Will you help me to suffer less? How about to feel more joy? Positive and negative empathy are associated with different other-oriented motivations☆☆☆

Michael R. Andreychik *, Eliza Lewis

Fairfield University, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 29 June 2016
Received in revised form 17 September 2016
Accepted 21 September 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Positive empathy
Negative empathy
Motivation
Prosocial behavior

A B S T R A C T

Although the vast majority of existing work on empathy focuses exclusively on the socio-emotional consequences of empathizing with others’ negative emotions, mounting evidence supports the view that empathy for others’ negative emotions and empathy for others’ positive emotions are distinct capacities. The present work seeks to marry this burgeoning literature on the separability of positive and negative empathy to the influential literature on approach and avoidance motivation by examining how these two distinct empathic capacities relate to the (pro)social motivations to assist others to approach positivity vs. avoid negativity. The results of two studies show that whereas positive empathy is associated with an other-focused motivation to assist others to approach positive outcomes and is predictive of helping only when that help is framed as a means of propelling others toward greater positivity, negative empathy is associated with an other-focused motivation to assist others to avoid negative outcomes and is associated with helping only when that help is framed as a means of assisting others to avoid further suffering. In addition to contributing to the emerging literature on the separability of positive and negative empathy, these results also help to extend the influential approach/avoidance distinction to the domain of other-focused motivation.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

A wealth of evidence now supports the important role of empathy in energizing prosocial behavior (for a review see Eisenberg, 2000). But, for the most part, this evidence stems from research focusing on the manner in which connection with the negative emotions of others (e.g., sadness, suffering) relates to helping behavior. Recently, however, scholars have begun to devote an increasing amount of attention to the question of how a related but distinct empathic capacity, namely, connection with others’ positive emotions (e.g., joy, optimism), relates to prosociality (see, e.g., Morelli, Lieberman, & Zaki, 2015 for a review).

The present work seeks to connect this relatively young literature on the separability of positive and negative empathy to the influential literature on approach and avoidance motivation (see Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Elliot & Church, 1997; Higgins, 1997) by examining how these two distinct but related empathic capacities relate to the (pro)social motivations to assist others to approach positivity vs. avoid negativity. Given that positive empathy involves a sensitivity to others’ positive emotions, we expect that positive empathy will be associated primarily with a desire to help others to approach positive outcomes and the positive emotions that accompany them. In contrast, because negative empathy involves sensitivity to others’ negative emotions, we expect that negative empathy will be associated primarily with a desire to help others to avoid negative outcomes and accompanying negative emotions.

We examined these hypotheses in two studies. In Study 1, we measured respondents’ levels of positive empathy and negative empathy as well as the strength of their other-oriented approach and avoidance motivations. We predicted that whereas positive empathy would be associated with other-oriented approach motivation, negative empathy would be associated with other-oriented avoidance motivation. In Study 2, we examined whether positive empathy and negative empathy would predict helping in different types of situations. Our focal prediction was that whereas positive empathy would predict helping only when that helping was framed as a means to assist needy others to approach positive end-states, negative empathy would predict helping only when that helping was framed as a means to assist needy others to avoid negative end-states.

In building a bridge between the burgeoning literature on positive empathy and existing influential scholarship on approach and avoidance motivations to assist others to approach positivity vs. avoid negativity, we examined these hypotheses in two studies. In Study 1, we measured respondents’ levels of positive empathy and negative empathy as well as the strength of their other-oriented approach and avoidance motivations. We predicted that whereas positive empathy would be associated with other-oriented approach motivation, negative empathy would be associated with other-oriented avoidance motivation. In Study 2, we examined whether positive empathy and negative empathy would predict helping in different types of situations. Our focal prediction was that whereas positive empathy would predict helping only when that helping was framed as a means to assist needy others to approach positive end-states, negative empathy would predict helping only when that helping was framed as a means to assist needy others to avoid negative end-states.

In building a bridge between the burgeoning literature on positive empathy and existing influential scholarship on approach and avoidance motivations to assist others to approach positivity vs. avoid negativity, we examined these hypotheses in two studies. In Study 1, we measured respondents’ levels of positive empathy and negative empathy as well as the strength of their other-oriented approach and avoidance motivations. We predicted that whereas positive empathy would be associated with other-oriented approach motivation, negative empathy would be associated with other-oriented avoidance motivation. In Study 2, we examined whether positive empathy and negative empathy would predict helping in different types of situations. Our focal prediction was that whereas positive empathy would predict helping only when that helping was framed as a means to assist needy others to approach positive end-states, negative empathy would predict helping only when that helping was framed as a means to assist needy others to avoid negative end-states.
motivations, the present work adds to the steadily growing body of evidence supporting the notion that positive and negative empathy are related in quite different ways to a variety of consequential social behaviors, emotions, and motivations.

1. Positive and negative empathy

The study of empathy—the capacity to connect with and/or experience another’s emotional state (see, e.g., de Waal, 2008; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994)—has a long history, both within psychology (see Eisenberg, 2000 for a review) and without (e.g., Darwin, 1871; Hume, 1978; 1998; Kant, 1889; Smith, 1759). As has been noted elsewhere, however (e.g., Morelli et al., 2015; Morelli, Rameson, & Lieberman, 2014), although empathy is usually defined as a general capacity to connect with others’ emotions (i.e., regardless of the “type” of emotion in question), the vast majority of research on empathy focuses exclusively on connection with others’ specifically negative emotions, largely ignoring the issue of whether individuals may connect to different extents with qualitatively different emotions displayed by others. Recently, however, a number of scholars have begun to examine the potential separability of empathy for others’ negative emotions and empathy for others’ positive emotions. This work has shown that although empathizing with either negative or positive emotions likely engages a number of the same foundational empathy-related processes (e.g., perspective-taking), empathizing with the negative vs. positive emotions of others also relates to unique patterns of neurological activity (e.g., Light et al., 2009; Morelli et al., 2014), different aspects of personality (e.g., Sallquist, Eisenberg, Spinrad, Eggum, & Gaertner, 2009), and different social behaviors and emotions (e.g., Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015).

