

Out-group mind perception before and after territorial conflict: Empathy as a key to reducing extreme prejudice

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History abounds with intergroup violence caused by territorial disputes, to name few examples of territorial disputes, Palestine (State of Palestine vs. State of Israel), Falklands (Argentina vs. UK), and West Sahara (Morocco vs. Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic). When one nation claims a territory as its own, the opponent usually reacts with resistance as though they have been robbed. A threat to a country, including territorial disputes activates a national identity (Davies, Steele, & Markus, 2008; Li & Brewer, 2004), which in turn fuels animosity toward the out-group. When the cause of conflict is nationalized rather than individualized, intergroup conflict is unavoidable (de Tocqueville, 2001).

Japan and the neighboring country, China, are geographically close, but there have been ongoing disputes over national territory, Senkaku (or as China and Taiwan call the uninhabited rocks their Diaoyu). In the summer of 2012, Japanese authorities arrested fourteen Chinese activists for planting a Chinese flag on the islands. Many Japanese people recognized the incident as a threat to their mainland, whereas many Chinese people thought that the Japanese marine police unjustly arrested their citizens. As the result, the fourteenth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations was cancelled, further widening the emotional distance between the nations.

Social Cognition and Intergroup Relations

Mind Perception

Although the operationalization of dehumanization varies greatly, depending on the construct under investigation (for comprehensive review see Haslam, 2006), in

order to keep its focus, this study highlights the denial of emotional and cognitive capacities of another and that dehumanized perception is “a failure to consider the inner life or mind of another” (p. 123 Harris and Fiske, 2011). According to this operationalization, perceiving out-groups as incapable of having rich affective experiences, agency, and ability to execute higher-order cognitive functions constitutes denial of emotional and cognitive aspects of humanity. Assuming that mind perception is one criterion for humanity, a failure to perceive the mind of another signifies a lack of moral concern that precedes moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002).

In this light, mind perception is more than just perceiving the mind of another since the possession of mind implies that the entity reserves human rights (Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010). Sad to say, people often fail to apply the same moral principles to those who are perceived as mindless. Mindless others are no longer considered to be humans, but instead they are perceived as non-human entities, and spontaneously excluded from our moral community (Opatow, 1990). The consequence is disastrous, often leading to inhuman acts, such as genocide, hate crime, and ethnic cleansing.

Empathy

While disgust has been implicated with dehumanized perception (Harris & Fiske, 2006), some theorists proposed that empathy expands a moral circle by including out-group members (Hoffman, 1981; Pizarro, Detweiler-Bedell, & Bloom, 2006). Costello and Hodson (2010) experimentally induced participants to feel empathy toward immigrants, and found that this manipulation promoted moral inclusion of stigmatized groups. Furthermore, Shih, Wang, Bucher, and Stotzer (2009) found that perspective taking improved intergroup relations by increasing empathy toward the target group. By plac-

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ing oneself in the other's shoes, people come to see out-group members as an individual, rather than judge them based on the impression of that group.

The present research and hypotheses

The initial purpose of this project was to test the applicability of the Mind Attribution Scale for Japanese speaking participants and how empathy, as a personal variable, affects mind perception.

Three months after the first data collection, Japan-China relation was aggravated by the territorial dispute, heightening negative attitudes toward China. Does mind perception fluctuate in the presence of a specific threat? Out-group hatred is susceptible to various factors, such as incidental emotions (Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, & Hunsinger, 2009), mortality salience (Greenberg et al., 1990), and the darkness (Schaller, Park, & Mueller, 2003). To investigate the malleability of mind perception in the presence of intergroup competition for economic superiority and territorial claims, a survey was conducted at two separate points in 2012. Based on previous findings and relevant theories, the following hypotheses were constructed.

Hypothesis 1. Participants would be more likely to disregard the inner life of out-groups under economic threat. Previous studies found that economic threat fuels preexisting prejudice (Butz & Yogeewaran, 2011; King, Knight, & Hebl, 2010).

Hypothesis 2. A territorial dispute has detrimental effects on out-group perception, such that participants would be more likely to disregard inner life of out-groups after the real conflict has arisen than before.

Hypothesis 3. Empathy is a buffer against dehumanized perception, such that participants with higher empathy would be less inclined to dehumanize the target than those with lower empathy.

