Can Empathy Improve Concern For Secondary Group Members?

Testing An Emotionally Engaging Video Intervention

Aaron Castelán Cargile

California State University, Long Beach

1250 Bellflower Blvd.

Long Beach, California 90840-2407

Aaron Castelán Cargile is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies.

Phone: (562) 985-7971 / E-mail: acargile@csulb.edu

Author Note

I would like to thank Heather Barone for her help with data entry. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Paul Zak for sharing the stimulus and control videos used in his research.

Citation: Cargile, A. C. (in press). Can empathy improve concern for secondary group members? Testing an emotionally engaging video intervention. *Communication Research Reports*.

Abstract

Media presentations that attempt to improve intergroup relations often portray stigmatized group members in a sympathetic light in order to induce empathy. Emotion priming research suggests that induced empathy may not only affect reactions to those portrayed, but also to a wide range of secondary others. In order to test this possible secondary or transfer effect, the present study assessed whether empathy induced by a video of a boy with cancer could also increase caring for an unrelated stigmatized group member. Although the video was not found to have a direct effect, it did have a significant indirect effect on caring for the stigmatized group member, mediated by concern for the boy. In addition, this indirect effect was also moderated by both age and gender.

Keywords: affect, empathy, intergroup relations, racism, media

Tribalism and group conflict are woven into the fabric of human experience. Consequently, many efforts have been made to encourage the "better angels of our nature" by helping us all to get along. Among various modes of conflict intervention (e.g., peace camps, cooperative learning, intergroup dialogue), one popular choice has been media presentations, because they are both effective and easy to implement. Batson and Ahmad (2009) conclude that "positive media exposure to individual members of an outgroup can lead to more positive attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole" (p. 163). But can they, in addition, have an impact beyond the portrayed outgroup to also improve empathy reactions to secondary group members? The present study sought to address this question.

As Dovidio et al. (2010) note, "empathy... is an important factor to consider in interventions and programs designed to improve intergroup relations" (p. 395). As a result, empathy induction is a common component of many such intervention efforts. In these cases, the action of empathy is presumed to follow the path of the empathy-attitude model (Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997) in which empathy increases valuing of the stigmatized group member's welfare which, in turn, increases valuing and overall appraisal of the group as a whole. But what if the effects of empathy induction via video were not limited to the group featured in the narrative account? Because emotions typically prime emotion-congruent material, empathic feelings have been found to improve feelings and attitudes for unrelated others in circumstances of direct contact (e.g. ,Vezzali & Giovannini, 2012). Despite this, empathy may not always transfer (e.g., Shih, Wang, Bucher, & Stozer, 2009), and may even decrease concern for secondary others through reactions akin to compassion fatigue or empathic overarousal. Thus although video-induced empathy appears to be a promising tool for intergroup interventions,

there is no direct evidence that it does, in fact, transfer to members of secondary stigmatized groups. In light of this, the present study was undertaken to address the following question.

Research Question: Will participants shown an emotional video clip selected to induce empathic feelings for a stranger increase their empathic concern for a secondary stigmatized group member relative to those participants shown an unemotional control video?

Method

Participants were 97 undergraduate students at a large Western U.S. university, recruited in class to take part on a voluntary basis. The sample included 33 males and 64 females, who were on average 21.73 (SD = 2.29) years old and reported a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds (44 Caucasian, 29 Hispanic, 14 Asian, 5 African-American, 4 "other", and 1 declined to state). After completing a statement of informed consent, participants responded to 34-items in a survey packet and subsequently were randomly assigned to view either the control or experimental video. Both videos were obtained from another study which demonstrated the experimental video's capacity to induce empathic feelings- a clip in in which a father tearfully explains the experiences of his 2-year old son who has terminal brain cancer (Barraza & Zak, 2009). The control video also portrays the father and son, but features emotionally-neutral testimony.

Participants in both groups collectively watched the assigned video and then completed a six-item measure of their empathic feelings for the boy used in the original study (e.g., "I felt moved"; see Barraza & Zak, 2009; $\alpha = .87$). After this, an audio-recorded true story of individual racism was presented- one in which an African-American man named Terry described a time when he was treated differently than white customers when purchasing a pair of shoes (available from Glide Racial Justice, n.d.). Empathic concern for the storyteller was then

measured using six items adapted from the empathic concern subscale of the most widely used measure of empathy- the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (e.g., "I was quite touched by the speaker's story"; Davis, 1983; $\alpha = .81$).

