The Neglected Ambivalent Emotion of Pity: Conceptualization and Potential (Complex) Effects on Charitable Behavior

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Consumer research has left unexamined the conceptualization and the potential effects of pity on charitable behavior. This paper proposes a conceptualization of pity whereby this ambivalent emotion is seen as composed of an altruistic and a cynical dimensions. Propositions regarding the effects of each dimension are presented.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many ads used by charities to collect money seem to rely on the emotion of pity. However, only a few studies have involved pity (Weiner 1980, 1993), leaving its conceptualization unclear. The lack of a clear conceptualization of pity may find an explanation in that researchers have investigated emotions like compassion – that involves empathy (Bagozzi and Moore 1994) and sympathy (Escalas and Stern 2003) – and sadness (Small and Vertoichi 2009) that resemble and partially overlap with pity. This lack of clarity has been costly to the study of pity in theoretical and empirical terms, and only a decade ago have researchers begun to consider differences between pity and related terms (Boelyn-Fitzgerald 2003; Dijker 2001). This confusion impedes researchers from knowing the exact antecedents and outcomes of pity. Thus, this article aims to propose a clear conceptualization of pity and addresses the following questions: “What is pity?”; “How does pity differ from related emotions?”; “To what extent may these differences explain meaningful variations among charitable behavior?”.

Commonly defined as “sympathetic heartfelt sorrow for one that is suffering physically or mentally or that is otherwise distressed or unhappy” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1961, p. 1726), pity is mostly described as an altruistic emotion (Weiner 1980, 1993). As such, pity may be seen as close to compassionate feelings, namely empathy and sympathy, and sadness. Empathy thus refers to a person’s capacity to feel within another person’s feelings (Eisenberg and Strayer 1987), while sympathy simply involves the awareness – not the experience – of the feelings of another (Stern 1994; Wispe 1986). While seemingly close to pity, the literature suggests that these emotions conceptually differ. First, while empathy is felt when one shares the feelings (Boelyn-Fitzgerald 2003), pity arises when one witnesses the other’s predicament and is sorry for the victim (Ben-Ze’ev 2000). Since pity stems from the fear of sharing the other’s predicament, this emotion creates a safe emotional distance from the sufferer; people who pity someone may feel disconnected from that person, while such an effect may not be observed in response to empathy. Turning to sympathy, pity appears closer to this latter emotion. However, pity might sometimes be appraised as a hypocritical and egoistic emotion whereby people adopt a “cynical superiority position” (Florian et al. 1999/2000). In that case, pity is different from sympathy. Finally, while sadness refers to a negative emotion, the aforementioned altruistic and cynical views of pity make it what Lazarus (1991) calls a problematic emotion.

We thus conceptualize pity as an ambivalent emotion (Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997; Ruth, Brunel and Otnes 2002) composed of “altruistic pity”, a selfless and benevolent dimension reflecting understanding of the suffering of others (Corrigan et al. 2003; Dijker 2001; Pace 2013), and ‘cynical pity’, a self-focused hypocritical and egoistic dimension (Florian et al. 1999/2000). Pity might thus lead people to feel somewhat antagonistic emotions, such as love-hate and joy-fear (Saunders and Hall 1900) when both ‘altruistic’ and ‘cynical’ dimensions occur at the same time. This conceptualization appears critical to the understanding of how pity might influence charitable behavior: altruistic pity might lead to charitable behavior while cynical pity might create a distance between the sufferer and the observer that may not result in charitable behavior (Gillath, Shaver and Mikulincer 2004).

Turning to the antecedents and outcomes of pity, research shows that pity first arises as a response to the appraisal of vulnerability (Boelyn-Fitzgerald 2003; Florian et al. 1999/2000) and the need to protect a sufferer against suffering (Dijker 2001). Second, pity also arises as a function of social stereotypes and is elicited by downward assimilative comparisons made to people perceived as warm but not competent (Cuddy, Glick and Beninger 2011). Third, a person is expected to feel pity if the misfortune of the sufferer is perceived as uncontrollable (Corrigan et al. 2003; Dijker, Kok and Koomen, 1996; Weiner 1980). However, previous research argue that pity is not contingent on controllability attributions (Tracy and Robins 2007; Weiner 1985), making the role of controllability attributions unresolved. Fourth, pity may arise as a trait function of neuroticism (Watson and Clarke 1984).

Regarding the effects of pity, the ambivalent nature of this emotion makes their prediction difficult since altruistic emotions and cynicism exert opposite effects on moral judgments (Chowdhury and Fernando 2014). When the altruistic dimension of pity arises, a positive effect on charitable behavior may occur; on the contrary, when the cynical dimension of pity arises, a detachment response may occur.

Turning to the potential moderating variables of the effects of pity, the role of attributions of controllability remains unclear (Gerbich 2011; Weiner 1980). We argue that this lack of clarity may find an explanation in the ambivalent definition of pity. Specifically, the altruistic dimension of pity might lead to charitable behavior whatever the attribution of controllability, while the effect of the cynical dimension of pity might not hold if the sufferer is perceived responsible for his or her plight. Given this predicted role of attributions of controllability, individual differences in control beliefs might also play a moderating role. This prediction builds on the notion that pity and locus of control are negatively correlated (Stöber 2003). People feel more pity if they believe that events in one’s life are caused by uncontrollable factors. Hence, people experiencing pity might engage more in charitable behavior if they believe that the situation of the person in need is not under his/her control (i.e. people with an external locus of control). Finally, attachment style (Mikulincer 1995) might moderate the effects of pity on charitable behavior. Securely attached people are more likely to approach others in need (Hazan and Shaver 1987) and because pity– activates a need to protect a person in distress (Dijker 2001), securely attached people are more likely to respond to such altruistic pity with more charitable behavior.

To conclude, it is our hope that bringing the various affective states related to pity into sharper relief will be generative, prompting additional scholars to investigate the conceptualization, measure and effects of pity.

REFERENCES


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