For example, Morelli et al. (2014) demonstrated that although subjects who watched targets experiencing either positive or negative emotions showed activation in brain regions associated with prosocial motivation (e.g., the septal area; Francis, Champagne, & Meaney, 2000; Moll et al., 2011), observing targets experiencing negative emotions uniquely activated brain regions associated with the personal experience of negative affect whereas observing targets experiencing positive emotions uniquely activated brain regions associated with the personal experience of positive affect.

Andreychik and Migliaccio (2015) provided additional support for the separability of positive and negative empathy, demonstrating that whereas both positive and negative empathy were related to perspective-taking and (valence-unspecifed) emotional contagion, each of these also had a number of distinct correlates. In particular, whereas positive empathy was related to dispositional positive emotionality (see also Sallquist et al., 2009) as well as engagement in behaviors specifically aimed at increasing others’ positive emotions (e.g., random acts of kindness and pro-relational behaviors; Peetz & Kammrath, 2013), negative empathy was related to dispositional negative emotionality (see also Rothbart, Derryberry, & Hershey, 2000) and personal distress in response to others’ suffering. In addition, encouraging people to connect with the positive emotions of a suffering but hopeful social target (using empathy instructions similar to those employed by Batson and colleagues; e.g., Batson et al., 1997) resulted in an increase in vicarious positive emotionality, whereas encouraging participants to connect with the target’s negative emotions increased vicarious negative emotionality.

Particularly germane to the present analysis, Andreychik and Migliaccio also showed that positive and negative empathy were each independently related to helping of needy social targets. Importantly, however, these authors did not examine the motivations associated with positive empathy-related and negative empathy-related helping. This is a potentially important point to consider, since, as we will argue below, empathizing with others’ positive emotions is likely to energize helping motivations directed toward different goals than those energized by empathizing with others’ negative emotions. As such, although both positive empathy and negative empathy may relate to helping behavior broadly speaking, each may also relate particularly strongly to the specific types of helping or types of social targets that best fit with the motivational goals energized by each.

Specifically, our primary argument is that the vicarious experience (or anticipation of the experience) of another’s pain, suffering, or sadness is likely to energize a motivation to help the other to avoid and/or reduce these negative emotions. Because negative empathy involves a sensitivity to others’ negative emotions, it should thus relate particularly strongly to behavior aimed at assisting others to avoid or reduce negativity. In contrast, the vicarious experience (or anticipation of the experience) of another’s happiness, joy, or excitement is likely to energize a motivation to help the other to approach and/or maintain these positive emotions. Since positive empathy involves a sensitivity to others’ positive emotions, positive empathy should relate particularly strongly to behavior designed to assist others to approach or maintain positivity.

2. Approach and avoidance motivation

The two motivations just discussed, approach and avoidance, represent two distinct and fundamental motivational systems in humans (and, likely, in biological systems more generally: e.g., Jones & Gosling, 2008; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990), one that regulates appetitive motivation and the other, aversive motivation. In a 2006 review, Elliot summarized approach motivation as “…the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior toward, positive stimuli…” and avoidance motivation as “…the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior away from, negative stimuli” (pg. 111). Within psychology, this general approach and avoidance distinction has been applied quite broadly to help illuminate a variety of domains of human cognition, emotion, and behavior (e.g., Cacioppo & Bernston, 1994; Elliot & Church, 1997; Gray, 1981; Higgins, 1997) suggesting, among other things, that approach motivation is associated with greater sensitivity to anticipated positive stimuli and tends to energize behavior directed toward the achievement of goals, whereas avoidance motivation is associated with a greater sensitivity to anticipated negative stimuli and tends to energize behavior directed toward the avoidance of failure (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Elliot & Thrash, 2010).

Of particular relevance to the present work is scholarship demonstrating links between positive affect and approach motivation and between negative affect and avoidance motivation (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Elliot & Thrash, 2002). For example, Elliot and Thrash (2002) showed that individuals with stronger chronic approach orientations also had higher levels of dispositional positive affect whereas stronger chronic avoidance orientations were associated with higher levels of dispositional negative affect (see also Carver & White, 1994). Complementing this correlational evidence, Yan and Dillard (2010) demonstrated that personally experiencing positive and negative emotions also exerts causal effects on motivation. They showed that participants induced to feel happiness via a writing task reported significantly stronger approach than avoidance goals whereas those induced to feel fearfulness reported significantly stronger avoidance than approach goals. Likewise, work in social neuroscience has shown that experiential inductions of positive and negative emotions result in different patterns of neural activity, with induction of happiness resulting in neural patterns consistent with activation of the behavioral approach system (e.g., Coan, Allen, & Harmon-Jones, 2001; Davidson & Fox, 1982).

These links are quite sensible: Individuals who experience positive emotions particularly strongly are likely to be the same individuals who direct their energies toward the approach of reward-related stimuli and the pleasant reward-related emotions that accompany them. In contrast, individuals who experience negative emotions particularly strongly are likely to be the same individuals who direct their energies toward the avoidance of aversive punishment-related stimuli and the negative emotions associated with them. Extending this logic to the
دریافت فوری
متن کامل مقاله
امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند راهگیری سفارشات