Empathy and distress: Internal and external context dependency of emotion term selection

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This study investigated the relationship between thought, emotion, and language for the feelings of *empathy* and *distress* within C.D. Batson's Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis (Batson and Shaw 1991). Within Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis 6 terms denoting *empathy* (*compassionate*, *moved*, *softhearted*, *sympathetic*, *tender*, *warm*) and 8 terms denoting *distress* (*alarmed*, *grieved*, *distressed*, *disturbed*, *perturbed*, *distressed*, *troubled*, *upset*, *worried*) are routinely used to identify and determine the presence of these respective feelings (Batson et al. 1987: 27). The main focus of this study was the question of which of these emotion terms would be preferred by participants experimentally conditioned to feel either *empathy* or *distress*.

There were 154 participants involved at various stages of this study, all of whom were English majors and all of whom volunteered for the study. Two experimental conditions were created: one of *empathy* and one of *distress*. Within each condition participants were confronted with purpose-made stimuli designed to create a mental representation of a fictional character in distress, who would constitute a potential object of feeling. The stimuli constituted the context in which the feelings of *empathy* or *distress* could potentially occur. The feelings themselves were evoked through a manipulation of the participant's perspective on the stimuli and strengthened by assigning participants to conditions which favored their natural propensities towards *empathy* or *distress*. The natural propensities for given feelings were tested in a separate study preceding the one presented here.

The primary hypothesis was that that there would be significant differences in how emotion terms for *empathy* and *distress* would be processed by participants conditioned to feel either *empathy* or *distress*. The secondary hypothesis was that only emotion terms with manifest affective semantic component, high frequency and high rate of familiarity within target population would differ significantly between experimental conditions. The primary hypothesis was partially confirmed. It was found that participants in the *empathy* condition processed the condition-incongruent *distress* terms faster and more accurately than the condition-congruent *empathy* terms. Thistendency indicates possible influence of negativity bias (Cacioppo and Gardner 1999: 205) on the results. The secondary hypothesis was confirmed. Only emotion terms with meanings manifestly conveying affect, ranking high in frequency and familiarity reached levels of significance in comparison between conditions. This might partially be dependent on the participants' proficiency of the English language (Altarriba and Morier 2004: 250), as English was not their native tongue. The overall implications are that emotion term selection for the description of affective states is highly dependent on the communicative contexts, both internal and external (Kopytko 2002: 247).

References

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