



Dispositional empathy with nature



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ABSTRACT

Empathy has been regarded by environmental thinkers as a key in conservation efforts. Nevertheless, systematic research on empathy toward nature, particularly from the personality perspective, has been lacking in psychology. The present research thus provides this needed investigation by testing four propositions regarding a new construct—*dispositional empathy with nature* (DEN), which refers to the dispositional tendency to understand and share the emotional experience of the natural world. In five studies with 817 participants in total (including university students and working adults from two societies), DEN robustly and uniquely predicted conservation behavior (Proposition 1). Females, respondents who felt close to nature, and participants who considered nature to be sentient exhibited stronger DEN (Propositions 2–4). DEN was distinct from empathy with humans and a number of known determinants of conservation behavior (including personality traits, values, emotional involvement with nature, environmental concern, and social desirability bias). Taken together, these findings highlight the possibility of developing a theory of empathy with nature by referring to the existing understanding about empathy with humans. The construct of DEN has much theoretical utility, as it sheds new light on several under-explored issues in conservation psychology (including the gender gap in environmentalism, the role of connection to nature, and the role of anthropomorphism), and bears practical implications for the promotion of environmentalism. In addition, the newly developed scale for DEN is potentially useful for assessing the efficacy of environmental education programs.

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1. Introduction

“...we must begin in empathy, by becoming the animals before we can save them.” (Sobel, 1996)

Empathy, broadly defined as the understanding and sharing of another person's emotional experience (Davis, 1983; Hoffman, 2008), has often been regarded by social scientists as the key to altruism and intergroup harmony (e.g., Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Stephen & Finlay, 1999). In recent years, some environmental thinkers have called for attention to the role of empathy in conservation efforts (e.g., Sobel, 1996). Despite this call, systematic research on the notion of empathy toward nature, particularly from the personality perspective, has been rare in psychology. The present research thus provides this needed investigation.

2. Empathy with humans

Empathy has two components: cognitive and affective. The cognitive component refers to the understanding of another person's emotions through perspective taking (e.g., Hogan, 1969). Affective empathy refers to joining and sharing the emotional responses of another person (e.g., Batson, 1991). These two components are considered to be inter-related and not separate (Davis, 1983). For instance, Coke, Batson, and McDavis (1978) showed that perspective taking can trigger empathic emotions. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) even suggested that the two components cannot be empirically disentangled.

By definition, empathy could involve either negative or positive emotions. Through empathy, one may feel distress for another person's suffering, or experience joy for other people's triumph. However, psychological research has predominantly analyzed empathy in a negative context (e.g., Batson, 1991; Coke et al., 1978), in part because the academic interest in empathy originates from research on altruistic behavior (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2008). More important, as Royzman and Kumar (2001) pointed out,

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experience of empathic joy is relatively unusual; people's empathic reactions are more readily aroused by the perceived negative affect in others than its positive counterpart, and this asymmetry appears to be hardwired biologically in human lineage. Accordingly, extant studies have typically examined empathic distress only, and considered compassionate feelings and helping behavior as its outcomes (Batson, 1991). These studies could be roughly categorized into two streams: induced empathy and dispositional empathy. The research on induced empathy follows the tradition of social psychology; it typically manipulates empathy through asking participants to take the perspective of a target person in distress. The research on dispositional empathy follows the personality psychology tradition; it assumes that the tendency to empathize is a stable trait, and thereby assesses empathy through self-report measures. Generally, both induced empathy and dispositional empathy have a robust effect on compassion and helping (Batson, 2011; Coke et al., 1978; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hodges, Myers, & Clark, 2011; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011).

3. Empathy with nature

The robust finding regarding the association between empathy and helping has inspired some environmental thinkers to consider the possibility of *empathy with nature*—the understanding and sharing of the emotional experience, particularly distress, of the natural world. This form of empathy can be exemplified with the following. When reading news that a deep-water oil spill is polluting the ocean, an individual may put himself or herself in the place of the affected animals and feel what they are feeling. Similarly, when watching a video about shark finning, some individuals may visualize vividly the sharks' experience and feel the pain the sharks are experiencing. One of the proponents for the primacy of empathy in conservation efforts is Sobel (1996). As he expressed in the opening quote, conservation efforts must begin in empathy. In his view, empathy should be taught in early childhood, and the empathy thus developed will serve as the foundation for more abstract environmental stewardship later in one's life. This view has been echoed by others (e.g., Chawla, 2009; Myers, Saunders, & Bexell, 2009). In particular, Guergachi, Ngenyama, Magness, and Hakim (2010) proposed that, rather than studying a long list of such characteristics as environmental friendliness or frugality, one should focus on the smallest set of qualities which, once met by the majority, will lead to sustainability directly; in their view, this resides in empathy.

