people and a therefore more personal atmosphere may have facilitated a feeling of discomfort and guilt about not being as empathetic. After all, the social norm is to feel sorry for poor children.

Considering the lack of significant results in our manipulation check, it is not expedient to draw conclusions about the subsequent helping behavior. As mentioned before, the helping behavior measured on the basis of an additional request did not differ between the groups. The vast majority of participants were willing to help one way or another without obvious benefits to them. If it was indeed the case that the manipulation worked, but that the students were not willing to admit to lower levels of empathy, these results could be presented as additional evidence for the empathy-altruism hypothesis. This remains the challenge for future studies.

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Appendix A

Instructions (condition A = objective):

Please read these instructions carefully.

In a few minutes you will be watching a clip. While you are watching the video, try to listen carefully to the information presented. Try to be as objective as possible, carefully attending to all the information presented about the situation, and about the person in the clip. Try not to concern yourself with how the person feels about what has happened. Just concentrate on trying to listen objectively to the information presented. You are in the position of an impartial observer.

Please refrain from speaking with or exchanging nonverbal signs with the other participants. It is very important that you don't talk during the experiment, and just concentrate on the task at hand. When the movie is over you will receive further instructions.

Please turn off your cell phone if you haven't already done so.

Thank you!

Appendix B

Instructions (condition B = subjective):

Please read these instructions carefully.

In a few minutes you will be watching a short clip. While you are watching the video, try to imagine how the people in the clip feel. Try to take the perspective of the person in the clip imagining how she feels about what has happened, and how it has affected her life. Try not to concern yourself with attending to all the information presented. Just concentrate on trying to imagine how the person in the clip feels. If this were you, how would you feel?

Please refrain from speaking with or exchanging nonverbal signs with the other participants. It is very important that you don't talk during the experiment, and just concentrate on the task at hand. When the movie is over you will receive further instructions.

Please turn off your cell phone if you haven't already done so.

Thank you!

Appendix C

Instructions (condition C = grammar):

Please read these instructions carefully.

In a few minutes you will be watching a short clip. While you are watching the video, please count how many times the word "the" is said. Try to also pay attention to grammar and syntax. Notice if there is anything unusual about it.

Please refrain from speaking with or exchanging nonverbal signs with the other participants. It is very important that you don't talk during the experiment, and just concentrate on the task at hand. When the movie is over you will receive further instructions.

Please turn off your cell phone if you haven't already done so.

Thank you!

Appendix D

Questionnaire:

Where is Maggie working:

the town hall
the gardens of the neighbors
the fields

What did she get from the village members?

a car
a hut
a bed

How many children in Africa are orphaned because of AIDS?

3 million
10 million
12 million

Which relative of Maggie's is still alive?

her mother
her grandmother
her great-grandmother

How many people die of AIDS every day in Zambia?

- 15
- 50
- 100

According to estimates, in the next six years the number of orphans will climb up to:

- 15 million
- 18 million
- 20 million

Last question:

By circling the appropriate number, please indicate on this scale of 1 to 8 how sympathetic you felt for Maggie. (1 = not sympathetic at all, 8 = completely sympathetic)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Appendix E

Additional Request:

As a Psychology major in my junior year I would like to follow up on this study. My intention is to write an extensive research paper about this topic. This will require additional contact with you, because you are a participant in my original study. However, the Psychology department has decided not to give out any extra credit (beyond the required credit for your PSY 100 class) for participation in my future project. Therefore, I won't be able to give you anything in return. But I would really appreciate your help with this. Since there are different aspects to my study I will need several people for the different conditions. If you are

willing to help, please check off below what you are willing to do to help me out. Please check as many as you can. I will contact you accordingly.

_____ I won't help at all.

_____ I can respond to an additional e-mail request.

_____ I can answer some questions related to the study over the phone.

_____ I can meet on campus for 10 minutes at my convenience so that I can be presented with an in-person questionnaire.

_____ I can meet on campus for about an hour at my convenience so I can be presented with a slightly longer in-person questionnaire.

_____ I can meet on a weekend to conduct an experiment in a local community.

_____ I can attend several additional meetings until the end of the semester.

If you agreed to volunteer for the above things, please leave your information in the space below.

Name:

Phone Number:

E-mail: _____

Please fold this paper in half and deposit it separately into the box by the door that is labeled "request".

Thank you!