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The role of empathy in intergroup relations

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Intergroup empathy — feeling empathy for a person or persons on the basis of group memberships — has been, until lately, relatively neglected by researchers and its mechanisms are poorly understood. What is well established is that people typically display a group bias, such that they more readily have empathy for the pain and suffering of ingroup members than they do for outgroup members. I review current research that attempts to answer four main questions about intergroup empathy: (a) what is the role of empathy in prejudice and prejudice reduction? (b) What are the causes and consequences of counter-empathy? (c) How do mimicry and the mirror neuron system play a role? (d) How does the brain produce intergroup empathy? This review draws mainly from studies in social psychology, developmental psychology, and social neuroscience, reflecting a variety of behavioral and neuroscience measures to examine the interplay between prejudice, empathy, counter-empathy, and mimicry, as well as the brain regions that underlie these processes.

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Introduction

As part of increasingly diverse societies that are also highly interconnected with the rest of the world, people frequently encounter others who represent various cultures, religions, and ethnic groups. Categorizing other people as ‘ingroup’ and ‘outgroup’ members, however, has profound consequences for how we respond to them. We may, for instance, feel differently about the adverse circumstances facing an outgroup member than we do when the same conditions apply to an ingroup member. Indeed, soccer fans are less likely to help an injured stranger wearing a rival team shirt than someone wearing an ingroup team shirt [1]. Similarly, people are less likely to post a lost letter found on the ground if the envelope is addressed to someone who is not from their own religious or ethnic group than if it is addressed to an ingroup

member [2]. Simply put, it is difficult to have empathy for those whom we perceive as belonging to an outgroup. In turn, without empathy for outgroup members, individuals may be less likely to listen to others’ points of view, ignore a customer’s complaints, oppose social programs that benefit disadvantaged others, or avoid helping others during a natural disaster [3].

Why do we behave so differently toward outgroup members? Although several factors may underlie such biases, the focus here is on the critical role of empathy. Several definitions exist, but here I will consider empathy as the capacity to share and be affected by the same emotion that another person feels [4]. A substantial body of research has examined the personality variables, situational causes, and behavioral consequences related to the experience of *interpersonal* empathy — when one person feels empathy for another without regard to a social category [5]. By contrast, the phenomenon of *intergroup* empathy — feeling empathy for a person or persons on the basis of group memberships — has been, until lately, relatively neglected by researchers and its mechanisms are not well understood [6].

This brief review of intergroup empathy is organized around four main questions that have been recently addressed by researchers: (a) what is the role of empathy in prejudice and prejudice reduction? (b) What are the causes and consequences of counter-empathy? (c) How do mimicry and the mirror neuron system play a role? (d) How does the brain produce intergroup empathy? As will be illustrated here, contemporary research on intergroup empathy uses a broad range of methodologies, including measures of attitudes and behaviors, neuroimaging (fMRI and EEG), brain stimulation, and hormones.

What is the role of empathy in prejudice and prejudice reduction?

It is perhaps unsurprising that prejudice is associated with intergroup empathy biases. For example, people high in Social Dominance Orientation, who endorse inequality and hierarchy between groups, tend to be high in prejudice and have less empathic concern for outgroups [7]. Similarly, less contact with outgroup members is associated with more prejudice and less empathy [8]. One’s trait empathy is even related to the extent one sees outgroup members as human [9]. Once social categorization occurs, people typically automatically have more empathy for ingroup members over outgroup members [10–12]. For example, after participants were divided into minimal groups ostensibly based on their dot estimation ability,

they judged the perceived pain (i.e., pictures depicting hand and feet in painful situations) of ingroup members as being more painful than the pain of outgroup members [13].

