



Their pain gives us pleasure: How intergroup dynamics shape empathic failures and counter-empathic responses



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Competitive intergroup contexts generate an intergroup empathy bias.
- People exhibit more empathy for in-group and counter-empathy for out-group targets.
- Empathy bias is driven by out-group antipathy, not extraordinary in-group empathy.
- Empathy bias persists after one's in-group has defeated their out-group competitors.
- Empathy bias is attenuated by cues that indicate reduced group entitativity.

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ABSTRACT

Despite its early origins and adaptive functions, empathy is not inevitable; people routinely fail to empathize with others, especially members of different social or cultural groups. In five experiments, we systematically explore how social identity, functional relations between groups, competitive threat, and perceived entitativity contribute to *intergroup empathy bias*: the tendency not only to empathize less with out-group relative to in-group members, but also to feel pleasure in response to their pain (and pain in response to their pleasure). When teams are set in direct competition, affective responses to competition-irrelevant events are characterized not only by less empathy toward out-group relative to in-group members, but also by increased counter-empathic responses: Schadenfreude and Glückschmerz (Experiment 1). Comparing responses to in-group and out-group targets against responses to unaffiliated targets in this competitive context suggests that intergroup empathy bias may be better characterized by out-group antipathy rather than extraordinary in-group empathy (Experiment 2). We also find that intergroup empathy bias is robust to changes in relative group standing—feedback indicating that the out-group has fallen behind (Experiment 3a) or is no longer a competitive threat (Experiment 3b) does not reduce the bias. However, reducing perceived in-group and out-group entitativity can significantly attenuate intergroup empathy bias (Experiment 4). This research establishes the boundary conditions of intergroup empathy bias and provides initial support for a more integrative framework of group-based empathy.

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Introduction

Empathy is generally recognized as a central component of the human condition: empathy facilitates social functioning by promoting pro-social behavior, even among strangers. Starting in infancy, humans are affected by others' suffering. We recognize sadness, fear and pain in others, experience congruent emotions ourselves, and are motivated to alleviate others' distress (Batson, 2009). Despite its early origins and adaptive functions, empathy is not a universal response. People often

feel less empathy for strangers who belong to a different racial, political, or social group, compared to strangers who are described as belonging to the same group (Batson & Ahmad, 2009; Davis, 1994; Hornstein, 1978): we term this difference the *intergroup empathy bias* (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011).¹ In certain contexts, people may even experience pleasure in response to out-group members' adversities (*Schadenfreude*) and displeasure in response to their triumphs (*Glückschmerz*; Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). These empathic and counter-empathic responses matter because they are associated

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¹ "Bias" in this context does not mean error; rather, we use bias in the sense that the intergroup literature uses it: a response tendency or preference.

with discrimination and a willingness to harm out-group members (e.g., Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Hein, Silani, Preuschhoff, Batson, & Singer, 2010; Johnson et al., 2002).

Almost all of the previous research in this area has focused on documenting intergroup empathy bias among real social groups (Cikara, Bruneau et al., 2011), such as racial groups (e.g. Dovidio et al., 2010), and academic, athletic or political rivals (e.g., Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; Combs, Powell, Schurtz, & Smith, 2009; Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom, 2009; cf. Montalan, Lelard, Godefroy, & Mouras, 2012). Among stable social groups, patterns of empathic responding might be relatively consistent across time and context; however, not all out-groups elicit the intergroup empathy bias to the same extent and the bias is demonstrably subject to context effects (e.g., Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2010, 2013).

Despite the clear real world implications of intergroup empathy and the growing number of empirical studies on the topic, few investigations have examined intergroup empathy bias through the lens of psychological theories of intergroup relations. Here we integrate work on social identity and intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) with the empathy literature. The goal of the current investigation is to move beyond describing empathic and counter-empathic response profiles among specific social groups by examining the underlying psychological processes at play between groups more generally (see Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014, for discussion). In a series of five experiments we assign participants to novel groups (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) and investigate intergroup empathy bias as a function of the relational structures between groups (cooperation, competition, or independence) and dynamic features of the groups and group-members: self-categorization, relative group standing, and perceived group entitativity.

Dampened empathy and heightened counter-empathic responses for out-groups

We define empathy as an affective reaction caused by, and congruent with, another person's inferred or forecasted emotions (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991): that is, feeling good in response to someone experiencing a positive event (e.g., when Emile wins an award), and feeling bad in response to someone experiencing a negative event (e.g., when Rebecca's paper is rejected).² As dozens of recent papers from social and developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience demonstrate, dampened or absent empathic responses (and associated physiological indicators) are particularly likely for social or cultural out-groups (e.g., Avenanti, Sirigu, & Aglioti, 2010; Chiao & Mathur, 2010; Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007; Decety, Echols, & Correll, 2010; Hein et al., 2010; Masten, Gillen-O'Neel, & Brown, 2010; Tarrant et al., 2009; Xu, Zuo, Wang, & Han, 2009).³

