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The Relationship Between the Private Self and Helping Victims of AIDS

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Social psychological theory is not often extended into real-world social contexts. In contrast, the current work applies the concept of increasing the accessibility of the private self (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991) to a real-world situation: namely, helping people with AIDS. The current results show that priming the private self increases actual helping behaviors directed toward victims of AIDS as compared to a no-prime condition. Furthermore, path analyses show that empathy mediates the prime-helping relationship. No significant gender differences were observed in self-reports of empathy toward victims of AIDS, but women generally volunteered to help more than men.

Experimental social psychology is often criticized for failing to explore real-world applications of theoretically driven concepts. This has been particularly true in the case of theories concerning the effect of culture on people’s self-concepts. In order to address this concern, the present research investigates how these theories can be applied to induce people to help members of stigmatized groups, such as persons with AIDS (PWAs).

Our understanding of the self has been enhanced by cross-cultural research that has distinguished between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). The culture that is predominant in the United States and parts of Europe is commonly referred to as individualistic, whereas eastern cultures are more likely to be labeled collectivistic. Members of individualistic cultures tend to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups less than do members of collectivistic cultures (see Triandis, 1994, for a review of the literature). Also, in individualistic cultures, where the distinction between in-group or out-group members is not considered to be as important as in collectivistic cultures, people tend to be more accepting of out-group members. Thus, members of an individualistic culture may be more likely to help or to act altruistically toward out-group members than are people from

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collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1989, 1994; see also Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

These culture-based concepts (collectivism and individualism) have also been applied to research concerning the self. Triandis (1989) argued that the self (a concept he thought was central to a person’s perceptions and behaviors) is shaped by norms, values, and beliefs that are influenced by cultural environment. Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) extended this idea and proposed that two types of cultural representations are represented within the self (see also Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984). They labeled these types of selves private and collective. Trafimow et al. defined the private self as a location in memory where thoughts of one’s own states and traits are stored, and the collective self as where thoughts of group membership are stored. Their “dual-self” model assumes that both selves exist and that one or the other is more likely to be accessible at any given time. In particular, Trafimow et al. argued that the private self is generally more accessible in individualistic than in collectivistic cultures, and the collective self is more accessible in collectivistic than in individualistic cultures. Further, Trafimow et al. provided empirical support for their two-location theory and for the efficacy of a priming manipulation to increase the accessibility of these selves. Several additional studies also support the two-location theory (Bochner, 1994; Lee, 1996; Singelis, 1994; Trafimow et al., 1991; Trafimow, Silverman, Fan, & Law, 1997).

If the private self corresponds with individualistic cultures, as the previously mentioned research suggests, and if individualistic cultures place less importance on distinguishing in-group members from out-group members, it is reasonable to suppose that increasing the accessibility of the private self will lessen the tendency to label individuals in terms of group membership. Thus, persons may be able to experience less negative, and perhaps more positive, feelings toward individuals who are not usually thought of as part of the subject’s in-group.

Empathy

One way to test whether priming the private self can improve feelings and actions toward an out-group would be to prime the private self and measure an affective reaction or an actual prosocial behavior directed toward members of an out-group. Further, the emotional reactions measured should be those that are expected to lead to performing such a behavior. Because empathy (which is the ability to understand, in an affective way, another’s plight or situation) has been found to increase helping behaviors (Batson & Coke, 1981; Batson et al., 1988; Betancourt, 1990; Toi & Batson, 1982), we tested whether increasing the accessibility of the private self would lead to increasing feelings of empathy and actual helping behavior directed toward an out-group perceived as being in need of help.
Victims of AIDS were chosen as the out-group for three reasons. First, using the PWA group provides participants with an actual opportunity to help a group of stigmatized people who are in need of social and other types of support (see Cadwell, 1991; Clemo, 1992; Leone & Wingate, 1991). Second, the AIDS resources organization in the county in which this study was implemented was, in fact, in need of volunteers at the time the research was being conducted. Third, the idea that empathy increases helping (and is related to other prosocial behaviors) is also specifically supported in intergroup research using the AIDS population (Austin, Hong, & Hunter, 1989; Bean, Keller, Newburg, & Brown, 1989; Froman, Owen, & Daisy, 1992; Johnson, 1987; McDonell, 1993; Pulliam, 1993).

Hypotheses

In general, priming the private self should result in a tendency to respond positively toward members of an out-group because the need to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups should be less important. More specifically, three hypotheses are tested. First, increasing the accessibility of the private self should lead to increases in empathy and helping toward PWAs, as compared to a no-prime condition. Second, empathy should mediate the prime–helping relationship. Third, if empathy completely mediates the prime–helping relationship, then controlling for empathy should eliminate the prime–helping relationship.

