Empathic Joy in Positive Intergroup Relations

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Research on empathy focuses almost exclusively on its negative variety, empathic sorrow, either by defining empathy as a state involving negative emotions or by confining its empirical study to the negative. In contrast, we investigate empathy's positive variety, empathic joy. We do so in the context of intergroup relations. A total of 1,216 predominantly White teachers participated in a yearlong investigation of whether their attitudes toward, and empathy for, their predominantly ethnic minority students affected their teaching style and the students' learning. Consistent with expectations, we found that teachers' experience of empathic joy predicted better student outcomes and that it did so by leading to more allophilia toward students and, in turn, toward more proactive *and positive interactions with students. Implications are considered for the role of empathic joy in positive intergroup relations more generally.*

> "Our sympathy with sorrow, though not more real, has been more taken notice of than our sympathy with joy."
>
> — Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 39.

The empathic joy that Adam Smith observed—a person's "interest in the fortunes of others . . . [that] render[s] their happiness necessary to him" (Smith, 1759/1976)—is echoed in the Buddhist concept of *Mudita*, the "divine state" or "virtue" of delighting in other people's well-being (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). In social science research, however, it has received little attention.

Yet, what little research there is suggests a relation between more positive empathic emotion and more positive attitudinal responses. We seek to demonstrate the existence and practical importance of that relation in the intergroup context.

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We test a model of empathic joy in intergroup relations in which empathic joy for the members of a different social group leads to more positive intergroup attitudes toward members of that group that, in turn, lead to more positive intergroup behaviors toward them.

Defining Empathic Joy

Empathy research in the social and behavioral sciences has been fixated on empathic sorrow, understood as "a negative emotional state anchored in and tending toward the alleviation of another's *misfortune* [italics added]" (Royzman & Rozin, 2006) or as the ability to understand the *suffering* of other people. A typical experiment involves inducing empathy by asking participants to read about someone who is homeless, addicted to drugs, or ravaged by AIDS (e.g., Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Eisenberg et al., 1989; Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Hoffman, 2000; Weiner & Wright, 1973; Xu, Zuo, Wang, & Han, 2009). Empathic responses are then typically measured by assessing the degree to which one feels "sympathetic, compassionate, softhearted, warm, tender and moved" (Batson, 1991) or by assessing the "tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others" (Davis, 1994) or to have "tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than [oneself]" (Davis, 1980).

As may be noted from the previously mentioned definitions, researchers tend to explicitly ignore the possibility of empathic joy. However, even research that does consider empathy as either a positive or negative force in human relations exclusively studies negative emotions such as pity, sympathy, sadness, and sorrow. Tam et al. (2008), for example, set forth to explore the more positive and "hopeful" sides of intergroup relations, yet measured empathy with items such as "I often feel very sorry for people from the other community when they are having problems" and "When I see someone from the other community being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them." Even the promisingly named "empathic-joy hypothesis" (Smith, Keating, & Stotland, 1989), a well-studied phenomenon in the psychological sciences, takes as its starting point another person's suffering and seeks to understand the experience of finding out that the suffering has been alleviated.

In the empathy literature, there is a diversity of views regarding the definition and components of the experience of empathy. One perspective is that the word "empathy" refers strictly to the emotional experience of being affected by someone else's condition, often through the cognitive act of perspective-taking. A second perspective is that "empathy" refers strictly to the perspective-taking process itself, with "sympathy" being the resulting emotion (e.g., Mathiasen, 2006). A third perspective is that "empathy" refers to an experience that is both emotional and cognitive, either because the two elements are intertwined or because the

emotion results immediately from the cognitive state of perspective-taking (Duan & Hill, 1996; Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Shechtman & Basheer, 2005).

We follow the third perspective: We defined empathic joy as the combined experience of perspective-taking and the resulting joy or happiness. Note that this definition neither presuppose either a direct or an indirect exposure to whatever stimulates the empathy, nor does it presuppose anything about the relation of the person feeling the empathy with the person whose situation provoked it.

