Self-Other Similarity and its Effects on Insensitivity to Mass Suffering

Ka Ho Tam, Daniel Lim, and David DeSteno
Department of Psychology, Northeastern University

Abstract

“Collapse of compassion” describes our tendency to feel less compassionate towards numerous suffering individuals as opposed to a single sufferer. We conducted an experiment to examine the effects of self-other similarity on the collapse of compassion. Our research demonstrates that although self-other similarity can promote compassion in a single victim context, this effect is reversed when multiple victims are present, leading to the collapse of compassion.

Method

• Data were collected from 242 Northeastern University undergraduate students.
• An independent samples t-test confirmed that reading shared human experiences led participants to perceive higher similarity between themselves and suffering others, M_shared = 2.475, M_contrast = 2.158, t(228.69) = 2.15, p = .033.

Results

• A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between similarity manipulation and number of victims on self-reported compassion, F(1, 238) = 4.126, p = .043. There were no significant main effects of similarity manipulation or number of victims. Participants who read vignettes of shared human experiences have significantly lower compassion for a group suffering children than for a single child (i.e., exhibiting the collapse of compassion), while participants in the control condition showed the reverse tendency.

Conclusion

• Our research suggests that although self-other similarity can promote compassion in a single victim context, collapse of compassion occurs when multiple victims are present.
• Journalists, filmmakers, and charities often try to elicit public sympathy by emphasizing commonalities between their audience and suffering individuals. Our study suggests that this strategy may not be effective when mass suffering is involved.

References


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