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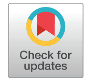
When does empathy feel good?



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Empathy has many benefits. When we are willing to empathize, we are more likely to act prosocially (and receive help from others in the future), to have satisfying relationships, and to be viewed as moral actors. Moreover, empathizing in certain contexts can actually feel good, regardless of the content of the emotion itself—for example, we might feel a sense of connectedness after empathizing with and supporting a grieving friend. Does this feeling come from empathy itself, or from its real and implied consequences? We suggest that the rewards that flow from empathy confound our experience of it, and that the pleasant feelings associated with engaging empathy are extrinsically tied to the results of some action, not to the experience of empathy itself. When we observe people's decisions related to empathy in the absence of these acquired rewards, as we can in experimental settings, empathy appears decidedly less pleasant.

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Most people think of empathy as a good thing. We go to movies, we share stories, we happily engage in the emotional lives of others. Empathy can feel good, even when the emotional content is unpleasant. It can be gratifying to share in a friend's disappointment, and comfort them after bad news. It will likely deepen our knowledge of each other and build a sense of trust, both of which are indicators of a strong relationship. Our friend might be there for us, and provide us support, the next time we get bad news of our own. Moreover, we might feel a sense of warmth and relatedness (e.g. a warm glow), knowing that we've helped someone we care about [1]. Empathizing in this context can provide the sense that we've done something good, something moral, which might boost our self-esteem and give us a sense of pride. In this way, empathy facilitates closeness [2], relationship satisfaction [3], and motivates prosocial behavior [4]. From an evolutionary perspective, things that are good for the group, and good for the individual, typically feel good to engage (cf. [5]). However, when these extrinsic rewards are stripped away from empathizing—rewards that flow from empathy but are not necessarily inherent parts of empathy—people report that empathy is effortful and aversive, and they avoid it [6•,7•]. Here, we suggest that the rewards that flow from empathy confound our experience of it in the real world. When these acquired rewards are reduced, empathy loses its appeal.

Beneficial empathy

Empathy has many components (e.g. see Refs. 8–12), often being separated into experience sharing (e.g. vicarious resonance with others' feelings), perspective taking (e.g. imagining oneself in their shoes), and compassion (e.g. cultivating prosocial intentions and warm feelings toward another; 10,13). While these components are distinct, recent work on everyday empathy suggests that when people spontaneously report empathic opportunities in their lives, most of the time (75%) there is co-occurrence between experience sharing, perspective taking, and compassion [13]. It is nonetheless possible that different components of empathy are differentially rewarding (e.g. Ref. 14), perhaps especially across contexts. Momentarily taking the perspective of a stranger on the street may have very few rewards — one might not even recognize that as an empathic experience, and might not think about it ever again. The rewards associated with that interaction are far fewer than, for example, visiting a friend in the hospital and sharing in their fear and sadness. It might not feel good to experience sadness and worry, but the social and emotional consequences that come from doing so might (e.g. a sense of closeness and affiliation; 15,16).

People who display empathy are typically rewarded for their willingness to feel with those around them. Choosing to engage in the emotional lives of our friends and

families gives us practice understanding the world from their perspective, and builds our self-efficacy and relational competence [17,18,2]. Not surprisingly, empathy in close relationships is related to relationship satisfaction — we like to be understood, and to understand our partners [18,2]. At a broader group level, empathy has long been associated with altruistic motivation and prosocial behavior (e.g. for reviews see Refs. 19,4). When people are empathizing, they are more willing to help others via the offering of their time [20,21], money (e.g. Refs. [21–23]), and even willingness to receive painful shocks to spare another's suffering [24].

Since empathy is so often associated with prosocial behavior [25], it is viewed as a highly valued and socially desirable trait (e.g. Refs. 2,26, though for critiques of the social value of empathy, see Ref. 27). Having a reputation as empathetic is usually a good thing [28,4,29,30•]. For example, Sassenrath [30•] manipulated the extent to which people believed they could lie during an empathy-induction task by attaching some participants to physiological equipment described as a 'lie detector'. Those who were believed they were attached to a lie detector reported experiencing less empathy after reading a story than those who were not attached to such equipment. Here, either empathic responding was reduced in the presence of a 'lie detector', or the absence of a 'lie detector' increased empathic responding. In either case, these results support the idea that people view empathy as a socially desirable trait.

Our interest in being known as empathetic makes good evolutionary sense: Engaging in empathy is a sign of willingness to act prosocially and of our value to those around us. If we cultivate a reputation as empathic and attuned to the needs of those around us, the chances of others' supporting us in a time of need are higher [31]. Ultimately, empathy facilitates our survival — it allows us to orient to the emotional states of those around us, which is fundamental to our ability to regulate social interactions and cooperate toward shared goals (for review see Refs. [12,32]).

