



The ironic effect of financial incentive on empathic accuracy

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the effect of financial incentives on empathic accuracy.
- Individuals were offered financial incentives or not for empathic accuracy.
- Those offered financial incentives were less accurate.
- Lower interdependence mediated the effect of financial incentives on accuracy.

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the effect of financial incentives on empathic accuracy and a possible underlying mechanism. In Study 1, participants either received a financial incentive based on performance on an empathic accuracy task (i.e., monetary reward for accurate inferences regarding the emotions experienced by videotaped targets) or not. Those in the incentive condition were less accurate than those not. Study 2 replicated this finding and tested a hypothesized mechanism—that money makes individuals view themselves in a less relational manner, thereby impairing empathy. Participants completed the Study 1 task in addition to the Twenty Statements Task (TST). “I am” responses on the TST were independently coded by two coders regarding the degree to which participants described themselves in a relational manner. Results indicated that relational self-construal mediated the link between money and decreased empathic accuracy.

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Introduction

The relationship between money and interpersonal relationship concerns is a contentious issue within political philosophy (Smith, 1790), and one that has received heightened attention due to the global economic crisis (Rifkin, 2010). The economic downturn of 2008 has prompted experts across disciplines to question how financial gain can undermine interpersonal connections (e.g., Altman, 2011). Here, we examined how activation of monetary goals influences empathic processes.

Empathic accuracy

Empathy promotes social connection and peaceful coexistence. Scientists have postulated that empathy has distinct components (e.g., the experience of another person's emotions; feeling concern for others, etc.), and engagement in one component does not necessarily equate engagement in another. For example, while empathic concern relates to feeling or imagining another person's point of view, empathic accuracy relates to inferences about the nature of

other individual's emotional experiences (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990; Levenson & Ruef, 1992). Much social psychological research focuses on the latter construct, empathic accuracy, and variations in individuals' ability to correctly judge the content of another individual's thoughts or feelings (Ickes et al., 1990; Levenson & Ruef, 1992). Empirical work has long confirmed that empathic accuracy promotes healthy personal adjustment, effective social support, and relationship satisfaction across life stages and relationship types (e.g., Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Ickes, 2009; Haugen, Welsh, & McNulty, 2008; Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009; Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, Davis, & Devoldre, 2008).

A growing body of research has examined predictors of empathic accuracy and several theories of empathy exist (e.g., Davis, 1994), many of which focus on the its underlying physiological or neurological mechanisms (e.g., Bartz et al., 2010; Decety & Chaminade, 2003; Keysers & Gazzola, 2007; Levenson & Ruef, 1992; Preston & Waal, 2002; Zaki, Weber, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2009). Most empirical studies have focused on intraindividual factors predicting empathic accuracy such as: personality (Davis & Kraus, 1997), interpersonal sensitivity (Hall, Andrzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009), motivation (e.g., attraction—Ickes et al., 1990; need to belong—Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004), gender (Klein & Hodges, 2001), education level (Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997), self-monitoring and grade point average (Ickes et al., 1990). In addition, studies have examined interpersonal

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factors such as relationship length and exposure to target others (Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995; Thomas et al., 1997), as well as the gender of the perceiver (Stinson & Ickes, 1992). With few exceptions (e.g., Soto & Levenson, 2009), most studies have not attempted to tap situational factors that influence empathic accuracy. Here, we focus on one such factor, financial gain.

Money as a psychological construct

Numerous psychological theories focus on money (for reviews, see Furnham & Argyle, 1998; Lea, Tarpy, & Webley, 1987; Lea & Webley, 2006; Zhou & Gao, 2008). Money is regarded as a powerful generalized motivator and object of desire (e.g., Lea & Webley, 2006; Skinner, 1953). However, money also underlies negative psychological (Chang & Arkin, 2002) and societal consequences (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Lichtenberg, 1996; Scitovsky, 1976). In general, money has a buffering and distancing function (e.g., Prasad, 1999; Simpson, 1997; Thompson, Harred, & Burks, 2003). Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006) found that participants primed with money experienced greater desire for both physical and psychological distance (i.e., to work and play alone) and became more socially insensitive. However, because the Vohs et al. (2006) studies focused on the impact of money-related cues on interpersonal distance rather than empathic accuracy, it is not entirely appropriate to use their findings to suggest that any monetary cue, no matter the magnitude, would exert similar effects on accuracy. Given that it is unclear whether empathic accuracy and interpersonal distance rely on the same motivations and mechanisms, we cannot assume that a factor that influences the one would exert the same influence on the other.

The aforementioned findings are consistent with research on social class, which has found that those who are less wealthy (i.e., lower class individuals) are more socially connected compared to those who are more wealthy (i.e., upper class individuals); they tend to depend on others more (Argyle, 1994), display more socially engaging nonverbal cues (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Stipek & Ryan, 1997), and are more empathically accurate (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). Nevertheless, there are other studies that suggest that money, under certain circumstances, can promote a greater focus on close others (Aknin, Sandstrom, Dunn, & Norton, 2011).