Importance of Positive Emotions versus Negative Emotions

There is evidence to indicate that there is a value in studying the positive versus negative variety of empathy. Specifically, a wealth of research indicates that positive and negative emotions operate differently (Dijker, Koomen, van den Heuvel, & Frijda, 1996; Stangor, Sullivan, & Ford, 1992) and that positive emotions play a unique role in intergroup relations (e.g., Dijker, 1987). Although positive empathy is not widely acknowledged as a construct distinct from empathic sorrow, increasing evidence indicates that it is independent of potentially related constructs, such as general positivity and empathy for others' distress (Morelli, Lieberman, & Zaki, 2015). Positive emotions are particularly important for building connections among groups (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001) and have been found to be better predictors of positive attitudes and behaviors toward an "other" (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011b; Tam et al., 2008). Studies in places such as Israel and Northern Ireland indicate that positive emotions and associated attitudes are present even during long-standing intergroup conflicts and that these positive intergroup emotions operate distinctly from negative emotions (for a review, see Pittinsky, 2012; Stürmer et al., 2013). Such a distinction has also been observed in attitudes toward African Americans. Although one body of intergroup relations research defines "pro-Black attitudes" as feelings that blacks are disadvantaged and deserve sympathy (Katz, Wackenhut, & Haas, 1986), such sympathetic recognition of prejudice toward African Americans is not the same as positive feelings or beliefs about them (Czopp & Monteith, 2006).

Empathic Joy in the Social Context

Several strands of research do suggest that there may be a distinct and important role for empathic joy in intergroup relations. First, empathic joy has been found for a range of social targets—not only close relationships such as family, friends, romantic partners, and roommates, but also strangers, coworkers, and acquaintances (e.g., Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Specifically, the close relationship literature has identified a positive association of perceived positive empathy with relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust (Gable,

Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012; Gable et al., 2004). Gable et al. (2006), for example, used observational coding of positive discussions to reveal that verbal and nonverbal displays of positive empathy predicted better relationship well-being and lower likelihood of breakup two months later. Similarly, studies using self-reports of trait and daily positive empathy showed a strong association between positive empathy and feelings of social connection (Morelli et al., 2015). Specifically, across several samples, trait positive empathy showed a positive association with trait social connection, but also a negative association with trait loneliness. In two daily diary studies, similar associations emerged at the within-subject level: daily positive empathy showed a positive relation with daily social connection and a negative relation with daily loneliness. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that positive empathy is associated with better relationships.

In addition, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory holds that positive emotions can help one develop friendships and social-support networks (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001). Fredrickson's (2001) and Fredrickson and Branigan's (2001) work indicates that arousing empathic joy generates positive emotions, positive thoughts, enhanced memory (including better recall of pleasant events), more exploratory and more flexible thinking, and the psychological states that prepare a person to build friendships and social networks.

In perhaps the most direct examination of empathic joy in positive intergroup relations to date, Pittinsky and Montoya (2009b) explored the contribution of empathic joy to positive intergroup attitudes toward outgroup members. Specifically, the authors assessed the attitudes of American White high school students at predominantly White schools, measuring their levels of empathic sorrow (sympathy) and empathic joy for the members of ethnic minorities. Empathic joy, relative to empathic sorrow, was more strongly tied to higher levels of positive intergroup attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Although this study provided clear evidence for the importance of empathic joy to positive attitudes, it did not examine the impact of empathic joy on subsequent positive behaviors. As has been noted more recently, it remains important "to more formally establish a causal relationship between positive empathy and important outcomes" (Morelli et al., 2015, p. 59).

The Current Study

We test a model of empathic joy in which empathic joy leads to more positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors toward outgroup members, which, in turn, lead to better outcomes for them. We test our model in the context of education, partnering with a national organization that places a predominantly White cadre of teachers in schools with predominantly ethnic minority students. Specifically, we investigated our hypotheses over the course of an academic school year, in which we tested whether empathic joy and allophilia assessed midway through the school

year, would affect the positivity of their teaching style (assessed midway through the second semester), and produce better student outcomes (assessed during an end-of-term exam).