3.1. Induced empathy with nature

Some studies have already found empirical support to the presumed importance of empathy. They commonly used perspective taking manipulations to arouse participants' empathic concern toward certain natural elements in distress (*induced empathy with nature*; IEN hereafter). Shelton and Rogers (1981) found that participants who had taken the perspective of a suffering whale, as compared to those who had not, exhibited stronger compassion toward whales in general and intention to protect them. This effect was replicated by Schultz (2000), who showed that when participants had taken the perspective of some animals harmed by pollution, they became more concerned about the biosphere as a whole (see also Sevillano, Aragonés, & Schultz, 2007). Berenguer (2007) extended these studies by showing that IEN can trigger actual behavior. He found that participants who had taken the perspective of a suffering bird or tree felt not only more compassionate but also more obligated to help it and nature as a whole. When asked to allocate some money to several student programs, these participants favored an environmental cause (see also

Berenguer, 2010). Taken together, induced empathy toward certain natural elements in distress is able to activate concern for not only these elements but also the whole natural world.

3.2. Dispositional empathy with nature: the missing construct

As Cronbach (1957) warned, to build a theory about a phenomenon, it is necessary to study its variance both among experimental treatments and among individuals. In this spirit, a complete theory of empathy with nature needs to consider *dispositional empathy with nature* (DEN hereafter)—the dispositional tendency to understand and share the emotional experience of the natural world. Some individuals may spontaneously empathize with nature more strongly than do others. The overall objective of the present research is thus to develop a systematic understanding regarding this previously neglected construct. To achieve this objective, close reference to existing, well-established understanding about dispositional empathy with humans is made. This gives rise to four theoretical propositions (see Section 3.3). As noted, by definition, empathy is not confined to negative emotions. For instance, one may feel joy when he or she takes the role of a forest that is well-protected from human interference. Nevertheless, the present investigation centers on the distress of nature for three reasons. First, as identified earlier, empathy is more likely to be aroused by distress than by good fortune (Royzman & Kumar, 2001). To develop a theory about empathy with nature with reference to existing research about empathy (e.g., Batson, 1991; Hoffman, 2008), it is conceivable to start with a focus on distress. Second, past studies on IEN (e.g., Berenguer, 2007; Sevillano et al., 2007) focused on distress only. To connect to these studies and thereby to build a general theory, the present research centers on distress too. Third, empathy with nature has often been discussed in the context of environmental degradation (e.g., Guergachi et al., 2010; Sobel, 1996), as the practical concern of this discussion is how to mitigate such degradation.

3.3. Four propositions regarding DEN

The present research aims to test four propositions. The first proposition considers the effect of DEN, while the next three propositions consider factors that account for individual differences in DEN. These propositions are certainly not exhaustive; some other possible propositions for future studies will be discussed in the *General Discussion*.

3.3.1. DEN motivates conservation behavior

As reviewed, empathy with humans motivates helping behavior. Based on this finding, it is expected that empathy with nature motivates protective behavior toward the natural environment (e.g., Sobel, 1996). Some studies on IEN have already supported this view (e.g., Berenguer, 2007; Schultz, 2000). It is thus intuitive to propose that people with stronger DEN exhibit more conservation behavior (*Proposition 1*). It should be noted that among the existing studies on IEN, only Berenguer (2007) provided behavioral evidence. As Cronbach (1957) noted, "simultaneous consideration of many criteria is needed for a satisfactory evaluation of performance" (p. 676) of a construct. Accordingly, in the present research, two forms of conservation behavior will be assessed. Public behavior ranges from active participation (e.g., joining an environmental group) to less active support (e.g., donation) in environmental movement, whereas private behavior refers to personal and household decisions (e.g., recycling; see Stern, 2000). Dispositional empathy with nature is expected to motivate both forms. Also, its predictive power is expected to be independent from that of other known determinants of conservation behavior.

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