When Empathy Succeeds and Fails:
Public Support for Social Welfare Policies

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Abstract

Empathy is a basic human ability and a likely foundation of support for social welfare programs in developed democracies. Drawing on data from two studies, we examine the power of empathy to shape support for social welfare policies across the political spectrum and examine in instances in which empathy and political ideology come into conflict. We assess empathic ability with Baron-Cohen and colleagues' (2001) "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" task and find that it powerfully *increases* support for an individual welfare recipient and social welfare policies among political liberals. In contrast, empathy *decreases* support for the same welfare recipient and a range of social welfare policies among political conservatives. We advance a dissonance explanation to account for the views of empathic conservatives and demonstrate that they are more willing to express support for needy individuals when empathy does not conflict with their ideological views. In essence, empathy drives support for social welfare policies among many Americans but places in a bind those who most strongly endorse individualism and other conservative values. We discuss the political implications of our findings.

Empathy is an essential part of the human condition and constitutes the glue that helps to maintain human societies. It can be defined as "the visceral or emotional experience of another person's feelings" (Seppala 2013), or "an ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond … with an appropriate emotion" (Baron-Cohen 2011 p.18). Put another way, Preston and De Waal (2002) believe we can respond "with" someone by feeling their distress or "to" them by providing comfort and consolation. From this perspective empathy is more than simply feeling someone's pain, it involves feeling sympathy for someone in distress, or worried about someone who is deeply grieving, emotions that readily lead to assistance.[1] Empathy is common among infants who respond to the distress of others with their own cries and morphs into helping behavior among children at around the age of 14 months, a trend that strengthens with age (Preston and de Waal 2002; Sagi and Hoffman 1976). Moreover, empathy is not a singular process. It is better thought of as a system involving multiple brain regions, and distinct but related motor, cognitive, and affective components that can occur both consciously and outside conscious awareness (Baron-Cohen 2011; Blair 2005; Preston and de Waal 2002).

In this manuscript, we examine empathy as part of the glue that holds human societies together, focusing specifically on its ability to promote support for social welfare assistance. This is not a simple process, however, and we additionally examine how empathy's influence is complicated by long-standing ideological beliefs. There are undoubtedly numerous factors that go into public support for government social welfare policies for groups such as children, the elderly, the poor, and the unemployed. Political ideology, and related values such as individualism, plays an important role in shaping such support resulting in lower support for such government assistance among political

[1] Some researchers (Eisenberg 2002) distinguish between empathy (the "with") from sympathy and compassion ("to"). But others find a very direct connection between empathy and compassion (Batson et al 2002). As Einoff (2008; p. 1267) puts it "empathy …… is an essential component of motivation to perform prosocial or helping behaviors in particular." Marsh et al (2007) report that those who more accurately recognized fear in the face of others in a lab setting were more likely to act pro-socially.

conservatives than liberals. But both liberals and conservatives differ in their empathic abilities, as we

discuss at length below, and we believe that such differences also powerfully shape support for social

welfare policies because empathy is a critical psychological mechanism that contributes to our feelings

of compassion and helping behavior. Our endeavor is aided by contemporary insights from research

within the burgeoning field of social neuroscience and social emotions (Decety 2011; Decety and Ickes

2009; Hein and Singer 2008). The time is right to take a close look at the complex interplay of empathy,

ideology, and public support for social welfare policies.

The Psychology of Empathy

There has been much ink spilled over the nature of empathy, especially its affective and

cognitive nature and relatedly its occurrence at an implicit or explicit level (Blair 2005; de Waal 2008;

Decety 2011; Hodges and Wegner 1997; Singer and Lamm 2009; Zaki & Ochsner 2013). There are

obvious indications that some aspects of empathy occur outside conscious awareness. For example,

humans mirror the facial expressions of others, even when faces are presented outside conscious

awareness, suggesting a very automatic link between one person's expressions of emotion and

another's imitation of the same facial expression (Dimberg 1982; Dimberg et al 2000). The mirror

neuron system is involved in this facial mimicry. One supposition is that the mirrored emotional

response helps an observer to better understand the other's emotional state. On its own facial mimicry

does not constitute empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011; Blair 2005). But there is evidence that such

unconscious mimicry facilitates the recognition of emotional facial expressions and is more pronounced

among people high in empathy (Chartrand & Bargh 1999; Neal and Chartrand 2011).

