



Paving the road to preferential treatment with good intentions: Empathy, accountability and fairness



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explore whether, when, and why empathy can lead to preferential treatment in groups.
- Empathy leads low (but not high) accountability decision makers to enact preferential treatment.
- Empathy shapes the perceived fairness of preferential treatment when accountability is low.
- Perceived fairness accounts for the effect of empathy on preferential treatment.
- Rather than representing a disregard for justice, effects are due to concerns about justice.

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ABSTRACT

Four studies explore whether, why, and under what conditions empathy may prompt group authorities and decision makers to enact preferential treatment toward particular members, favoring those group members over others when making allocation decisions. Based on prior research that emphasizes the prosocial consequences of empathy in dyadic relations, we predicted and found that empathy can prompt group leaders to enact preferential treatment even in multi-party contexts. However, this effect was moderated by the extent to which these leaders were accountable for their decisions, with high accountability attenuating the effect of empathy on preferential treatment. The mediating role of concerns about justice was also explored. Empathy led to preferential treatment among low accountability leaders because empathic emotion led leaders to perceive preferential treatment as relatively fair. In contrast, high accountability leaders evaluated preferential treatment as relatively unfair. These results indicate that empathy leads to preferential treatment because of people's concerns about fairness—and not despite those concerns. Implications for theory and research on empathy and justice are discussed.

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Introduction

When it comes to factors that shape prosocial motivation and behavior in interpersonal relations, few psychological constructs can compare with empathy, defined as other-oriented emotional responses that are congruent with the welfare of the target of one's emotional focus (Batson, 1991). An extensive and rich range of studies have demonstrated the prosocial consequences of empathic feelings towards a distressed target (Batson, 1991, 1995, 1996; Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2000). However, somewhat less well understood are the consequences of group authorities experiencing empathic feelings towards a distressed group member, situations that include a number of features

that can complicate the beneficent hue of empathy. Such potential complications highlight the importance of examining the dynamics of empathy in groups and collectives more generally.

The research presented below considers these issues, exploring the processes by which empathy shapes group authorities' decision making and behavior. In particular, we explore whether empathy for a particular group member can lead group decision making authorities to give that individual extraordinary treatment, benefits, resources, and consideration, despite the impact that doing so may have on other group members. Importantly, we explore the role of accountability in moderating this impact of empathy on preferential treatment, an important issue to consider since accountability exerts a strong influence on decision makers and since there is great variation in the extent to which accountability pressures are absent or present in most group contexts. Moreover, we also consider the role of justice in this process, since empathy-based preferential treatment can be tantamount to a violation of equity in group contexts. This is a particularly critical aspect of our

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research, since equity is a hallmark of fairness in many group settings and is thus essential to fostering the motivation and commitment of group members (Deutsch, 1985; Greenberg, 1982; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003).

Empathy and preferential treatment

Prior research consistently finds that feeling empathy towards someone in distress can prompt a motivation to alleviate that person's suffering (for reviews, see Batson, 1991; Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), since empathy prompts concern for the distressed party's welfare and in turn motivates a desire to improve the distressed party's welfare. That is, empathy triggers actions or decisions that are beneficent and seek to improve that person's circumstances. For instance, research participants induced to feel high (vs. low) levels of empathy towards a distressed or needy target² are more likely to assume a burdensome task on behalf of that target or to volunteer to help that target (Batson, 1991; Davis, 1994).

Empathy is largely a target-specific, particularistic emotion (Batson, 1991; Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990), in that it only fosters benevolent action directed toward the specific target of one's emotions and not towards other individuals. For this reason, prior research has primarily examined empathy in dyadic interpersonal contexts, with relatively little consideration of empathy in group contexts and, in particular, among group decision making authorities (cf. Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995; Batson et al., 1995). However, acts that are highly prosocial at the dyadic level may simultaneously bring about negative consequences when enacted in group contexts. In groups, empathy for a distressed group member may prompt decision makers to provide that member with *preferential treatment* (i.e., treatment, resources, and consideration not normally made available to all) in an effort to reduce that individual's distress. In many cases, this favoritism towards one group member may negatively impact and thus evoke negative reactions among other group members, thereby tarnishing the benevolent intentions that underlie empathy.