Method

Participants

Of the teachers in this organization who were active during the 2010–2011 academic year, a randomly selected subsample of 1,216 (29.6 percent) participated in this study. Their average age was 23.50 years old. Eighty percent were Caucasian, 10% were African American, 8% were Hispanic/Latino, and 2% identified as another ethnicity or chose not to identify their ethnicity. The teachers were selected in roughly equal percentages from schools in 14 states: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington.

Materials

Positive intergroup attitudes. The degree to which teachers liked their students was assessed using the intergroup affection subscale of the Allophilia Scale (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011a). Participants indicated their responses to four items on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included "In general, I have positive attitudes about my students" and "I feel positively toward my students." The scale was reliable, $\alpha = .91$.

Empathy. The degree to which teachers experienced empathic joy for their students was assessed using four items adapted from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). Sample items for empathic joy included "When my students celebrate things, I am happy for them" and "When my students feel happy, I feel happy." Participants recorded their responses on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The empathic joy items were combined to form a reliable index, $\alpha = .92$.

Positive achievement teacher behavior. To assess the degree to which a teacher was proactively and positively engaged with his or her students, we used data collected by the teacher organization to assess the global degree to which he or she was engaged in building a culture of achievement and fostering an environment of positive academic growth for all students in the classroom. The assessment was conducted by a trained expert in the professional development

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlation between Teacher Assessments and Student Achievement

Variable	M	SD	Correlation		
			1	2	3
1. Empathic joy	6.36	0.67			
2. Allophilia	6.31	0.76	.46*		
3. Teaching culture	2.35	0.73	.15*	.21*	
4. Student achievement	77.73	40.40	.06*	.16*	.26*

Note. N = 1,216. *p < .05.

of teachers and used a standardized coding rubric. The assessment was scaled between 0 (*apathetic/unruly*) and 4 (*passionate/caring*).

Student achievement.   Students' academic performance was assessed using a composite of nonproprietary, standardized academic achievement scores administered at the end of each academic year to all students taught by members of the teaching organization as a way to quantify teachers' impact. The test included questions relevant to the subject a given teacher teaches, such as English, mathematics, art, and science. A student achievement score was then assigned to each teacher.

Procedure

As part of a midyear assessment, teachers completed a large set of online questionnaires in December 2010. They were instructed to complete it in private and were assured that their responses would remain anonymous. The questionnaires of interest for this study—the assessments of empathic joy and allophilia—were included among a larger set of questionnaires unrelated to the current project.

About halfway through the spring semester, each teacher was evaluated by a member of the teaching organization's staff. This included an evaluation of the teacher's curriculum, an in-depth interview, and an observation of the teacher's classroom teaching style, which included scoring the aforementioned "positive achievement teacher behavior." At the end of the school year, the student achievement test was administered and scored by national staff of the teacher organization.

Results

The correlations between the variables are presented in Table 1. Prior to conducting our main analyses, all variables were standardized.
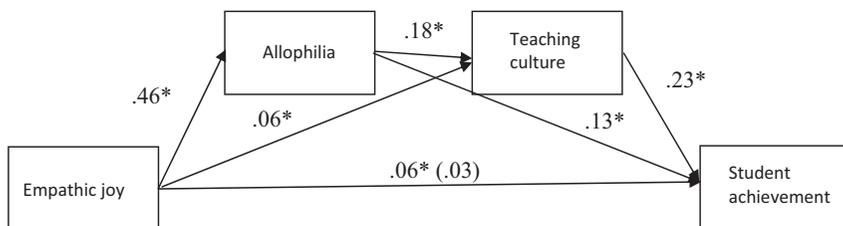
Fig. 1. Results of the serial mediation model assessing the relation between empathic joy and student achievement through allophilia and teaching culture. *p < .05.

The methods used to collect the data allowed us to test a temporal sequence from empathic joy to student outcomes. Early in the school year, teachers reported their experience of empathic joy and their degree of positive intergroup attitudes for their students. Midway through the year, the teachers' degree of positive achievement behaviors was coded. At the end of the school year, student performance was measured.