De Waal (2008 p. 287) captures empathy's complexity in his "Russian doll" model which involves

"simple mechanisms at its core and more complex mechanisms and perspective-taking abilities as its

outer layers." In this sense, very automatic processes such as mirroring the emotional facial expressions

of another or learned conditioned reactions such as sympathy in response to someone's pain lie at the

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center of empathy and represent rapid reactions that can occur outside conscious awareness. De Waal notes that humans instinctively understand empathy's automaticity and will cover their eyes at an especially gruesome movie scene to avoid empathic feelings. Automatically triggered empathy can then be reinforced or modified by more complex cognitive responses (i.e., the outer layer in the nested Russian doll model; Spunt and Lieberman 2012). Such higher level cognitive processes could involve heightened empathy through the conscious adoption of another's perspective by imagining their internal state in response to a specific event. It might entail shifting attention from another to oneself and thus undercutting empathy (Lamm et al 2008). Or conscious emotion regulation may override empathy by denigrating a person or group in need, or squashing emotional reactions to those affected by a large-scale humanitarian disaster (Cameron and Payne 2011; Gubler 2013).

There is no doubt that cognition plays a role in the direct experience of empathy. There are different strands of evidence to support this conclusion. First, shifting someone's attentional focus from another to the self reduces empathy for a person in need. Such processes are seen as responsible for the lack of empathy observed among those experiencing acute anxiety or a very direct threat. Second, changing cognitive appraisals about a person alters the amount of empathy felt for them. For example, Lamm and colleagues (2007) told subjects that the pain felt by another observed person did or did not help to successfully treat their health condition. Subjects in the condition in which the painful treatment was described as successful felt less empathic pain for the person than those who were told the treatment was unsuccessful. In a similar vein, Decety and colleagues (2010) found that a person receiving a painful treatment was rated as experiencing more pain when described as someone who had been infected with the AIDS virus via a blood transfusion than via intravenous drug usage. Moreover, subjects evinced greater activity in regions of the brain associated with pain while watching a video of the "deserving" AIDS victim and reported feeling greater empathy for them. Empathy is also dampened in response to someone in pain who is regarded as unfair (Singer et al 2006). Other researchers have

identified areas of the brain in which this form of top-down cognitive control of emotional empathy

occurs (Klaisch et al 2005; Ochsner and Gross 2005).

Preston and de Waal suggest that the ability to inhibit and control emotion is crucial in humans,

as a way to prevent emotional contagion and dampen empathy when it conflicts with social rules or

norms. Such cognitive control of emotion is learned in childhood and is commonly referred to as

emotional regulation. Cameron and Payne (2011) demonstrate a very direct link between emotional

regulation and what they call the collapse of compassion in response to large-scale humanitarian

disaster. In their research, compassion was most likely to collapse among those most skilled at

emotional regulation and among respondents explicitly instructed to regulate their emotion.

The ability to cognitively override empathy is consistent with the notion that empathy arises

through several independent, overlapping, and potentially redundant neural pathways, occurring at the

conscious and pre-conscious level (Blair 2005). Blair regards these multiple pathways for the detection

of emotion in others as a basic survival mechanism. For instance, pre cortical pathways that rapidly

detect emotional faces conveying disgust, fear, or anger very likely serve a basic evolutionary purpose.

But empathy's multiple neural pathways also hint at the potential for psychic conflict. The automatic

arousal of affect in response to someone in need or pain may conflict with cognitions that suggest the

person is underserving or emotionally manipulative. This creates a fascinating situation in which heart

and head can collide, a situation that is especially relevant as unknown others demand our assistance in

the form of broad-based government benefits.

Individual Differences in Empathy

Before we turn to a closer examination of public support for government social welfare policies,

it is important to note that people vary in their general degree of empathy, leading to crucial individual

differences in the ability to understand, feel, and appropriately respond to another's emotional state.

