

The Effects of Perspective on Prosocial Emotions and Intent

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ABSTRACT

Conceptualizing perspectives into three types—victim, involved observer and disinterested observer, we investigate how perspective influences prosocial intents via its effects on prosocial emotions. We show that taking the perspective of victims or involved observers boosts empathic distress, but only the latter elicits high guilt and prosocial intent.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When imagining someone in pain, individuals can either putting themselves into the victim's shoes or evaluate the possible remedies for the situation from an observer's perspective. The affective reactions to the situation depend on the perspective that they take (Jones and Nisbett 1972). That is, individuals who appraise a situation from different perspectives can have different emotional reactions (Hung and Mukopaphyay 2012). In a case that they get too close to the victim and lose themselves, they may be too distressed to consider help. Yet in another case if they stay too distant, they may become disinterested to empathize and fail to recognize the need of help. These cases highlight the mixed findings in literature concerning which perspective, of the victim or of an observer, is more effective to motivate prosocial intents.

To reconcile this dilemma, we theorize that the effects of perspective are underlain by two opposite forces—the capacity to empathize and self-awareness to evaluate potential obligations. In literature, empathy and self-consciousness have been treated as opposite ends of a continuum. That is, people who imagine the situation from the victims' perspective are assumed to lose themselves in the situation, blurring the subjective distinction between themselves and the others (Green and Brock 2000). However, this conceptualization does not account for all of the effects that perspectives might have. When several parties are involved in a situation, people might imagine the situation from the two basic perspectives but also that of persons other than the victim who are involved in the situation. The effects of taking the perspective of this involved observer have not been articulated.

This research sets out to understand the effects of the perspective of *involved* observer and shows that this perspective is optimal in stimulating prosocial intent. We predict that although both the perspectives of victim and involved observer boost empathy and distress as compare to that of disinterested observer, only the latter elicit more guilt and results in enhanced prosocial intent. These effects can be summarized in two parallel routes, empathy-based and obligation-based.

Three experiments validate the proposed effects and mechanism. In the studies, participants read about a fatal ferry collision. In *disinterested-observer* conditions, they imagined the situation as if they watched a new report of it on television. In *involved-observer conditions*, they imagined themselves as passengers on the undamaged boat which left the scene immediately after the collision. (In study 3, participants imagined themselves as a passenger on the ship passing by the scene.) In *victim* conditions, they imagined themselves as a passenger on the sinking boat. Then participants listed their thoughts, and reported their emotions and prosocial intent.

In study 1 ($N = 71$), participants reported more distress when taking either an involved observer's perspective ($M = 7.41$) or the victims' perspective ($M = 6.41$) than by taking a disinterested observer's perspective ($M = 5.70$; $F(2, 68) = 4.39, p = .016$). However, the involved observer's perspective induced more guilt ($M_{IO} = 5.87$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 4.20$ vs. $M_{DO} = 3.89, F(2, 68) = 4.26, p = .018$) and a greater prosocial intent ($M_{IO} = 8.04$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 6.35$ vs. $M_{DO} = 6.75, F(1, 68) = 3.20, p = .078$). We created two contrast variables to examine the empathy-based (1, 1, and -2 for involved observer, victim, and disinterested observer perspectives respectively) and the obligation based routes (1, -1, and 0 respectively). Bootstrapping analyses (Model 4, Hayes 2013, based on 5000 resamples) supported for both the empathy-based (95%CI: .0574 to .5406, empathic distress as the mediator) and the obligation-based routes (95%CI: .0071 to .6532, guilt as the mediator).

In study 2 ($N = 118$), participants completed a more extensive questionnaire which assessed the underlying processes. The results replicated the observed effects of perspective on distress ($M_{IO} = 5.98$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 5.33$ vs. $M_{DO} = 4.27, p < .001$) and guilt ($M_{IO} = 4.77$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 3.24$ vs. $M_{DO} = 2.30, p < .001$). As predicted, results indicated that the effect of perspective on empathy mirrored its effect on distress ($M_{IO} = 6.43$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 6.41$ vs. $M_{DO} = 5.12, p = .019$) while the effect on self-consciousness was parallel with that on guilt ($M_{IO} = 6.76$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 5.74$ vs. $M_{DO} = 5.57, p = .024$). As in Study 1, planned contrasts were created to examine the mediating effects of empathic distress and obligation-based mechanisms (Model 6, Hayes 2013). Bootstrapping yielded a significant mediation pathway for both the empathy-based (95%CI: .0014 to .0670) and the obligation-based routes (95%CI: -.0706 to -.0014).

Study 3 employed a 3 (perspective: victim vs. involved observer vs. disinterested observer) \times 2 (context: newspaper vs. donation appeal) between-subjects design. We predicted that donation appeals enable individuals who take the victim's perspective to recognize their role as a help-giver at the outset and thus these individuals adopt a perspective similar to that of involved observers in the situation we have considered. Specifically, context moderated the effects of perspective on guilt ($F(2, 219) = 2.61, p = .076$) and prosocial intent ($F(2, 219) = 3.12, p = .046$), but not empathic distress ($M_{IO} = 5.75$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 5.84$ vs. $M_{DO} = 4.76, p = .001$). In the newspaper conditions, the effects of perspective on guilt ($M_{IO} = 4.07$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 2.53$ vs. $M_{DO} = 2.75, p = .002$) and prosocial intent ($M_{IO} = 7.22$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 6.04$ vs. $M_{DO} = 6.62, p = .031$) observed in earlier studies were replicated. In the donation appeal conditions, however, the feelings of guilt ($M_{IO} = 3.51$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 3.24, F < 1$) and motivation to help ($M_{IO} = 6.70$ vs. $M_{Vic} = 6.76, F < 1$) of the participants who employed the victim's perspective increased to the level experienced by who employed that of the involved observers. Comparably, that of disinterested observer induced less intense feelings of guilt ($M_{DO} = 2.18$) and prosocial intent ($M_{DO} = 5.96$). This suggests that to consider helping, individuals must be conscious of the distinction between themselves and the victims and thus of being a position to help.

Past research assumed that individuals would lose themselves completely in a situation when they imagine it vividly and empathize with the protagonists. However, the present studies show that the disposition to empathize and the level of self-consciousness can be induced independently in a given perspective. This occurs when individuals imagine themselves as an observer who is physically (or emotionally) involved in the situation.

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