In addition to the main hypotheses, it was also convenient to analyze how gender of the subject might affect our findings. In this paradigm, the gender of the participants is of some interest for several reasons. First, research findings concerning gender differences and empathy have been inconsistent. For example, Davis (1994) reported that women tend to self-report higher empathic responding than do men. Dispositional measures of empathy also often support females’ tendencies to empathize more than males (Dovidio, 1984; see also Archer, Foushee, Davis, & Adelman, 1979; Buck, Savin, Miller, & Caul, 1972; Eisenberg et al., 1991). However, behavioral measures and some other self-report studies have not resulted in these types of gender differences (Betancourt, 1990; Davis, 1994; Hoffman, 1977; see also Block, 1976). Thus, the debate about gender differences pertaining to empathy has not yet been resolved (Davis, 1994).

Additional research has suggested other gender differences that can be examined as well. For example, prior research has consistently indicated that males tend to be much more prejudiced than are females toward PWAs (Austin et al., 1989; Cunningham, Dollinger, Satz, & Rotter, 1991; see also Connors & Heaven, 1990). Helping has also been found to be gender specific, based on the nature of the helping task (Belansky & Boggiano, 1994). Thus, we explore the possibility that males would report less feelings of empathy toward PWAs and would volunteer less and spend less time helping than would females.
Method

Participants

Participants were 88 female and 74 male students in introductory psychology classes at New Mexico State University.

Design

The study was a 2 x 2 (Prime: Private Prime vs. No Prime x Gender) between-subjects factorial.

Procedure

Participants in the priming condition were informed that they were to be involved in two separate studies that were of interest to different researchers. Subsequently, each participant was asked to pretend that he or she was the main character (i.e., Sostoras, a Sumerian warrior) in the following short story. The private priming manipulation is similar to the one used by Trafimow et al. (1991), with the exception that the war-related concepts were removed. Eighty-three participants, run in groups of 4 to 25, were randomly assigned to read the following "private" self prime.

I am Sostoras, a leader in ancient Sumer, and I was largely responsible for the economic success of Sargon's empire. As a result, I was rewarded with a small kingdom of my own to rule. About 10 years later, Sargon was preparing to build a new city to increase trade. I was obligated to send a detachment of soldiers to help build the new city. I had to decide who to put in command of the detachment. After thinking about it for a long time, I eventually decided on Tiglath, who was a talented general and engineer. This appointment would solidify my hold on my own dominion. In addition, the very fact of having a general, such as Tiglath, as my personal representative would greatly increase my prestige. Finally, sending my best general would likely make Sargon grateful. Consequently, there was a possibility of being rewarded by Sargon.

The prime was followed by a question about the subject's ability to identify with Sostoras in order to facilitate a sense of closure for the "experiment" and a second question in order to identify the subject's gender.
All participants received a questionnaire intended to measure self-reports of empathic emotions (Betancourt, 1990) toward the AIDS group. No-prime participants received only this portion of the experiment, and private prime participants received it following the prime. The questionnaire asked to what degree participants felt the following empathic emotions toward PWAs: compassion, sympathy, moved, grieved, upset, disturbed, and alarmed. These items employed a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely) through 4 (neutral) to 7 (not at all).

All participants were then told that the experiment was finished, but were asked to read the contents of a manila envelope as a favor to a community organization that the experimenter had contacted to get background information about parts of the study. The experimenter asked the participants to read the contents and to fill out the materials only if they would like to be contacted by the organization. All participants were instructed to put the contents of the envelope back into the envelope, regardless of their response, as the envelopes were going to be returned to the community organization and could be reused if they were not filled out. Debriefing occurred at several stages, depending on the desire of the subject to help the organization.

The envelope contained a statement that a New Mexico AIDS organization, ARDAC (AIDS Resources for Dona Ana County), is in need of volunteers. Participants were asked to actually volunteer for this organization and to indicate the amount of time they would be willing to spend helping. Participants who filled out the volunteer sheets later received telephone calls. The ARDAC volunteer coordinator kept a time log of all persons in the study who actually spent time helping the organization. Participants who volunteered to help were expected to participate before 1 month and 20 days from the time they were contacted by phone. Participants who failed to do so within that time period were considered not to have helped.