Psychologists have developed various scales and tests to assess empathy (Davis 1980; Baron-Cohen &

Wheelright 2004). These measures include both cognitive and affective components and predict a variety of relevant attitudes and behavior including the ability to accurately read others' emotions, feeling the same emotion as another, helping a person in need, and supporting humanitarian values (Batson et al 2002; Laurent & Hodges 2008; Barr & Higgins-D'Alessandro 2007; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001). The cognitive facet is often referred to as perspective taking whereas the emotive component is thought of as empathic concern (Davis 1980).

In recent years, researchers have moved away from measuring empathy through self-report scales and towards obtaining direct behavioral measures. This shift arose, in part, to get around social desirability pressures inherent in asking individuals about their ability and willingness to feel the pain of others. One of the most important of these empathy tests has been developed by Baron-Cohen and colleagues (2001). It is called the "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" (MIE) test and has been used to successfully differentiate those with and without Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Individuals with ASD have considerable difficulty on the test and score poorly. The test measures an individual's ability to correctly label an emotion expressed by someone else. Respondents are shown a picture of a pair of eyes and then asked to choose the emotion being conveyed by the person, choosing from one of four emotion words in a multiple choice format.

In the past, most studies using MIE were conducted among abnormal, autistic, and schizophrenic populations. But that is beginning to change, as the test is used increasingly among normal populations (Baker et al 2014; Kidd and Castano 2013; Norenzayan et al. 2012). This endeavor is still in its early stages but the effects of MIE are impressive. For example, Engel and colleagues (2014) report that MIE predicts successful cooperation and task completion among work groups and does so in contrast to average team member IQ which does not boost team success (Engel et al 2014). In this research, we employ the MIE scale and assess its relationship to social welfare attitudes to avoid the social desirability pressures commonly associated with self-reported empathy. To date, there is no

published research that has examined the link between empathy and social welfare attitudes using the MIE test.

Public Support for Social Welfare Assistance

As a general rule, Americans are reasonably favorable towards a wide range of social welfare programs. Reviews of survey evidence show consistently strong support for Social Security (Shapiro and Smith 1985) and spending efforts by the government to reduce unemployment (Shapiro *et al.* 1987). Government guarantees for jobs are met with somewhat less enthusiasm, although support for such policies is by no means lacking (Shapiro *et al.* 1987a). Even in the controversial domain of public assistance, support for a range of government programs has generally been high, indicating a broad willingness within the American public to come to the assistance of the poor (Shapiro *et al.* 1987b). As Cook and Barrett (1992) note "in general, over the years the public has supported programs to help the needy [...] and this support does not appear to have diminished" (p. 27).

The evidence for welfare support does not imply, however, that ideological misgivings about the welfare state are absent in the U.S. Survey evidence continues to show that Americans are quite *unwilling* to accept the welfare state in principle (McClosky and Zaller 1984). The idea that government should play a role in socioeconomic affairs is met with a great deal of suspicion, as is the idea that the poor should be taken care of by society (Sniderman and Brody 1977). There is some evidence that Americans view the welfare state as unjust, believing that welfare recipients are undeserving or unduly advantaged at the expense of the middle class (Jennings 1989). The emergence of vigorous ideological opposition to the welfare state on the political right, as seen in the statements and actions of Tea Party activists and conservative members of Congress, suggests that this opposition may be even more pronounced in the 2010s than in the recent past as program support shifts with political rhetoric (Parker and Barreto 2013; Schneider and Jacoby 2005).

Broad support for social welfare programs is consistent with the potential role of empathy in driving such support. News stories about government social welfare programs such as health care or unemployment insurance often include images, stories, and information about needy individuals who can benefit from government social welfare programs (Iyengar 1991). These stories have the potential to arouse empathy for those who find themselves in need of government assistance. Such feelings can play a large role in shaping support for specific social welfare programs, especially when the beneficiaries are regarded as deserving individuals such as children and the elderly who are seen as largely incapable of helping themselves (Bang-Petersen et al 2010; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Goren 2003; Huddy et al 2001). But feelings of empathy for helpless individuals in need of government assistance may present strong conservatives with a dilemma. They are opposed to large government, believe strongly in individualism, and yet may also feel empathy for those who find themselves in need of government assistance (Malka et al 2011). We thus examine the power of empathy to shape support for social welfare policies across the political spectrum and examine more closely instances in which empathy and political ideology come into conflict.