Such studies suggest that biases in empathy are a consequence of prejudice, but other research has investigated whether changing one's empathy toward the outgroup can reduce prejudice. One method of effecting empathy change is to train people in perspective taking [14]. This typically involves providing instructions about taking the outgroup members' perspective, which has yielded several positive effects, including increased intergroup helping and the recognition of group disparities [15[•]]. Perspective taking appears to be most effective, however, when it follows a multicultural perspective (i.e., recognizing group differences) rather than a color-blind one (i.e., emphasizing a common group identity) [15[•],16,17]. Another approach to reducing bias in intergroup empathy is to make norms about outgroup empathy salient. Studies with 8–13-year-old children, for example, have demonstrated that descriptive peer norms about helping outgroup members can outweigh individual empathic biases [18[•],19]. Yet another area of research has focused on the role of empathy in ameliorating ongoing conflict or hostility. In such conflicts, expressing empathy for the other group is an important precondition for reconciliation [20]. For example, if just one outgroup member expresses empathy for the ingroup, ingroup members are more likely to humanize that entire outgroup [21]. Interestingly, expressing group-based anger toward the outgroup can also elicit intergroup empathy and reduce intergroup conflict [22]. Communicating such anger not only lets the other group know about a perceived injustice, but it also signals a desire to maintain a long-term relationship between the groups — two critical elements that can enhance empathy. Finally, when one group has harmed another, and that group offers a collective apology to the harmed group, an apology that is victim-focused (i.e., it acknowledges that the harmed group suffered), rather than offender-focused, is more likely to lead to forgiveness because it connotes remorse and empathy for the outgroup [23].

What are the causes and consequences of counter-empathy?

Sometimes people experience pleasure when observing or learning of another's misfortune or adversity — a counter-empathic response also known as *schadenfreude*. Typical expressions of *schadenfreude* involve smiling, laughing, cheering, and pointing at the affected party. *Schadenfreude* occurs between groups as well [24,25]. From enjoying the loss of a rival sports team to laughing at the gaffe of a member of an opposing political party, deriving pleasure from the misfortunes of other groups is a common occurrence. At the intergroup level, two main

factors appear most strongly to facilitate the experience of *schadenfreude*: group identification and a competitive context. The mere presence of competition is sufficient to incite *schadenfreude* at an outgroup's misfortune, and the strength of identification with one's group that often occurs alongside competition further facilitates the experience of *schadenfreude* [26,27]. Yet, even in the absence of overt rivalry, groups merely associated with competitive stereotypes (e.g., wealthy people or professionals) can also become targets of *schadenfreude* [28].

Pre-existing stereotypes and biases, however, are not essential to the experience of intergroup *schadenfreude*. Even novel (or artificial) groups can elicit *schadenfreude* responses. For example, in one study [27], participants who had been assigned to novel groups read short descriptions of positive and negative events that happened to ingroup and outgroup members. Participants reported greater empathy for negative and positive events happening to ingroup targets, and more *schadenfreude* and *glückschmerz* (feeling bad in response to a positive event) for negative and positive events, respectively, when they happened to outgroup targets. Similar to the way empathy may lead to the reduction of intergroup conflict, the counter-empathy response of intergroup *schadenfreude* may promote harm to the outgroup precisely because of the pleasure gained from seeing the outgroup suffer [29[•]].

How do mimicry and the mirror neuron system contribute to intergroup empathy?

Humans tend to mimic or imitate the specific physical postures and mannerisms of their interaction partners, even when they are strangers. One explanation for this behavior is that people engage in mimicry because it increases empathy [30]. On this account, mimicry is the first step in an emotional contagion process in which a person imitates the expressions, postures, and behaviors of another, and the resulting muscle contractions provide feedback to the brain allowing one to feel the corresponding emotion [31]. Group memberships can affect mimicry. For example, when participants viewed a video of a woman who occasionally rubbed her face while she described a picture, they were more likely to imitate spontaneously her movements when she was described as sharing the same religious group membership as the participants, compared to when she was described as an outgroup member [32]. Moreover, in a later study [33], participants watched a 140-sec video of a racial ingroup or outgroup member touch and drink from a glass of water. Some participants were also instructed to mimic the actor's movements. Those who were in the outgroup mimicry condition subsequently showed less implicit racial bias toward the outgroup than those who just observed the video or who were in the ingroup mimicry condition.

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