Results

In order to determine if the emotional video had a main effect on empathic concern for the storyteller (ECS), an independent samples *t* test was conducted. Results showed that the difference in ECS across the control (N = 48, M = 5.702, SD = .930) and experimental groups (N = 49, M = 5.650, SD = 1.035) was not statistically significant, t(95) = -.261, p = .794, 95% CI [-.449, .345], d = -.052. To test whether empathic feelings for the boy (EFB) mediated the effect of the emotional video on ECS, Model 4 in SPSS PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was estimated using unstandardized coefficients and bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The emotional video was found to influence EFB (*b* = .368, SE = .183, p = .047, 95% CI = .005, .732), which in turn affected ECS (*b* = .435, SE = .105, p = .000, 95% CI = .226, .643). The model did not produce a significant direct effect of the emotional video on ECS (*b* = -.209, SE = .191, p = .276, 95% CI = -.588, .169), but did indicate a significant indirect effect (*b* = .160, SE = .094, 95% CI = .020, .403). Moderation analyses indicated that among the demographic variables, age moderated the effect of the emotional video on EFB (*b* = .247, t(91) = 3.582, p = .001, 95% CI = .109, .384), and that gender moderated the effect of EFB on ECS (*b* = .585, t(92) = 2.032, p = .045, 95% CI = .013, 1.157).[1]

Discussion

This study was undertaken to explore the potential for empathy to transfer from a sympathetic video presentation of one individual to a member of a secondary stigmatized group. Although the emotional video was not found to directly encourage empathic concern for the

African-American man in this study, it did have a significant indirect effect mediated by empathic concern for the boy featured in the video. In addition, the mediated effect of empathic concern for the boy was further moderated by both age and gender. Despite their moderated mediated nature, this study is the first to suggest that empathy transfer is indeed a possible mechanism through which media may intervene in intergroup conflict. It seems that the effects of media presentations are not limited to those outlined by the empathy-attitude model (i.e., empathy for a stigmatized outgroup member increases the overall appraisal of the group), but may also prime emotion-congruent reactions. In this case, a sympathetic video presentation of a boy with cancer increased concern for an unrelated African-American man who experienced discrimination, though only among those who reported feeling touched by the boy's story. These results suggest that empathy-inducing media presentations may have a role to play in efforts to improve intergroup relations.

References

Barraza, J. A., & Zak, P. J. (2009). Empathy toward strangers triggers oxytocin release and subsequent generosity. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1167*, 182-189.

Batson, C. D., & Ahmad, N. Y. (2009). Using empathy to improve intergroup attitudes and relations. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 3*, 141-177.

Batson, C. D., Polycarpou, M. P., Harmon-Jones, E., Imhoff, H. J., Mitchener, E. C., Bednar, L. L., Klein, T., & Highberger, L. (1997). Empathy and attitudes: Can feeling for a member of a stigmatized group improve feelings toward the group? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 105.

Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44*, 113-126.

Dovidio, J. F., Johnson, J. D., Gaertner, S. L., Pearson, A. R., Saguy, T., & Ashburn-Nardo, L. (2010). Empathy and intergroup relations *Prosocial motives, emotions, and behavior: The better angels of our nature* (pp. 393-408). Washington DC: APA.

Glide Racial Justice. (n.d.). Introduction to stories of racial profiling by the Glide Racial Justice Group. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/user/GlideRacialJustice?feature=watch

Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Shih, M., Wang, E., Bucher, A. T., & Stotzer, R. (2009). Perspective taking: Reducing prejudice towards general outgroups and specific individuals. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 12*, 565-577.

Vezzali, L., & Giovannini, D. (2012). Secondary transfer effect of intergroup contact: The role of intergroup attitudes, intergroup anxiety and perspective-taking. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 22*, 125-144.

Endnotes

[1]Tests of the simple slopes indicated that the emotional video increased EFB among mean age, t(91) = 2.187, B =.386, p = .031, 95% CI = .035, .7372, and older (i.e., +1 SD) participants, t(91) = 3.84, B =.954, p = .000, 95% CI = .460, 1.447, but not among younger (i.e., -1 SD) participants, t(91) = .803, B = -.181, p = .424, 95% CI = -.629, .267. Similarly, EFB was found to increase ECS among male t(92) = 3.175, B = .787, p = .002, 95% CI = .295, 1.289, but not among female participants, t(92) = .803, B = .202, p = .172, 95% CI = -.089, .493.