



Testing the qualitative differences between empathy and personal distress: Measuring core affect and self-orientation

B. López-Pérez^{a,*}, P. Carrera^b, T. Ambrona^c, L. Oceja^b

^a Plymouth University, UK

^b Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

^c Universidad de Burgos, Spain

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ABSTRACT

In two studies the emotional valence, the level of arousal and self-orientation of empathic concern and personal distress are tested. The empathic concern prevalence versus personal distress prevalence is induced through pictures in Study 1 ($N=62$) and perspective-taking instructions in Study 2 ($N=60$). Results of Study 1 show that participants in the personal distress-prevalence condition report significantly more negative emotional valence ($d=.65$), higher arousal ($d=.48$), and higher self-orientation ($d=.57$) than participants in the empathic concern-prevalence condition. Results of Study 2 show that participants in the self-oriented condition report the highest arousal, followed by participants in the other-oriented condition, and the objective condition ($\eta_p^2=.58$). Concerning the increase of self-orientation, results show that it is mediated by the personal distress induced by self-perspective instructions. Similar results in emotional valence were found between self- and other-oriented conditions.

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1. Introduction

There is extensive research in the ways the emotions of others influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of an observer (Allport, 1924; McDougall, 1908; Mead, 1934). Vicarious emotions are the result of perceiving others displaying an emotional expression (Lanzetta & Englis, 1989). Empathic concern and personal distress are two vicarious emotional episodes usually involved when a person perceives someone in need (Batson, 1991, 2011; Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). Indeed, in most experiments where participants are faced with others' suffering, both emotions are reported (Batson, 2001; Batson, 2011). However, empathic concern and personal distress are defined

as qualitative different emotions. Empathic concern is other-oriented and linked to altruism; personal distress is self-oriented and linked to egoism (Batson, 2011; Davis, 1996). Previous research shows that these two affects can be measured by different emotional verbal categories, and they distinctively influence helping behavior (Batson, 2011, 1987; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Through factor analysis, researchers show that the scale designed by Batson et al. (Empathic response scale, 1987) to tap these two situational emotional reactions comprises two expected dimensions: the personal distress factor with items such as upset and worried; the empathic concern factor includes items such as sympathy and compassion. Regarding their behavioral effect, through combining the manipulation of the self vs. other orientation and the easy vs. difficult escape, researchers find that, in line with the empathy–altruism and personal distress–egoism hypotheses, helping decreases when participants are asked to maintain a self-orientation and believe that they can

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, B-214 Portland Square, Drake Circus, Plymouth, Devon PL4 8AA, UK.
Tel.: +44 01752587862.

E-mail address: belen.lopez-perez@plymouth.ac.uk (B. López-Pérez).

easily get away from noticing the person's suffering (Stocks, Lishner, & Decker, 2009). However, the qualitative difference between empathic concern and personal distress has not yet been addressed directly.

First, so far the affective valence of empathic concern and personal distress has been deduced by the semantic analysis of the terms that are used to measure them. Because this semantic analysis may be biased by language or culture, a direct empirical test of their different affective quality is missed. Second, the orientation theoretically associated with each emotional reaction has been manipulated through the use of different perspective instructions (Batson et al., 1997), but it has never been directly measured.

The main goal of the present work is to address the affective quality and orientation of empathic concern and personal distress. Bearing in mind that empathic concern and personal distress are usually elicited when people perceive someone in need, two studies are undertaken to manipulate the prevalence of one of them, that is empathic concern or personal distress, as a strategy to test the affective and orientation quality of the elicited emotional experience. In both studies presented here, the samples are mostly of women. While there is evidence that women may show greater empathic disposition than men (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983), the studies focused on situational empathic concern do not usually find significant differences according to gender (Batson et al., 1991, 1999). Due to that reason and the small sample size for males, there is no analysis on gender differences.

2. Study 1

The objective of this study is to provoke the empathic concern or personal distress prevalence, according to the condition, and test the theoretically proposed differences in their affective and orientation quality (Batson, 1991, 2011; Lishner, Batson, & Huss, 2011). The hypothesis is that participants in the personal distress prevalence condition will report higher arousal, higher displeasure, and higher self-orientation than will participants in the empathic concern prevalence condition.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

In this study 61 undergraduate students from a large university in Spain participated: 54 women and 7 men; age range between 18 and 22; $M = 19$, $SD = 1.09$. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: prevalence of empathic concern with 30 participants and prevalence of personal distress with 31 participants.

2.1.2. Stimuli selection

From a pool of 32 photos, which depict people in need, participants applied a guided categorization task. Three independent judges, two women and one man, similar in age and education level to the experimental participants,

read two definitions¹ about empathic concern and personal distress based on Batson's (1991) approach. Afterwards, for each photo, they reported which of these two affects was more intensively felt. The three independent judges then selected 6 photos that were assigned to the same category with 100% of agreement: 3 for empathic concern and 3 for personal distress. Therefore, within each prevalence condition, one 3-photo set was created and prepared and shown in a Power-Point presentation. The photos are available upon request to the first author of this manuscript.²

2.1.3. Measures

This study relies on the following measures: (1) *The Affect grid* (Russell, Weiss, & Mendelson, 1989; adapted into Spanish by Hurtado de Mendoza et al., 2010), which assesses two dimensions of affect: pleasure–displeasure and arousal–sleepiness. Participants have to place one checkmark in the grid indicating how they felt while watching each picture. The scores for both axes range from –4, the displeasure pole and sleepiness pole, to +4, the pleasure pole and arousal pole. (2) *Private self-orientation scale* (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; adapted into Spanish by Echevarría, Martínez, Páez, & Valencia, 1987): this 8-item scale measures the extent to which a person is oriented to oneself in a specific situation; for example, I pay attention to my feelings; I am alert of the changes in my mood. The original measure contained another scale, *Public self-orientation scale*, which was not included as it is not relevant to the purposes of this research.

2.1.4. Procedure

Participants were presented with one 3-photo set of either empathic concern or personal distress-prevalence conditions. They were told the pictures were real photos taken by different volunteers from *Quality of Life Foundation*, and their responses would be considered in selecting the best photo for different magazines. Each photo was evaluated in the Spanish version of the Affect grid (Hurtado de Mendoza et al., 2010; Russell et al., 1989). Afterwards, they completed the self-orientation scale (Echevarría et al., 1987; Fenigstein et al., 1975),

¹ The definitions provided were as follow: empathy is an other-oriented emotion whose final goal is to increase the welfare of the other in need, whereas personal distress is a self-oriented emotion whose final goal is to reduce one's own distress provoked by the distress of other.

² Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth (1972) suggest *clarity* as a guideline to equate emotional information on stimuli based on agreement among observers and strength. To make sure these two sets of pictures were equal in clarity, these criteria were followed: (a) 100% of agreement obtained in the stimuli selection using three independent judges, described above and (b) the non-significant differences in emotional intensity between the two sets found in a control check study. This control check uses independent-samples design ($N = 20$; 14 females; age range from 21 to 51 years old, $M_{age} = 36.95$, $SD_{age} = 12.18$), presenting to the half of the sample the set of pictures of empathic-concern prevalence and to the other half the pictures of personal distress prevalence in random order. For every picture participants indicated to *what extent the picture was emotionally impactful*, to *what extent they felt moved by the people/person depicted in the picture* and to *what extent the people/person depicted in the picture were/was vulnerable* in a Likert scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = extremely. For all the items non-significant differences were found between conditions; $t_s(18) = 1.16$, 0.14 , and 1.55 , $p_s > .13$, respectively.

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