

To foster a love for ‘enemies’! Using psychology data to muster out-group empathy

Robin Lynn Treptow  
Fielding Graduate University

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*Author Note:*

Robin Lynn Treptow, School of Educational Leadership for Change [Infant and Early Childhood Development with Emphases in Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Doctoral Program], Fielding Graduate University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robin Lynn Treptow, School of Educational Leadership for Change, Fielding Graduate University, 2020 De la Vina Street, Santa Barbara, California 93105-3814. Email: [rtreptow@email.fielding.edu](mailto:rtreptow@email.fielding.edu)

### **Abstract**

In-group and out-group tensions plague civilization. Distrust and the disagreeableness it breeds chip away at amity: creating deep rifts in social harmony—rending our sense of a shared humanity. Race, ideological views, ethnicity, political leanings, scientific assumptions, et cetera split cadres of folk into “us” and “them”—“with” and “against” factions. Enemies. Despite Muzafer Sherif’s (1954) classical studies that throwing everyone’s efforts together towards superordinate goals can overcome such grave divisions they yet persist. Violence, death, bloodshed, poverty, and countless like evils pile up whilst humankind squabbles as to whose way is right, pure, or best. Even assemblages allied for the same social goods (e.g., an end to war, stopping crime) rarely work cohesively with oiled precision rooted in respect-filled integrity. Further, in cases where groups do so strongly align—it is oft at the expense of one or another, less advantaged cohort (e.g., the designated enemy, those accused or convicted of crimes). Seldom does culture play witness to equanimity towards and for all—firm conviction that even the most splintered of groups deserve seats at the table of negotiation: to help make things right for all. No doubt, loving those who seem easiest to hate takes courage; but where to begin? Data on shared values (see Dahlsgaard et al., 2005) give robust clue that all is not lost; sects who hold diverse beliefs share much in common. The chief step is to look beyond “we” and “they” to “us” to maintain others’ degrees of social freedom (see Van Doesum et al., 2014) via humility and a subdued ego (see Kesebir, 2014). Deciding to seek the needs of others—known or unknown—who with us divvy up the earth’s abundance. Building empathy—willingness to perceive and engage with another’s worldview: seeing what is optimal for all.

**To foster a love for ‘enemies’! Using psychology data to muster out-group empathy**

Misunderstandings between individuals and groups permeate society. Even very young children pick up threads of dislike for persons not like them—ones not in their group (Feder, 2016). It may even be that mental representations of social dominance begin in very early childhood—through genetic, parenting, or larger cultural factors. In this talk I focus on social dominance and/or social power as mediators of empathy. I first cite a historical example of manipulated social dominance and then summarize work from two papers with differing emphases and findings around dominance and/or social power in contexts of empathy. First, I want to offer new perspective on Muzafer Sherif’s (1954) classic work. These studies illustrate how joint efforts towards shared goals move people (children in this case) past serious divisions. Less known is that Sherif et al. (1954) created the deep-seated out-group differences later done away with through mutual effort (e.g., “In other words, group attitudes [both intra- and intergroup] will start from scratch and will be produced as a consequence of interaction processes in intra- and intergroup relations through the introduction of specified experimental conditions”; pp. 5-6). Stirring up conflict between neutral groups of camping boys, the investigators made natural, spontaneous empathy ineffective. The resulting dynamic of striving for social dominance between the groups may have decreased individuals’ social power.

But why? Science sees humans as self-focused—prone to do whatever is in their own (not others’) interest. Dominance is excused as evolutionarily advantageous. Paradigms to promote this view override (e.g., Zimbardo prison experiment; Milgram’s response to authority studies): scant mention in either study is given to persons not coerced to wrong action. The resulting negative outlook distracts from wholesome accounts of human capacity (see Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005: a study of six values shared across culture and time—

transcendence; courage; temperance; humanity; wisdom; and justice). Negative views may undermine compassion—for unfamiliar others that one deems deserve their poor conditions (see Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). A fairer version must now be heard: a voice to build (not undermine) empathy's core in the psyche.