On balance, people tend to focus on the positive effects of empathy (but see Ref. 27). Empathy allows us to build bonds and strengthens our community, and it might even provide a warm glow to those who are willing to engage it. But empathy also fails us — some argue that we are becoming less empathic [e.g. see Refs. 33,34 for US data], and political leaders have suggested that an 'empathy deficit' is one of the world's leading problems [35]. If empathy is so beneficial, why do not we come to it easily for strangers and people outside our groups?

Stripping away rewards

Empathy appears positive and desirable, yet people also seem motivated to avoid it [36] and some view its costs as overshadowing its rewards [27]. How do we explain this paradox? Is empathy inherently positive and enjoyable? Or is empathy actually experienced as difficult and aversive, but engaged in as a means to reap the rewards that come from it? We can get purchase on this question by removing many of the rewards gained by empathizing and then examining people's preferences when faced with empathy opportunities. If empathy is inherently pleasant and positive, then people will choose to engage in it even when the extrinsic rewards are minimized. For example, sex has many extrinsic and instrumental rewards (e.g. procreation, bonding with partner, reputation enhancement), but even if all these rewards were stripped away, people would still engage in it because it feels inherently good. Stripping away many of the extrinsic rewards that flow from empathy allows us to interrogate whether, by itself, empathizing is desirable or not.

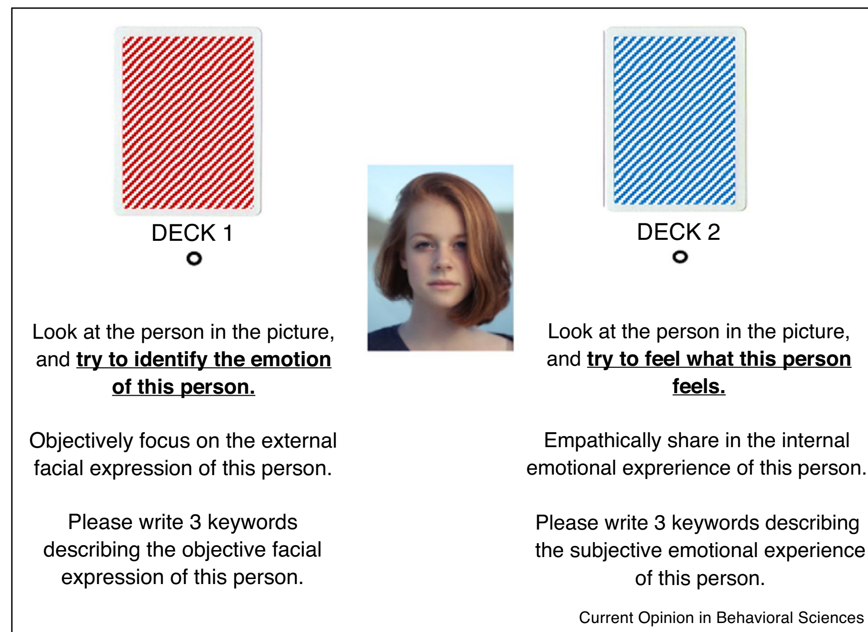
Recent experimental work from this perspective has demonstrated that people consistently prefer to avoid empathy in the absence of acquired rewards. The Empathy Selection Task [6•] is a behavioral paradigm wherein people choose between completing an empathy task (e.g. sharing in the internal experience of a stranger) or a comparable non-empathic task (e.g. identifying the emotional expression of a stranger; see Ref. [6•]; Figure 1).[6] Here, the empathy task seems void of obvious social rewards. There is no one to help, no one to bond with, no relationship to maintain. Work with this task has demonstrated that, over a series of trials, people are less likely to choose the empathy deck, and this has been demonstrated using different versions of the Empathy Selection Task intended to elicit different facets of empathy (i.e. experience sharing, perspective taking, and compassion [6•,7•,37]). More than that, participants report experiencing more mental demand, negative affect, and less self-efficacy when engaging in empathy than while completing an alternative task [6•,7•,38•]. These findings hold regardless of whether people are asked to empathize with pleasant or unpleasant emotions, and when the alternative task also includes emotional content [6•,7•]. Presumably, if people were choosing to empathize because it feels pleasant or good, they would be more likely to choose empathy for targets displaying positive emotion. But this is not what we find. By contrast, we might expect that empathy choice would increase if the *consequences* of empathy were more rewarding, which we will turn to next.

The rewards of empathy

In our prior work, we have found that empathy is felt as cognitively challenging, possibly because of the uncertainty associated with inferring information about another's experience. In the real world, these costs are

[6] Note that there are different variants which also address response length and format, see Ref. [6•].

Figure 1



Visualization of the Empathy Selection Task [6•]. The Empathy Selection Task has been adapted to elicit experience sharing, perspective taking, and compassion [6•,7•,37] using a variety of responses (e.g. written, binary choice, keywords). See Refs. [6•,7•,37] for details.

likely part of the equation, but they are mitigated by rewards — it is effortful to try to understand our friend's experience of rejection after a break up, but we care about their wellbeing and want to support them, and this makes it worth the effort.

