

Context is important when assessing ingroup and outgroup pain: Empathy bias in football fans

Intergroup empathy bias (IEB) is a tendency to empathise more with ingroup than with outgroup members. Substantial evidence for the phenomenon comes from neuroscientific studies of empathy for physical pain. These studies typically investigate racial groups and register bias in neural but often not in behavioural indicators of empathy; the discrepancy is routinely ascribed to social desirability. Moreover, the ecological validity of empathy-eliciting tasks is usually low.

We addressed these limitations in four experiments ($\Sigma N = 362$). To eliminate social desirability concerns related to racial/ethnic groups, we studied football fans. Two experiments replicated typical neuroscience tasks: pain intensity and self-unpleasantness ratings of painful vs neutral faces of ingroups and outgroups. In the next two more ecologically valid experiments, we embedded the painful events in identity-unrelated contexts (painful accidents described by ingroup/outgroup, Exp3) and identity-related contexts (painful football tackles, Exp4).

We observed no bias when participants were asked for decontextualised pain assessment (Exp1 & Exp2). We registered bias only when pain happened in a context directly relevant to their group identity (Exp4), but not as an identity-unrelated event (Exp3). IEB was related to identification and social dominance orientation, but not to empathic personality traits.

The results follow the predictions of social identity theory: IEB emerged only when social identity was an important cue for understanding and responding to a social situation. This highlights the need to address the discrepancy between behavioural and neural measures over and above social desirability concerns, and points to the importance of context in studying social biases.

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