Few studies have experimentally tested the link between money as an incentive and individuals' ability to accurately infer others' emotional states. Although studies on social class (i.e., Kraus et al., 2010; Piff et al., 2010) have demonstrated the ways in which the chronic possession of money is linked to decreased empathic capacity, they do not address how money as a motivator can produce ironic consequences on the very processes it is intended to facilitate. To our knowledge, Klein and Hodges (2001) is the only empirical study that examined the effects of financial incentives on empathic accuracy. In their study on gender differences in empathic accuracy, they found that the introduction of financial incentives increased accuracy for both men and women and thereby eliminated gender differences in accuracy. While compelling, the focus of their investigation was on gender differences rather than monetary incentives, and important questions remain. Namely, their financial incentives condition involved both financial payoffs for performance and performance feedback, such that participants were informed after each trial about both how much money they earned and how well they performed. Although the authors included a feedback-only condition to account for this confound, their results – which also show no gender differences in the feedback-only condition – do not definitively rule out the possibility that the unique combination of monetary payoffs with feedback, rather than money payoffs alone, produced an increase in empathic accuracy. Thus, the question remains as to whether pure financial incentive serves to facilitate or undermine empathic accuracy.

A better understanding of the role between financial incentives and empathic accuracy would shed light on many of the queries left

behind by the recent global economic crisis – e.g., questions of how financial insiders could have callously contributed to the ruin of both individual lives and the economies of nations – as well as broader questions regarding individuals who are in professions that pay them to be empathic. In relation to the former, many observers have noted that the latest financial fallout was not simply a failure of money markets, but also a failure of empathy on the part of the policy-makers and investors whose dubious actions lead to the financial bubble and its subsequent collapse (e.g., Foroohar, 2012; Scott, 2010). In relation to the latter, various professions (e.g., counseling, law enforcement, social work, hospice) routinely pay individuals to exhibit empathy. However, does the presence of monetary gains hinder the empathic processes such jobs require? An empirical examination of the link between money and empathy would help elucidate the conditions under which failures of empathic accuracy are likely to occur, and applying such knowledge could ultimately prove to be useful in avoiding predicaments – in terms of both the global financial fallout and the more mundane practice of paying individuals to be empathic in certain professions – in the future.

Furthermore, such an understanding would contribute to broader theories of both money as a psychological construct (e.g., Furnham & Argyle, 1998; Lea & Webley, 2006; Lea et al., 1987; Zhou & Gao, 2008) and empathy as an economic one (e.g., Kirman & Teschl, 2010). Although both money and empathy are age-old issues, only recently have researchers begun to examine the precise ways in which the one impacts the other. Given that the aforementioned fallout has brought on – according to some – a new era of empathy (e.g., De Waal, 2009), a better understanding of the dynamics between empathic processes and financial rewards will allow us to better navigate life and human behavior post-fallout.

Present research

This research examines whether the presence of financial incentives facilitates or impairs the accuracy with which individuals detect others' felt emotions. Specifically, we investigated the effects of monetary incentives on behavioral measures of empathic accuracy as well as putative underlying mechanism. We predicted that, in line with the body of existing evidence demonstrating that money promotes lesser social connection among individuals (Argyle, 1994; Kraus et al., 2010; Piff et al., 2010; Stipek & Ryan, 1997; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2008), monetary reinforcement would impair performance on tasks involving assessments of other individuals' emotional states. As a stringent test, we predicted that monetary incentive would impair empathic accuracy, even when accuracy pays—that is, when financial reward is contingent upon achieving empathic accuracy.

We also hypothesized that changes in self-construal, specifically ones concerning social connectedness (i.e., as less relational), would mediate the link between monetary incentives and impaired empathic accuracy. We define social connectedness, or relational self-construal, as the tendency for individuals to value and emphasize the importance of relationships (relative to other more independent concerns, such as the individuating attributes and needs of the self).¹ Existing research on individual differences has shown that those high in interdependence tend to spend much time and effort attending to the expressed thoughts and emotions of others, and as a result, are relatively accurate at inferring what others are thinking and feeling (e.g., Cross & Morris, 2003). Studies in related domains (i.e., class and SES) have suggested that the possession of money and other resources decreases social connection by causing individuals to be less socially engaged, more focused on

¹ It is important to note that relational self-construal is distinct from collective self-construal, which focuses on group identities rather than relationships; existing research has shown highly collectivistic individuals to exhibit lower emotion recognition skills (Konrath, Grynberg, Corneille, Hammig, & Luminet, 2011; Matsumoto, 1992; Matsumoto & Kishimoto, 1983; Schimmack, 1996).

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