



# Sympathy fuels creativity: The beneficial effects of sympathy on originality



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## ABSTRACT

Sympathy is usually evoked by heightened awareness of and concern for others' suffering by perceiving or reacting to their distress or need. Sympathetic contexts appear to spur creative solutions, because those who react sympathetically to others' suffering tend to seek novel, desirable, and prosocial solutions that alleviate suffering and promote well-being. We conducted two studies to investigate whether sympathy enhances creativity. Study 1 tested the feasibility of using images of distressed elderly as an unobtrusive method to induce sympathy. Study 2 sought to determine whether induced sympathy promotes creativity, and whether individual differences in trait empathy moderate this effect. Results demonstrate that sympathy fosters creative originality – but not creative fluency or flexibility – as assessed by either content-general or content-specific creativity measures. In addition, the beneficial effect of sympathy on originality is moderated by individual differences in trait empathy. The potential mechanisms that underlie these effects are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Sympathy<sup>1</sup> is usually evoked by heightened awareness of and concern for others' suffering by perceiving or reacting to their distress or need (Chismar, 1988; Decety & Michalska, 2010; Wispé, 1991). Sympathy has been regarded as one of the most valuable emotions, because it is intimately tied to prosocial and moral behaviors such as low discrimination, cooperation, sharing, helping, supporting, and protecting others (Batson, 1991, 1998; Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; de Waal, 2004; Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Fultz, Schaller, & Cialdini, 1988; Holmgren, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998). Considerable attention has therefore been paid to the behavioral consequences of sympathy (e.g., various prosocial behaviors), while surprisingly little has been given to the cognitive consequences of sympathy. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that sympathy influences our thinking and problem-solving skills. For instance, a group of medical professionals who joined several medical mission trips to underdeveloped countries felt sympathy for the critical shortages of supplies in

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that although sympathy and empathy are often used interchangeably, they are not identical (Gruen & Mendelsohn, 1986). Sympathy is sorrow for a distressed or needy person without sharing the other's relevant emotion, while empathy also seeks to share the person's emotional state (Decety & Chaminade, 2003; Gladstein, 1983; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010). Therefore, sympathy occurs in an emotionally negative context (e.g., pity, sorrow, or concern), whereas empathy can occur in both positive and negative emotional contexts (Wispé, 1991). For the purposes of this study, we limit our focus to sympathy and its impact on creativity.

those countries, and was inspired to collect unused but clean surgical supplies (e.g., gloves, sutures, and drapes) that would otherwise be disposed of in U.S. hospitals. Similarly, Robbins et al. (1994) found that physicians who are more sympathetic to their patients' psychological distress tend to be more accurate in their assessments and diagnoses. These findings suggest that the experience of sympathy may improve the ability to produce distinctive and constructive ideas, which are linked to important aspects of creative cognition (Ward, Smith, & Fink, 1999).

Given the lack of studies that seek to understand the cognitive outcomes of sympathy, we set out to examine the effects of sympathy on creativity—that is, the ability to generate novel and useful ideas by exploring a range of possible solutions (Amabile, 1996; Decety & Michalska, 2010). A link between sympathy and creativity is plausible for several reasons. First, sympathy may foster creativity through its affective route. In general, a situation that engenders sympathy is usually linked to undesirable events; therefore, sympathetic emotions are considered to be negative emotions. Regarding the link between negative emotions and creativity, the feelings-as-information model suggests that negative emotions signal problems that require greater effort and improvement, and therefore stimulate creativity when making changes or seeking adequate solutions (Frijda, 1994; Schwarz & Clore, 2003). In a related vein, the mood-as-input model suggests that negative emotions signal problems or danger in a given context and evoke more effortful and systematic strategies to tackle the problem (Martin & Stoner, 1996). Similarly, growing evidence indicates that the effect of negative emotions on creativity is largely context dependent (George & Zhou, 2002; Leung et al., 2014). This contextual view suggests that negative emotions can be beneficial to creativity, especially in a context in which negative emotions are clearly identified, and their perceived recognition and rewards for creative solutions are highly regarded (George & Zhou, 2002). Noting that sympathy induced by one person's suffering can be the catalyst for strategies to end the suffering of others in a similar plight (Lee & Dow, 2011; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Piliavin, Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981; Wispé, 1991), sympathetic contexts appear to spur creative solutions. Lastly, in consideration of the dual-pathway model—which assumes that negative emotions influence creativity via the persistence pathway, which refers to the degree of sustained, task-directed cognitive effort—it is plausible that sympathy's affective influence fosters creative action (Martin & Stoner, 1996).