In justice terms, empathy-based preferential treatment may constitute a digression from equity, neutrality and consistency norms, and a movement towards need and partiality. While need can be viewed quite positively as a distributive norm in close interpersonal relationships, families, and highly communal groups (Clark & Mills, 1979; Deutsch, 1985; Lamm & Schwinger, 1983; Mikula, 1984) equity, neutrality, and consistency are typically regarded as hallmarks of justice in task groups, organizations, and related contexts (Adams, 1965; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987; Kabanoff, 1991; Leventhal, 1980). Indeed, it has been widely noted that equity—and not need—is the preferred and largely default norm in task and work contexts where economic dynamics dominate (Deutsch, 1985; Mannix, Neale, & Northcraft, 1995). As such, deviations from equity in favor of need may elicit negative reactions in task or work contexts. For instance, the affirmative action literature finds that opposition to affirmative action policies is directly related to the extent to which those policies are perceived as digressing from equity (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Cropanzano, Slaughter, & Bachiochi, 2005; Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000). Similarly, negative reactions to family-friendly workplace policies are determined by the extent to which those policies are seen as emphasizing need rather than equity (Grandey, 2001; Grover, 1991; Roper, Cunningham, & James, 2002).

The predominance of equity norms raises questions about whether empathy will have the same effect on group decision makers as it does in dyadic contexts, and thus whether empathy will lead to preferential treatment in groups. On the one hand, since preferential treatment violates equity norms and since group authorities are responsible to

multiple constituents (some of whom may be negatively impacted by preferential treatment given to a particular group member), group authorities may override their empathic inclinations and not enact preferential treatment. This would be consistent with the fundamental motive people have to uphold justice (Mikula, 1984; Montada & Schneider, 1989; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997) and to regard themselves as acting fairly (Blasi, 1984; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985). On the other hand, empathic motivation is an extremely powerful influence in interpersonal contexts (Batson, 1991), and prior work suggests that empathy will heighten focus on the needy target and prompt other parties to recede into the background of the decision maker's attention (Batson, Batson, et al., 1995; Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). While these studies lack some of the conditions that make equity and fairness especially important (such as a strong group context or a role with clear responsibility to multiple constituents; Tyler et al., 1997), they do suggest that empathy can provoke favoritism of one party over another and therefore that empathy may lead to preferential treatment in group contexts. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. High (vs. low) empathy will make group decision makers more likely to enact preferential treatment towards a needy target.

The moderating effect of accountability

A key distinguishing feature of group contexts (as compared to the dyadic situations examined in prior empathy research) is that there is variation in how identifiable authorities' decisions are to parties other than the needy target. For instance, in work contexts, the extent to which decisions about pay, work allocations, and exceptions to policies and procedures are made public has been shown to be both highly varied and exceedingly consequential (e.g., Lawler, 1972; Rousseau, 2005). This variation and its profound consequences are also true in academia, government, and in many senses all group contexts. Frequently, it is believed that decisions will be made public and become widely known. However, in many other cases decisions are made in private and expected to remain as such. Indeed, calls for greater transparency in many sectors of society are based on the observation that many decisions are not made public but rather are made and kept "behind closed doors". On a more mundane level, decision makers frequently make decisions under the *belief* that only they and the beneficiary will learn of the decision, such as when managers may give particular employees unearned time off to accommodate family issues, advance pay to employees in need despite rules stipulating otherwise, and bend rules about tardiness due to childcare and transportation issues.

Whether observers will learn of the decision—and whether decision makers are identifiable for the decisions they make—is a core determinant of the decision maker's accountability for their decision (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Accountability refers to the "implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others" (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999: 255). Prior empathy research has examined situations with low or nonexistent accountability to alternate parties. Yet as noted, group contexts actually vary a great deal on the degree to which decision makers are accountable. Moreover, it is particularly critical to examine the intersection of empathy and accountability, since accountability exerts profound effects on decision-makers, acting as a rule- and norm-enforcement mechanism that constrains behavior (Tetlock, 1985; Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989). More specifically, accountability leads decision makers to think in more self-critical, integratively complex ways that anticipate and address the reactions and expectations of others (Tetlock, 1983; Tetlock et al., 1989). This makes decision makers more attentive to the bases of their decisions and, most importantly, reduces the likelihood that their reasoning will be influenced by internal states (such as empathy).

As such, accountability may moderate the effect of empathy on preferential treatment. In particular, we expect that in situations where decisions are identifiable—and thus decision makers are more

² Consistent with the research literature on empathy, we use the term "needy target" to refer to individuals experiencing circumstances that place them in a negative psychological state. In this sense, need does not specifically refer to economic bases of need but rather to any circumstance that creates psychological distress.

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