Group membership may modulate empathy by enhancing in-group empathy (i.e. 'extraordinary in-group empathy'; see Mathur, Harada, Lipke, & Chiao, 2010) or by reducing out-group empathy (i.e., 'out-group apathy'; see Avenanti et al., 2010; Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012). Although

extraordinary in-group empathy and out-group apathy are conceptually distinct (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1999), they are often confounded in the literature. One way to disentangle these phenomena is to include a set of control targets, who are unaffiliated with either group, to act as a baseline (e.g., Bruneau, Dufour, & Saxe, 2012; Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2013; Van Bavel & Cunningham, 2009; Van Bavel, Packer, & Cunningham, 2008, 2011).

Another, potentially more pernicious manifestation of intergroup empathy bias is counter-empathic responses. An out-group member's pain can elicit perceivers' pleasure, a feeling referred to as Schadenfreude (Smith et al., 2009; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, & Van Koningsbruggen, 2011; see also Weisbuch & Ambady, 2008), and conversely, an out-group member's pleasure may cause the observer pain or anguish, a feeling referred to as Glückschmerz.

Several factors facilitate the experience of Schadenfreude: when observers gain from the target's misfortune (Smith, Eyre, Powell, & Kim, 2006); when another's misfortune is deserved (Feather, 1999, 2006; Feather & Nairn, 2005; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005); when a misfortune befalls a disliked or envied person (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Smith et al., 1996; Takahashi et al., 2009); and when an out-group, which has made the in-group feel inferior, suffers subsequent losses at the hand of a third party (Leach et al., 2003; Leach & Spears, 2008, 2009; see also Van Dijk et al., 2011). Strikingly, Schadenfreude can even override self-interest: people may feel pleasure at rival groups' misfortunes, even when those misfortunes have negative implications for themselves and society more broadly (Combs et al., 2009). Thus, even when there is not a tangible benefit to the observer or some greater social justice served, targets' misfortunes are pleasurable, in part, because they make people feel better about themselves (Smith, 2013).

The complement of Schadenfreude is Glückschmerz. Though Glückschmerz is conceptually related to resentment (Feather, 2006) and envy (Smith, 2000), resentment and envy are typically studied as precursors to Schadenfreude (e.g., Schadenfreude is more likely when people, who we have previously envied, experience a misfortune). In contrast to envy and resentment, which are more chronic and which target specific individuals in the absence of a particular event, Glückschmerz refers to the fleeting, negative affect associated with observing another person's good fortune.

It is critical to study these counter-empathic responses in addition to failures of empathy because of their role in the tolerance, and even perpetration, of harm against out-group members. For example, greater Schadenfreude in response to a rival's injury is correlated with disappointment in response to news that the injury is not serious (Hoogland, Schurtz, Combs, Powell, & Smith, 2012), and activity in 'reward' related brain regions (i.e., ventral striatum) in response to rival sports teams' suffering predicts willingness to harm, and unwillingness to relieve pain from, rival team fans (Cikara, Botvinick, et al., 2011; Cikara, Bruneau, et al., 2011; Hein et al., 2010).

The research on intergroup Schadenfreude has revealed a great deal about the factors that predict this malicious emotion, however it has focused primarily on 1) groups with a history of rivalry, and 2) emotions in response to events that are the basis for that rivalry (e.g., asking soccer fans how they feel when a rival team loses a soccer championship to a 3rd party). In contrast to previous studies, we focus on individuals' responses to events that are separate from, and irrelevant to, the intergroup context at hand, to assess whether functional relations affect intergroup empathy bias beyond contexts that define the groups themselves. Furthermore, using novel groups of initially equivalent standing allows us to circumvent confounds such as pre-existing negative attitudes, or anger at the out-group's past successes (Hareli & Weiner, 2002) and perceptions that such past successes are illegitimate (Feather & Sherman, 2002). We believe that these features help establish a general theoretical framework of intergroup empathy that extends beyond specific historical or social contexts.

² Note that our definition of empathy is more specific than simply experiencing concordant affect (Heider, 1958; Ortony et al., 1988; Smith, 2000); for example, empathy does not extend to situations in which the perceiver's outcomes are tied to the target's; it must be other-focused without any material implications for the perceiver.

³ Two studies of which we are aware—Dovidio et al. (2004) and Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp, and Siem (2006)—report failures to find evidence of intergroup empathy bias, even in the absence of interventions and additional information about targets. However, both of these papers use race- or ethnicity-based groups, which markedly increases demand effects. Even if people aren't willing to self-report less empathy for a racial out-group, a sizeable literature has documented that they exhibit dampened or absent neural and physiological responses (see Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011 for a review) and are less likely to help an out-group relative to an in-group member (e.g., Dovidio et al., 1997; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005), suggesting the influence of social desirability as an explanation for these null effects.

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