To conduct the key analyses, we conducted serial mediational analyses to test whether the proposed mediators (allophilia and teaching culture) produced indirect effects on the relation between empathic joy and student achievement. We used the PROCESS macro (Model 6) developed by Hayes (2013) to estimate direct and indirect effects and confidence intervals using bootstrapping methods. The PROCESS macro produces point estimates for the size of the indirect effect and a 95% confidence interval (95% CI) based on the distribution of the 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The mediation pathway is considered significant if the confidence interval does not include zero.

In terms of our model, we first tested the pathway from empathic joy to allophilia to teaching culture to student achievement. The results of the sequential mediation are presented in Figure 1. Consistent with the model's predictions, there was a significant total effect of empathic joy on student achievement ($\beta = .06$, $t = 2.26$, $p < .05$). Next, we tested whether the relation between empathic joy and student achievement was mediated by the sequential allophilia-to-teaching-culture processes. Consistent with expectations, there was an overall indirect effect through allophilia to teaching culture (*estimate* $= .09$, 95% CI $= .06, .13$). When the mediators were included in the model, the direct influence of empathic joy on student achievement was no longer significant ($\beta = .03$, $p = .28$).

Discussion

We examined empathic joy in an intergroup context and empirically tested a model in which predominantly White teachers' experience of empathic joy

for their predominantly ethnic minority students produces better learning outcomes for those students. Consistent with expectations, teachers' experience of empathic joy and positive intergroup attitudes (i.e., allophilia) was associated with positive achievement teacher behavior, which then produced better learning outcomes. Our study provides evidence for the importance of empathic joy in intergroup contexts and its importance in promoting positive intergroup attitudes and outcomes. Whereas the literature on empathic joy has tended to focus on close interpersonal relationships, our findings provide clear evidence of its importance in a larger social context. They also contribute to a body of studies finding that the presence of positive intergroup attitudes such as allophilia, rather than the absence of negative intergroup attitudes, is an important antecedent to positive intergroup relations that involve positive, proactive engagement and behaviors across groups divides (e.g., Pittinsky & Montoya, 2009a; Pittinsky et al., 2011a).

Whether positive empathy is a cause of prosocial behavior or an effect of it has been questioned repeatedly in the literature (e.g., Batson et al., 1991; Smith et al., 1989). For example, two studies found that participants were more likely to help if they anticipated seeing the positive reaction of the recipient than if they were told they would not see that reaction (Batson et al., 1991; Smith et al., 1989). It is possible that they were motivated by the anticipation of empathic joy (that is, that empathy caused the prosocial behavior). Furthermore, the research on empathic joy in the intergroup context (e.g., Pittinsky & Montoya, 2009b) has only revealed correlational evidence regarding the relation between (i) positive intergroup attitudes such as allophilia and empathic joy and (ii) student outcomes. However, our findings provide an example of empathic joy preceding student achievement and document the causality in the relation between the measurement of empathic joy and allophilia and the subsequent assessment of student outcomes.

Although the direct relation between empathic joy and student outcomes ($r = .06$) appears to be only a trivial effect, the Institute of Education Sciences recently issued a report (Lipsey et al., 2012) that focused on how to interpret effect sizes in education. Specifically, the report dismisses the traditional characterization of effect sizes—such as those established by Cohen (1977, 1988)—often used in the context of laboratory studies by noting that in randomized studies using "broad measures" (such as state test scores or standardized measures), effect sizes across elementary and middle school studies will be relatively small (for example, .08). Our study, though finding a "small" effect size, meets all of Lipsey et al.'s (2012) criteria for a meaningful and "high-quality study": We used a large sample, used independently collected and objective measures of student performance, and conducted the study over the course of a school year. Moreover, there is a research literature on the impact a particular teacher can have on student achievement, despite the many other possible factors at play (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000;

Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Learning gains achieved during a year with an effective teacher last beyond that year (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011a, 2011b).