In the lab, we can examine these trade-offs by manipulating the social context in which empathy arises. Ferguson *et al.* [7•] found that individuals were more willing to empathize with a self-nominated loved-other than a stranger, and they described empathizing with loved-others as less effortful than empathizing with strangers, though still more effortful than avoiding empathy altogether. Interestingly, when participants were asked to imagine that their loved-other was in distress (i.e. presumably eliciting some protection or threat response, and reminding participants of empathy's real-world social rewards), they were just as likely to opt-in to empathy with their loved-other as they were to opt-out of empathy all together. Moreover, people reported that feeling with their loved-other after imagining them in distress was just as mentally demanding as feeling with a stranger. That is, imaging one's loved-other in distress made empathizing with them feel hard, but people were nonetheless willing to do it. Unlike when people didn't choose empathy more for positive valence targets, here we see that when the consequences of empathy are potentially more rewarding — as they would be with a relationship partner — people choose empathy more. Such differences suggest that outcomes matter and highlight the extent to which empathizing is tied to real-world rewards in our minds.

Having a reputation as an empathetic person is typically a good thing [e.g. Refs. 28,4,29,30•], and engaging in empathy might feel good to the extent that cultivating a reputation as a caring person elicits rewards (e.g. more friends). In a series of studies, Ferguson *et al.* [7•] asked participants how much they agreed that 'moral character involves having empathy for people' after they completed an Empathy Selection Task. Interestingly, a relation was found between agreement with this idea and willingness to empathize with a stranger on the Empathy Selection Task in only one of three studies. Conversely, agreement with the statement, 'To what extent did you want to show that you had high moral character on the card task you just completed?' predicted willingness to empathize with a stranger across all three studies. That is, simply believing that empathy is related to moral character was not sufficient to motivate people into empathy in absence of its typical rewards, but those who perceived *some* potential for reputation-related or other social rewards were more likely to opt into empathy on the Empathy Selection Task. Again, these results highlight the extent to which empathizing is tied to real-world rewards in our minds, and the power that these associations hold in motivating our behavior.

The costs of empathy

In the absence of reward, expressing empathy involves more uncertainty and vulnerability than avoiding it. It's always possible that we'll get empathy wrong, that we'll misunderstand or misinterpret another's emotional state [cf. 6•]. Research in a variety of areas indicates that self-efficacy is an important element for inducing prosocial action (e.g. Refs. [39–41,42•]). Importantly, in the context of the Empathy Selection Task, there is no request for action beyond empathizing itself (i.e. there is no one to help). Here, self-efficacy indexes participants' sense that they are *successful at empathizing*. Across many studies, we find that retrospectively reported self-efficacy during the empathy deck is related to one's willingness to choose the empathy deck at all. People who were more likely to choose the empathy deck also reported relatively higher self-efficacy when completing that deck. Moreover, manipulating self-efficacy via false-feedback [6•] made people more likely to opt into empathy. When people thought they were getting empathy right, they were more willing to do it. Here, it may be that feelings of efficacy and competence at empathizing produce positive feelings in turn, which then bolster empathy choice. Again, it is the positive feelings resulting from empathic competence which might be the true target of feeling good about empathizing [e.g. see Ref. 42•].

Maximizing empathy

A subjective value-based choice perspective of empathy suggests that people make decisions about whether to engage in the emotions of others by weighing the relative rewards and costs in any particular situation [e.g. see Refs. 36,43]. From this perspective, empathy should be easiest, and most likely, when the costs are low and the rewards are high. When your partner gets news that their parent has died, empathizing with them feels automatic — it's easy to identify their grief and sadness (low cost), and doing so increases closeness and trust (high reward). This subjective value-based framework allows us to make predictions about how to motivate empathy behavior. If, like former US President Barack Obama, we are interested in increasing people's willingness to engage in empathy [35], we can evaluate the relative strength of empathy's various rewards and costs across empathy targets (e.g. loved-others, strangers). In this way, evaluating empathy in the lab allows us insight into the metrics by which people make decisions about when and with whom to empathize. Importantly, empathy is a complex social process and the form it takes in a controlled lab context is necessarily contrived. More work is needed to determine the extent to which, if at all, lab-induced empathy behavior generalizes to the real world.

Conclusion

We have many opportunities to empathize throughout our day [13]. In our daily lives, empathy-eliciting situations are *also* opportunities to demonstrate our real and potential value to our community and to receive real and potential social rewards. Noticing someone struggling with their groceries provides an opportunity to help them, and to receive praise and have a pleasant interpersonal interaction. Choosing to read about a tragic event might lead us to donate to a GoFundMe for survivors, and bolster our sense that we are a moral actor. We submit that the rewards of these empathy opportunities are typically extrinsically tied to the *results* of some action, not to the experience of empathy itself. These rewards are gained by empathy as an instrumental process [44], but not inherently linked to it. In the lab, we can observe people's decisions related to empathy with these rewards stripped away. And when we do, empathy appears decidedly less positive, requiring effort that we would otherwise avoid unless sufficiently motivated toward it. In this context, and devoid of obvious reward, empathy does not feel good.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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