

I Totally Empathize With You...Sometimes: Effects of Empathy on Ethnic Group Interactions

February 18, 2009

Increased empathy toward minority group members is one way to reduce prejudice and promote more positive inter-group relationships. When individuals take on the perspective of someone from a different group, a number of processes and feelings are set in motion that should lead to more positive feelings toward members of that group. But University of Manitoba psychologists Jacquie D. Vorauer and Stacey J. Sasaki wanted to investigate the effect of empathy in actual interactions with minority group members.

Volunteers were shown a brief segment of a documentary detailing the hardships endured by members of a minority group and were instructed to view it with an objective or an empathetic mindset. The volunteers expected to discuss the video with another study participant, who was either from the same ethnic group as they were or from the minority group depicted in the documentary. The partners never actually met; instead they had controlled interactions in which written personal information was exchanged (in reality, only the researchers read the written responses).

The results, described in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that empathy for minority groups has a much less positive effect when it is triggered in the context of an actual intergroup interaction situation than it does when directed toward minority group members in the abstract. The researchers found that the volunteers who had viewed the video with empathy and were told they were paired with a participant from a minority group reported more negative feelings towards minority group members, including greater feelings of prejudice. However, the empathetic volunteers who had been paired up with participants from their own ethnic group reported a more positive attitude towards minority group members.

The researchers surmise that empathy has a negative effect during interactions with members of the minority group because the empathetic individuals become preoccupied with how they will be viewed by that minority group. That is, these individuals focus so much on what the others will think of them (specifically, thinking about how the majority group might be viewed as prejudiced or be criticized for having mistreated the minority group in the past), that any empathy they have for the minority group takes a backseat and they begin to dwell on negative feelings that minority group members have toward them instead, which can then lead to more negative attitudes toward that group. The researchers conclude that these findings suggest that when we think about other ethnic groups in the abstract, the resulting attitudes may be very different from the feelings we actually experience during interactions with members of those groups.