<u>Empathy and Social Welfare Attitudes</u>

There is additional empirical support for empathy and compassion as bases of support for the American welfare state. Feldman and Zaller (1992) find that many respondents in the 1987 American National Election Studies (NES) pilot study justified pro-welfare attitudes in humanitarian terms. Feldman and Steenbergen (2001) report that Americans who score highly on a scale of humanitarianism were more supportive of social welfare spending, more willing to assist the poor, expand Medicare, and provide direct assistance to the elderly. In addition, a measure of empathy predicts the humanitarian scale in Feldman and Steenbergen's (2001) research and reduces the effect of an experimental frame designed to decrease support for restricting immigration and boosts the effect of a humanitarian frame on opposition to such restrictions (Newman et al 2013).

But for some Americans this support is tempered by whether or not a recipient is considered *deserving* of government assistance (Bang-Petersen et al 2010; Goren 2003). From this perspective, individuals who fail to succeed are blamed for their shortcomings. And there is ample evidence that some Americans blame individuals who require welfare assistance. Cook and Barrett (1992) demonstrate, for example, that holding program recipients responsible for their situation diminished support for AFDC and Medicaid. Kluegel and Smith (1986) find that blaming individuals for their own poverty increases opposition to social welfare policies targeted at the poor. And Skitka and Tetlock (1993) show that Americans are less likely to give public aid to the unemployed and those held accountable for becoming infected with the AIDS virus. In all of these instances, program support depends on how hard recipients have worked to prevent their misfortunes. For those considered undeserving, the political effects of empathy are less apparent.

When Empathy and Political ideology Collide

If empathy helps to explains public support for the American social welfare state, particularly programs in which recipients are deemed deserving, what happens when empathy comes into direct conflict with principles? Among liberals, there is no tension between empathy for welfare recipients and principled support of larger government and a robust social welfare safety net. An empathetic response to welfare recipients may actually serve as a useful emotive heuristic for liberal policy support. In contrast, empathy and principles are likely to clash among conservatives who believe strongly that individuals should be held accountable for their personal financial situation and thus oppose government and social assistance programs. How do conservatives resolve this kind of conflict? Does empathy or political conservatism prevail (Malka et al 2011)?

There is some prior evidence that the regulation of empathy generates cognitive dissonance. Cameron and Payne (2012) placed individuals in a situation in which they were required to squash any

feelings of compassion while watching brief (4 second) images of homeless people, babies, and victims of war and famine. Respondents' desire to emulate a highly moral person (who was described as caring, compassionate, generous, kind along with other positive moral attributes) was assessed after viewing such images. Respondents also indicated the degree to which they thought morality was flexible, including the view that moral rules can be broken. The emotional regulation of compassion resulted in those who endorsed moral inflexibility downplaying the importance of their moral identity, and those who maintained a strong moral identity viewing morality as more flexible. Overall, someone who was asked to repress compassion had to reconcile a lack of feeling with their moral self-image by either downplaying the importance of morality to their identity, or viewing morality as more flexible across situations in order to accommodate their behavior.

To understand how conservatives react to feelings of empathy for potential welfare recipients, we adopt a relatively new approach to cognitive dissonance, developed by Eddie Harmon-Jones and colleagues referred to as the action-based model of dissonance (Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones 2009; Harmon-Jones 2008; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones 2002). According to Harmon-Jones, dissonance arises when conflicting cognitions interfere with effective action, producing an aversive state. Many positive emotions drive action, and empathy is no exception. It is linked to helping behavior and other pro-social acts. Within this model, strong conservatives high in empathic ability will experience the greatest dissonance. They can empathize with the welfare recipient which will arouse the desire to help but at the same time will be ideologically opposed to help if it involves government assistance, creating powerful dissonance (Harmon-Jones, Peterson, & Vaughn 2003). No dissonance will be aroused among strong political liberals, however. Their support for government assistance will increase with their level of empathic ability.

