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Contextual Malleability of Empathy: Effects of Trait Level, Group

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Abstract

Empathy was mainly considered a stable trait, and few studies have investigated whether it can vary across different situations. This investigation explores how contextual empathy of study participants varies across different social group relationship and positive/negative event valence. In this study, participants were divided into high- or low-empathy group by their scores of Empathy Scale. The in/out group membership was manipulated through a point estimation paradigm, and event valence was operationalized by the emotion status of the character in the story event. As expected, results showed main effects across all factors that participants demonstrated contextual empathy differently. More importantly, an ingroup bias is significantly emerged, with participants exhibiting enhanced contextual empathy toward ingroup than outgroup character. Furthermore, positive story events elicited more contextual empathic responses than negative events. These findings evidently provide an empirical support for the context-dependent nature of empathy, challenging its traditional conceptualization as an invariant trait.

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