Method

Participants

On July, a sample of 182 (131 female, $M_{age} = 20.85$; $SD = 1.58$) undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology course at two universities took part in this survey.

Immediately after Japan and China relation was aggravated, during the first week of October, 218 undergraduate students (161 female, 54 male, 3 unknown, $M_{age} = 19.58$; $SD = 0.77$) enrolled in a psychology course

participated in the same survey. All participants received a partial course credit for participation.

Materials and Procedure

Two versions of a five-page booklet were created. On the front page of each booklet, participants indicated their age, sex, and nationality. The following constructs were measured in the order described.

Empathy. To assess individual differences in empathy, the Japanese version of Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Sakurai, 1988) was used. The scale consists of 28 items with a five-point Likert scale 1 (*that describes me the least*) to 5 (*that describes me well*). The internal consistency for the current study was $\alpha = .82$.

Priming. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: threat condition or no-threat condition. In the threat condition, participants read a vignette that depicted a hypothetical nation "X" as highly threatening to Japanese economy's global competitiveness. "X" was depicted as undergoing rapid economic growth, contrasted with Japan experiencing a drastic economic decline and the increasing unemployment rate for fresh college graduates.

In the no-threat condition, participants read a vignette that depicted nation "X" as empathic in response to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan. "X" was described as offering Japan generous amounts of aid, and their Minister of Foreign Affairs sent genuine condolences to the government. While we did not specify "X" as being any particular country (for ethical reasons), a manipulation check later indicated the majority thoughts that "X" was China.

After the manipulation, all participants read a seemingly truthful story of A (target actor's name) who underwent a traumatic loss of her family after a natural disaster. They were instructed to read the passage from A's point of view. The story begins with, "A resides in 'X' and lost her family to the earthquake four years ago." As suggested by Cuddy, Rock, and Norton (2007), affective words and any words that connote cognition were excluded from the vignette. The story of A was fictional, but in fact it was based on the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China.

Mind attribution. The Mind Attribution Scale (Kozak, Marsh, & Wegner, 2006) is a 10-item scale, designed to assess the "perceiver's global attribution about an-

other person's capacity to act with intention, engage in complex cognition, and experience emotion" ($\alpha = .86$). Participants were asked to rate each statement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). High scores reflect higher levels of mind perception, and low scores reflect dehumanized perception.

The scale was translated to Japanese by using the back translation method. First, the author translated the original items to Japanese with several suggestions from two Japanese speakers. Next, a native English speaker who was not involved in this study translated the Japanese items back to English without reference to the original items. The internal consistency was $\alpha = .87$.

Perceived liking and morality. To explore perceived traits of out-groups that are important for mind perception, participants answered two face-valid items: "This person is likable" and "This person is moral" on a seven-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Previous studies showed that females typically score higher than males on the self-report measure of empathy (e.g., Davis, 1996). In this sample, there were no significant effects of gender in observed constructs; therefore, we did not consider gender in the further analyses.

Time 1

The manipulation check indicated that 77.8% of participants imagined China as they read the description of "X", consequently assuming that the target A was from China. The manipulation had no effect on the extent to which participants perceived A's moral status, $F(1, 176) = .23$, *ns*.

To examine main effects of each independent variable on mind perception, a series of two-way and one-way ANOVAs were performed. A 2 (condition: threat vs. no-threat) \times 3 (empathy: low vs. medium vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA on mind attribution did not reveal a main effect of condition on mind attribution, $F(1, 176) = 0.004$, *ns*. This result was inconsistent with previous findings that people are more likely to allot higher mind attribution to those who they like versus those who they dislike (Kozak et al., 2006) since participants in the no-threat condition ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.13$) perceived the target A as more likeable than those in the threat condition

($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1, 176) = 6.07$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .033$.

Next, participants were categorized on the basis of empathy scores into high, medium and low groups. Those who scored one standard deviation (*SD*) above the mean were categorized into the high empathy group ($n = 56$), while those one *SD* below were placed into the low empathy group ($n = 51$). The rest who scored in between were considered to be in the medium empathy group ($n = 74$). There was a significant main effect of empathy on mind attribution, $F(2, 176) = 5.16$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .055$, such that participants who scored high on empathy were less likely to dehumanize the target (high: $M = 62.77$, $SD = 8.72$) than did medium and low empathy groups (medium: $M = 60.61$, $SD = 8.92$; low: $M = 57.37$, $SD = 8.22$).