Second, sympathy's motivational route may enhance creativity. When people are intrinsically motivated, they tend to engage in an activity for their own enjoyment or the challenge it presents. The literature suggests that intrinsic motivation is conducive to creative performance because it facilitates exploration, spontaneity, flexibility, persistence, and interest—all of which are linked to creative processes (Amabile, 1996; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006; Grant & Berry, 2011; Reeve & Deci, 1996; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Given this literature, the link between sympathy and intrinsic motivation is credible: Those who react sympathetically to others' suffering tend to be motivated to alleviate suffering and seek novel, desirable, and prosocial solutions that promote well-being. This, in turn, may afford the greatest opportunities for learning and exploration (Hepach et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In support of this view, Grant and Berry (2011) demonstrate that intrinsic motivation with other-focused, prosocial motives fosters the production of novel ideas (i.e., originality). Sympathy, therefore, likely promotes creativity through its motivational route.

Third, sympathy may foster creativity through perspective taking. Sympathy is largely evoked by affective perspective taking, which often promotes a shift from a self-centered view to an other-centered view and, in turn, facilitates the integration of diverse views in a meaningful way (Lamm, Batson, & Decety, 2007). In favor of this notion, Grant and Berry (2011) propose that other-focused psychological processes play an important role in entertaining ideas that are not only novel but also valuable, because they may be useful in addressing others' problems or needs (Mohrman, Gibson, & Mohrman, 2001). Given that perspective taking is thought to be one of the most important psychological forces underlying creativity (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Lamm et al., 2007; Parker, Atkins & Axtell, 2008), sympathy – which promotes this ability – is likely to enhance the flexibility aspect of creativity.

In light of the credible link between sympathy and creativity, our primary research goal was to determine whether induced sympathy improves creativity. We also employed a rather unobtrusive method to induce sympathy. As stated earlier, sympathy involves feelings of pity or sorrow for another's distress. Unlike empathy, however, it does not require that we share the other's relevant experiences or emotions (Lee, 2009; Wispé, 1991). Therefore, caution should be exercised when inducing sympathy that does not implicate empathy. The literature, for instance, has often induced sympathy by asking a participant to envision how a person who is described as experiencing tragic circumstances must feel (e.g., Harmon-Jones, Vaughn-Scott, Mohr, Sigelman, & Harmon-Jones, 2004). Despite the assumed effectiveness of these methods, it is possible that they may inadvertently induce empathic feelings. In Study 1, therefore, we tested the feasibility of using images of distressed elderly as an unobtrusive method of inducing sympathy for the elderly.

Study 2 aimed to determine whether participants in whom sympathy had been induced would outperform participants in the control group in creative performance, as assessed by (a) two domain-general tests of creativity, the Unusual Uses Test (Guilford, 1959) and the Wallach-Kogan Creativity Test (Wallach & Kogan, 1965), and (b) one domain-specific test, the Floor Plan Test, which asks the participant to generate ideas that can help the elderly. We examined creative performance across four dimensions: originality, fluency, flexibility, and elaboration. In view of the three potential routes that can facilitate creativity (affective, motivational, and perspective taking), we hypothesized that sympathy would particularly benefit two aspects of creativity – originality and flexibility – but not necessarily the third, fluency.

We also sought to determine whether individual differences in trait empathy – the general ability to perceive, understand, feel, and share another's feelings and sensations – would modulate the impact of sympathy on creativity. It is probable that those who have a greater tendency to feel empathic are also more likely to experience sympathy for others' troubles. Given the

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