Results

Creating Dependent Variable Measures

Empathy. The Betancourt (1990) empathy items are traditionally made up of two components. However, we chose to use the items as a single scale due to the exploratory nature of the current research, as well as the satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha (.86) that was obtained for the single scale.3

3Principal components analyses and additional reliability analyses were performed and compared to the traditional two-component empathy interpretation (Betancourt, 1990), but provided no reason to believe that a two-factor interpretation for this scale was necessary.
**Helping.** Three measures were created out of the volunteer and behavioral variables. A dichotomous variable was created from participants' decisions to fill out the volunteer sheet, and was used as a general measure of whether or not participants intended to help. A second, continuous variable was based on the overall number of hours participants intended to help the organization (hereafter this measure is referred to as "Hours") and was used in the ANOVA and path analyses. Finally, the number of hours participants actually spent helping the organization constituted the third measure (hereafter this measure is referred to as "Actual").

**Descriptive Analyses of Volunteering and Actual Helping Behavior**

Approximately 24% (38 persons) of all subjects indicated a willingness to help by filling out the volunteer sheets. The total number of hours volunteered was 60. Unfortunately, only 4 subjects (2.5%) actually spent time helping ARDAC, and 38 hours were spent helping. However, 3 of these volunteers committed to continue to help the organization on a permanent basis.

Gender analyses were also performed on the volunteering and actual helping measures. Women volunteered to help more than did men, $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 3.27, p < .08$; 26 women out of 88 volunteered, whereas only 12 men out of 74 volunteered. However, two gender by prime ANOVAs, which were performed on both of the continuous variables, indicated that the gender difference was only marginally significant for the number of hours volunteered, $F(1, 158) = 3.35, p < .07$, and failed to reach significance on the actual helping measure, $F < 1$. Yet, the fact that 3 women and only 1 man actually spent time helping suggests that had more volunteers actually helped, the same pattern might have been statistically significant.

**Analyses of the Private Priming Manipulation**

The dichotomous volunteering measure was positively affected by the private priming manipulation, $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 6.05, p < .01$; 33% of the subjects who received the private prime filled out a volunteer sheet, compared to only 14% of subjects who received no prime. In order to examine if the private prime had a similar effect on the continuous measures of volunteering and on actual behavior, $2 \times 2$ ANOVAs involving the continuous volunteering and helping measures were performed. Subjects in the private prime condition volunteered more time to ARDAC than did subjects in the no-prime condition ($M = .40$ and $.12$, respectively), $F(1, 158) = 4.29, p < .05$ (Table 1). Furthermore, subjects who received the private prime were also more likely to actually spend time helping ($M = .42$ and $.00$, respectively), $F(1, 158) = 3.85, p < .05$ (Table 1), than were subjects in
Table 1

Means (and Standard Deviations) of Empathy, Hours (Total Hours Volunteered), and Actual Hours (Total Time Spent Helping)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No prime</td>
<td>3.17 (1.07)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.68)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private prime</td>
<td>2.79 (1.08)</td>
<td>0.40 (0.98)</td>
<td>0.42 (1.89)</td>
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</tbody>
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*High numbers indicate less empathy reported toward victims of AIDS.

the no-prime condition. The combination of these analyses provides a rather strong case that priming the private self not only creates a willingness to help PWAs, but also increases actual helping.

Finally, it is theoretically possible that the private prime might have increased helping for only male or female subjects, but not for the combination of the two. If this were the case, a gender by prime interaction using the volunteering or actual helping measures should be significant. However, the interactions from both ANOVAs failed to reach significance in both cases, $F < 1$.

Empathy Analyses

Although priming the private self did not interact with the gender of the subject, according to the empathy and AIDS literature reviewed earlier, males should have reported feeling less empathy than did females on all of the self-report variables. In order to explore the gender and prime differences, a gender by prime ANOVA was performed with empathy as the dependent variable. Participants in the private prime condition reported significantly more empathy toward PWAs than did participants in the no-prime condition, $F(1, 162) = 4.87, p < .05$ (see Table 1), but the relationship between gender and empathy was only marginally significant ($M = 2.84$ for men and $M = 3.15$ for women), $F(1, 162) = 3.19, p = .08$.

Analyses on Empathy as a Mediator

The results from the ANOVA and chi squares indicate that the private prime significantly increased feelings of empathy toward PWAs, volunteering, and actual helping behavior. However, to find out if empathy mediates the effect of the private prime on helping, we performed additional analyses.

First, we conducted a prime by gender ANCOVA with empathy as the covariate and the number of hours subjects actually volunteered as the dependent
variable. Consistent with expectations, controlling for empathy in this way eliminated the effect of prime on hours ($p > .1$).