We would also point out the possibility that empathic joy, although associated with a small effect size in our study, may have meaningful effects by virtue of acting as a catalyst. We often hear of vicious cycles, in which reciprocal causes and effects intensify and aggravate each other, there can also be *virtuous* cycles, in which reciprocal causes and effects produce increasingly favorable results. Empathic joy may, for example, help trigger moral elevation (e.g., Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011). Moral elevation is a state that individuals may experience after witnessing—or even merely hearing about—a virtuous act. In the intergroup context, a show of unexpected compassion, forgiveness, or proactive engagement may produce more altruism and helpful behavior simply by being a witness. In this way, empathic joy may be a critical part of the virtuous cycle observed in moral elevation research and in intergroup relations more generally.

Implications for Practice

Anecdotal evidence for the power of empathic joy in education includes the popularity of films such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988), in which ethnic minority dropout students learn to excel in calculus, and *Knights of the South Bronx* (2007), in which a teacher creates a championship chess team out of fourth-grade students whose families confront social problems such as poverty, prison, and drug addiction. Audience members, many of them White and middle class, feel joyful as the characters—minority youth—persevere and triumph.

Indeed, there are many opportunities for the use of empathic joy to complement or replace the use of empathic sorrow in education. The American educational system is steeped in empathic sorrow and it sometimes goes to extremes (Davis, 2001). In the many educational domains in which empathic sorrow is put to use—such as history, civics, and English—it seems important to investigate how empathic joy might play a role that is not only complementary but possibly more constructive.

The implications of our findings extend well beyond our experimental context, because educational attainment (our measured outcome) can predict adult well-being (emotional, physical, and material) in industrialized countries. Any gain in educational attainment is therefore important, especially given the wealth of findings on self-fulfilling prophecies and on vicious and virtuous cycles.

Finally, we note that education is not the only sector in which empathic joy on the part of those who serve members of disadvantaged communities might be valuable. Youth guidance, criminal justice, and community relations more generally might benefit from greater attention to empathic joy alongside empathic sorrow.

Social Policy Considerations

There is debate about how student outcomes may be affected by the combination of the teacher's ethnicity and the student's ethnicity. Some education leaders submit that because role-modeling effects may trump other effects, ethnic minority students must have teachers of the same ethnic identity. Other researchers propose that the teacher's skills and attitudes are paramount. Caught in the middle are the teacher and tutor corps—organizations such as Alliance for Catholic Education, Americorps Builds Lives through Education (ABLE), Citizen Schools National Teaching Fellowship, Teach for America, and city-government sponsored teaching fellowship programs such as those run in New York and Boston—whose members, often largely White, seek to address the shortages of qualified teachers in struggling schools serving predominantly ethnic minority students. Our findings indicate that an ability to empathize with students' joy can increase teachers' effectiveness, even when they differ ethnically and socioeconomically from their students.

Limitations and Directions for Future Work

Although our findings raise several intriguing possibilities, future work remains to understand more deeply the role of empathic joy in intergroup relations, both in education and more generally. More specifically, other external variables and more general dispositional characteristics of the teachers that might underpin observed differences in teacher orientation, but for which our data do not allow us to test. Future work might directly consider possible external variables that could influence both empathic joy and allophilia, as well as more general characteristic such as optimism or sociability. We note this in light of Barbarino and Stürmer's (2016) findings, who noted that xenophilic orientations can be predicted by major personality traits. Similarly, Paolini, Wright, Dys-Steenbergen, and Favara (2016) found that individuals' expectations, desires, and motives are factors that can lead to more and better intergroup interactions. Understanding how expectations, desires, and motives affect the experience of empathic joy in intergroup contexts is therefore a rich area for consideration.

Conclusion

Our goal was to investigate the impact of empathic joy on objective student outcomes. Consistent with expectations, we found that empathic joy can indeed create conditions that improve student outcomes. Education has always been seen as a key to what is best about American society: mobility and success through personal ability and effort. To the extent that American education is not serving that purpose today as well as it has in the past, we need teachers who empathize

with their students fully—that is, who experience empathic joy but also empathic sorrow.

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