Time 2

Participants at Time 1 did not score significantly higher on empathy than did those at Time 2, so samples were equivalent in this respect, $t(398) = 1.83$, *ns*. At Time 2, the low-empathy group consisted of 80 participants, the high-empathy group 59, and the medium-empathy group 79.

Unlike Time 1, participants in the threat condition ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.09$) rated the target as less moral than those in the no-threat condition ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 212) = 8.52$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .038$. A 2 (condition: threat vs. no-threat) \times 3 (empathy: low vs. medium vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA on mind attribution revealed a significant effect for condition. Participants in the threat condition rated the target as less mindful ($M = 56.75$, $SD = 7.55$) than the comparison group ($M = 59.54$, $SD = 6.84$), $F(1, 212) = 7.68$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .035$.

As hypothesized, there was a significant main effect of empathy on mind attribution $F(2, 212) = 6.57$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .058$. Post hoc tests revealed that high empathy individuals ($M = 60.92$, $SD = 7.12$) were more likely to find the target mindful than medium ($M = 57.13$, $SD = 7.61$) and low ($M = 56.69$, $SD = 6.75$).

Time 1 versus Time 2

There was a significant difference in perceived morality as shown by one-way ANOVA, $F(1, 394) = 4.11$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, with Time 2 ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.09$) perceiving the target as less moral than those at Time 1 ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.09$). Again, the two time groups rated the target's perceived liking similarly, $F(1, 387) = 2.95$, *ns*.

A 2 (time of survey: Time 1 vs. Time 2) \times 3 (empathy:

low vs. medium vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for time on mind attribution. Participants at Time 2 ($M = 57.99, SD = 7.36$) rated the target as less mindful than those at Time 1 ($M = 60.36, SD = 8.86$), $F(1, 394) = 6.65, p < .05, \eta^2 = .017$. (see Table 1).

A main effect of empathy on mind attribution also emerged $F(2, 394) = 11.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .054$, indicating that participants with low empathy ($M = 56.95, SD = 7.33$) rated the target as less mindful than those with high ($M = 61.82, SD = 7.95$).

Discussion

This study examined changes in out-group perception before and after the territorial dispute. When the mutual relationship between Japan and China was relatively neutral, merely suggesting the unfavorable influence of the nation “X” on the Japanese economy did not exert any impact on how participants ascribed the mind to people of “X”. However, the territorial dispute has changed their perception of “X” drastically as they reacted to the unfavorable influence of “X” on the Japanese economy by disregarding the inner life of the out-group target.

At Time 1, the priming was effective toward the target’s favorability, but not adequate enough to induce any extreme form of prejudice. In addition, participants in the two conditions rated the target’s mindfulness similarly. One possibility is that participants in the threat condition may not have been intimidated by merely posing country “X” as an economic threat. The fact that a rival country may have more economic prowess than Japan may not have had sufficient personal impact; therefore,

participants may have reacted to the vignette with only minor irritation without any feeling of threat.

Compared to the economic threat, the territorial dispute had a potent effect on how participants perceived the out-group member. Japan, an isolated island surrounded by water, has had a long history of closing the door to foreign nations. Because of the pervasive impression of nationalism during the early twentieth century, it is often mistaken; however, for most Japanese people, their national identity is more strongly related to cultural heritage, such as four distinctive seasons, local customs, and traditional events compared to its flag and national anthem (Chavez, 2007; Karasawa, 2002; Sasaki, 2004). It appears that the most threatening to Japanese national identity is something that destructs symbols of Japanese culture and tradition that they are fond of. As territorial disputes cause the highest probability of war compared to other kinds of disputes (Vasquez & Henehan, 2001), the threat shakes many Japanese people’s sense of security.