A path analysis was also performed to further explore whether empathy mediated the prime-helping relationship. Three standardized path coefficients were calculated. These were from (a) prime to empathy, (b) empathy to hours, and (c) prime to hours, not mediated by empathy. If, as the present conceptualization asserts, the effect of prime on hours is mediated by empathy, then the standardized path coefficients from prime to empathy and from empathy to hours should be significant. However, the standardized path coefficient from prime to hours not mediated by empathy (the direct path) should not be significant. In fact, all three predictions were confirmed. The first two path coefficients were significant (.17 and .24, respectively, $p < .05$, in both cases), while the third was not ($p > .1$). More generally, the ANCOVA and path analysis both indicate that although the prime clearly affected empathy and helping, the effect on helping was completely mediated by empathy.

**Discussion**

The most important results can be summarized as follows. First, participants who received the private self-prime were more likely to help PWAs than were participants in the control group. Further, the fact that this comparison was significant for each of the three helping measures indicates that it is a robust effect. Second, participants who received the private self-prime also exhibited a significantly greater degree of empathy for PWAs than did control participants. Third, ANCOVA and path analyses demonstrate that empathy mediates the effect of the prime on helping behavior. Finally, the effects did not depend on whether the participants were male or female.

Before discussing the implications of these findings, it seems worthwhile to note some potential limitations. First, one might argue that the act of completing the measures, rather than the private self-prime, could have caused the increase in helping. However, because there was a control group that also completed exactly the same measures, reactivity to the measures cannot, by itself, explain the obtained differences between the two groups. On the other hand, it remains possible that completing the measures enhanced the effect of the prime.

A second limitation is that although the data clearly show a robust effect of the prime on empathy and helping, these effects could be explained in more than one way. One possibility is that the prime directly affected empathy and helping. A second possibility is that it was the combination of the prime and the mention of PWAs in the empathy and helping measures that caused empathy and helping. We suspect that the latter is a more plausible explanation because the prime was designed to increase the accessibility of individualism, which should have
induced participants to think of people as individuals. Theoretically, the prime, by itself, was not expected to increase empathy and helping for PWAs. However, when participants who have been induced to perceive others as individuals are later presented with out-group members in a life-threatening situation (i.e., having AIDS), then they are more likely to experience empathy than are participants who had not been induced to perceive out-group members in this way.

The robust effect of the private self-prime on empathy and helping has some practical implications. Intergroup researchers have frequently pointed out that prejudice is extremely difficult to change (see Hewstone, 1989, for a review). However, the present data suggest an interesting possibility. Specifically, priming the private self may cause people to perceive even highly stigmatized out-group members as individuals, which is incompatible with "dehumanizing" them due to their status as out-group members. Of course, the generalizability of the effect of the private prime to various out-groups is a matter to be determined by future research.

There are also implications for volunteering behavior in general—namely, that priming the private self increases volunteering. To be sure, the present data demonstrate this only with helping PWAs, but there are no obvious reasons to believe that a similar effect would fail to occur with regard to other volunteering behaviors concerned with helping people in need. Some of these might involve community service with minority children, helping victims of crime (e.g., battered women) and many other charitable acts. It seems less likely that the priming manipulation would affect volunteering in areas not pertaining to specific individuals (e.g., the environment).

There is also a theoretical implication. Specifically, cross-cultural psychologists have often conceptualized individualism and collectivism as being stable dispositional qualities. The present data suggest that this is not always the case. If reading a short story about an ancient Assyrarian (the priming manipulation) not only affects measures of individualism and collectivism (e.g., Lee, 1996; Trafimow et al., 1991, 1997), but also affects volunteering later on in the experiment, and even actual helping up to several weeks later, then the stability of individualism and collectivism must be reconsidered. We are not arguing that these dimensions are inherently unstable, only that they can be easily influenced by priming manipulations. Moreover, we do not believe that the sensitivity of these dimensions to priming manipulations is unfortunate or that the dimensions should be criticized because of this sensitivity. Rather, we believe that applied social psychologists might take advantage of this sensitivity to induce prosocial behavior.

In conclusion, the present experiment was a first step toward demonstrating how a general theory of the self could be applied to a specific behavior (helping PWAs). Thus, this study not only militates against the often-argued criticism that basic research in experimental social psychology (e.g., self-representation
theories) fails to deal with actual social problems, but it also provides a method by which volunteering to help PWAs can be increased. Certainly, questions remain about the extent to which the present priming methodology would also successfully increase other kinds of volunteering, decrease prejudice, or affect other kinds of prosocial behavior. However, although we cannot yet provide answers to all of these questions, we nevertheless believe that the robust effects suggest an optimistic outlook.

References