The first reviewed paper (i.e., Sidanius, Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, Ho, Sibley, & Duriez, 2013) looks at relationships between social dominance and empathy: which one influences the other? The authors noted that social dominance “is said to be reflective of a ‘tough-minded’ personality, characterized by low empathy and concern for others” (p. 2). It links to Agreeableness (among the Big Five personality traits)—and is most predicted by “empathy, or concern for the welfare of others” (Sidanius et al., 2013; p. 2). Curious as to whether social dominance predicts empathy—or the reverse, these authors note social dominance (quote) “has been found to correlate with and to help determine a wide range of socially relevant attitudes, social policies, and behaviors such as political conservatism, nationalism, system justification, endorsement of colorblindness, endorsement of legacy admissions, perceived zero sum competition, career choice, activation of the neural circuitry associated with empathy, generalized xenophobia, support for wars of domination, the death penalty, and torture” (Sidanius et al., 2013; p. 3).

Results of their cross-lagged path model initially showed equal strength for the effects of social dominance on empathy and of empathy upon later social dominance; a second study, however, showed greater impacts of social dominance on later empathy than the reverse pattern. They conclude that “empathy might well mediate the relationships between SDO and an array of aggressive and violent policies against out-groups such as launching wars of domination and support for torture and the death penalty” (Sidanius et al., 2013; p. 8).

In the second paper, Côte and colleagues (i.e., Côte, Kraus, Cheng, Oveis, van der L we, Lian, & Keltner, 2011)—work from the lab of Dacher Keltner—examine how social power enhances empathy through attentiveness to social cues. These authors looked at potential positive contributions of social power to empathy: drawing “upon research showing that social power—and the elevated freedom that power allows—increases behavioral flexibility and propels behavior that is congruent with individuals’ goals and motivations” (C te et al., 2011; p. 218). They note that, “the control over resources that characterizes power reduces dependence on others and increases the ability to think, feel, and behave freely and independently of others’ wishes and aspirations” (C te et al., 2011; p. 218). They suggest that greater social power, “frees prosocially oriented individuals to attend to the salient motive of enhancing others’ welfare, which involves paying attention to and correctly identifying what others feel” (C te et al., 2011; p. 218). The authors concluded that, “[e]levated power allows individuals to behave in ways that are consistent with goals and motivations that are a part of their preexisting dispositions (Studies 1 and 3) or that are activated by the context (Study 2)” (C te et al., 2011; p. 228). They stress that, “individuals in higher power positions act more prosocially (in our studies, by being attuned to others’ emotions) when prosocial tendencies or concerns are salient” (C te et al., 2011; p. 228). Interestingly, results differed when people had in-context social power (i.e., a managerial job in an organization): where “higher power individuals with lower levels of prosocial orientation were particularly inaccurate in their emotion perceptions”. These outcomes may reflect Sidanius et al.’s (2013) findings on social dominance—although C te et al. (2011) attribute the lowered empathy to less attention and greater cognitive load.

So what can be added? Violence, death, bloodshed, poverty, and countless like evils pile up while humans squabble as to whose way is right, pure, or best—evidences of social

dominance or power. Even assemblages allied for the same social goods (e.g., an end to war, stopping crime) may not work cohesively with respect-filled integrity. Further, in cases where groups strongly align it is oft at the expense of another, less advantaged cohort (e.g., the designated enemy, those accused or convicted of crimes). Seldom does culture play witness to equanimity towards and for all—firm conviction that even the most splintered of groups deserve seats at the table of negotiation: to help make things right for all.

No doubt, loving those who seem easiest to hate takes courage: but where to begin? Data on shared values (see Dahlsgaard et al., 2005) give robust clue that all is not lost; sects who hold diverse beliefs share much in common. Hojat (2016) and colleagues show that empathy can be taught. One chief step is to look beyond ‘we’ and ‘they’ to ‘us’ to maintain others’ degrees of social freedom (see Van Doesum, Van Lange, & Van Lange, 2013) via humility and a subdued ego (see Kesebir, 2014). These are prosocial stances: and if cultivated might promote empathy even in contexts of social power. Empathy may be most robust when we decide to seek the needs of others—known or unknown—who with us divvy up the earth’s abundance: in situations where we feel free to make our own choices and/or when we scale down social dominance. The idea is to build empathy—a willingness to perceive and engage with another’s worldview: seeing what is optimal for all.

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