Do individual differences matter for mind perception? Classical studies had been claiming that a situation exerts unavoidable influences upon the individual as though human behavior is contingent to the immediate context (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 2007). Such a situationalist’s approach leaves no room for individual differences. Nonetheless, across conditions and time of measurement, participants with high empathy were less likely to dehumanize the target than those with low empathy, suggesting that empathy may be a key factor in mollifying intergroup conflict.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of perceived liking, perceived morality, and mind attribution scores at Time 1 and Time 2

Measures	Time 1			Time 2			Time 1 × 2
	Threat	No-threat	<i>F</i>	Threat	No-threat	<i>F</i>	
Perceived liking	4.88 (1.11)	5.25 (1.13)	6.07*	4.66 (1.00)	5.19 (1.04)	14.78**	2.95
Perceived morality	4.97 (1.13)	5.02 (1.05)	0.23	4.60 (1.09)	5.02 (1.04)	2.92**	4.11*
Mind attribution	60.53 (9.13)	60.20 (8.60)	0.004	56.75 (7.55)	59.54 (6.84)	7.68**	6.65**

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Limitations

Please note that originally this study aimed at testing whether the Mind Attribution Scale can be also used for Japanese-speaking samples. To our acknowledgment, no study has examined psychometric properties of the scale for respondents whose primary language is other than English.

Other than the linguistic concern, there may be conceptual issues. The test developers reported that perceived liking influenced the way participants attributed agency, emotional and cognitive capacities to a fellow college student who may share similar backgrounds (Kozak et al., 2006). The description ostensibly indicates that the target is an in-group member if participants assumed that he belongs to the same demographic category. The target was described as a male college student without any mention of ethnicity and socioeconomic status (“Mike is a 20-year-old student at a large state university.”); therefore, participants were likely to rate the target’s likability based on his personality (e.g., friendly vs. arrogant). In this study, participants rated mindfulness of the out-group member based on the group entitativity, and results showed that perceived liking was relatively less important than perceived morality. It may be that people perceive liked fellow members more capable than disliked members, but likability has little to do with evaluation of out-group members compared to moral status.

Conclusion

Out-group derogation occurs when we momentarily forget that ‘they’ resemble ‘us,’ and instantaneously conclude that we are good and they are bad. Although the specific role of perceived morality in out-group derogation remains unclear, previous studies found that morality is the upmost criteria for positive evaluations of the in-group (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011; Leach, Ellemers, & Barrero, 2007; Leidner & Castano, 2012), self, and others (Wojciszke, 2005). People tend to dehumanize out-groups that seem to be morally inferior because a lack of morality indicates that the target is less human or not a human (Bastian et al., 2011).

The media often exploits our proclivity to view the opponent with a sense of moral superiority by creating a hero and a villain in a dramatized international affair (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Labeling the other as morally in-

ferior facilitates self-righteous justifications, and people claim that their in-group contributes a greater good for the whole world no matter the cost (Billig, 1995). At crisis, the media is likely to feed hatred by selectively highlighting negative attributes of the out-group (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009; Kellner, 2004).

Here, the good news is that people normally do not fail to see the inner life of another. Although external factors may make people go against fundamental moral principles of harm through dehumanized perception, there are possible means that can foster better intergroup relation without blurring the collective identity. To allay negative reactions to out-groups, previous studies successfully induced empathy by highlighting similarities (Costello & Hodson, 2009), or individualizing out-group members (Čehajić, Brown, & González, 2009). Of course the real conflict is far more intricate than a laboratory setting and a survey taken in an academic institution (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). The complexity of intergroup feud considered, future studies should address practical ways of making the most of empathy even in a presence of a long-standing discord.

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ABSTRACT

Out-group mind perception before and after territorial conflict: Empathy as a key to reducing extreme prejudice

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To examine the vicissitudes of dehumanized perception, participants in the threat condition were led to think that a nation “X” hinders Japan’s economic advances in foreign markets. In addition to the experimental manipulation, data were collected at two points to see whether a (real) territorial dispute affects mind perception of members of the out-group. Results suggest that extreme prejudice is not an ordinary phenomenon, but a territorial dispute is one detrimental cause of dehumanized perception that may be used for justification of wrongdoing. It was also found that the high-empathy group was more likely to see human characteristics in the target than did the low- and medium-empathy groups irrespective of the time and condition. To encourage adaptive ways to deal with intergroup conflicts, empathy may be one of the key ingredients.

Key words: mind perception, empathy, intergroup relations