What then are conservative likely to do: disavow their beliefs or discount their empathic feelings? According to Harmon-Jones et al (2009) the "cognition" most likely to change in order to

reduce dissonance is the attitude or feeling that is easiest to change. For strong conservatives, this is obviously empathy for an individual welfare recipient. Moreover, the theory does not just suggest that conservatives will simply side with their principles. It specifically predicts that greater dissonance will lead to greater attitude change in the direction that bolsters ideology, implying greater denigration of the welfare recipient and even stronger support for ideological principles in a process referred to as "a spreading of alternatives." This process is designed to reduce dissonance and facilitate unconflicted action and generates the intriguing and counterintuitive prediction that highly empathic conservatives will be the most opposed to any form of government assistance. Moreover, policy opposition among conservatives should increase with the degree to which they feel empathy for those in need.

This hypothesis has not been tested in past research. But there are analogous examples from the study of racial attitudes. In one study, white Americans who rated themselves as racially tolerant were given bogus feedback indicating that their neural responses (monitored during the study) indicated that they had reacted very negatively to a series of black faces. They were then given an opportunity to reduce their dissonance by reading articles about prejudice reduction or a neutral topic. Those who felt most guilty about their negative racial response were most likely to want to read articles on prejudice reduction (Amodio, Devine & Harmon-Jones 2007). This research example of conflict on the political left provides a clear parallel to the hypothesized conflict highly empathic conservatives feel in response to someone in need of government assistance. From this vantage point, conservatives high in empathic ability will make greater efforts to reduce the dissonance aroused by a needy individual by bolstering their initial position—political conservatism and individualism more specifically.

It is also possible that the spread of emotion, such as distress or need, from someone else to oneself can lead to the false appraisal that the observed person caused one's distress. This may arouse anger at the observed person even though they have done nothing to intentionally cause harm or distress (Preston and de Waal 2002). Such misappraisal may be especially likely to occur when empathy

conflicts with beliefs that the person does not deserve sympathy or support, such as when that support

arises from government assistance.

Finally, there is evidence that the cognitive regulation of empathy can become routinized and

habitual. For example, Cheng et al (2007) exposed both physicians who practiced acupuncture and naïve

respondents to animated pictures of needles being inserted into a body. Those who practiced

acupuncture evinced weaker neural responses in regions of the brain linked to empathy than did the

naïve respondents suggesting that frequent exposure to pain reduced an empathic response to

someone in pain.

Hypotheses

We expect individuals high in empathic ability (as measured by MIE) to be more supportive of

social welfare policies than those low in empathy. This is qualified, however, by the effects of political

ideology. Empathy will have positive effects for political liberals among whom there is no obvious

conflict between empathy and their political beliefs. Empathy will have a backfire effect among

conservatives, however, decreasing support for social welfare policies. But we expect highly empathic

conservatives to support assistance, consistent with the helping actions linked to empathy, when it does

not involve government assistance (and does not arouse dissonance). Under these circumstances, highly

empathic conservatives will be more supportive of assistance provided to someone in need by a private

charity or religious organization. We conducted two studies to test these hypotheses.

Data and Methods

Study 1: Amazon Mechanical Turk Sample

Participants were recruited through MTurk and were paid $1.00 for completing a survey that

took between 15 and 20 minutes. To improve the demographic diversity of the MTurk sample we used

the Dynamic Demographic Filter developed by Joshua Mitts (see http://joshmitts.com/?page_id=17).

This filter allowed us to select respondents to fill predetermined quotas based on ideology, age,

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education, race, income, and gender. As those quotas were filled, potential participants in the study were rejected. In particular, we specified equal numbers of self-identified liberals and conservatives. Although we were not able to completely fill the quotas (we obtained a somewhat greater number of liberals than conservatives), the sample exhibits substantial demographic and political variation. A total of 511 respondents completed the survey, although 97 were eliminated because they took less than 11 minutes to complete it, leaving a sample of 414[2]. The study was conducted over several weeks in January and February of 2014. Descriptive statistics for this sample are shown in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Study 2: YouGov National Sample

Participants in this study came from the YouGov online subject pool and included 400 non-Hispanic, non-Asian whites. As might be expected, YouGov respondents reflect greater diversity than the MTurk sample. In particular, it is older, less Democratic, and includes more political moderates (who were largely filtered out of the MTurk sample). The study was in the field during October of 2014. Descriptive statistics for this sample are shown in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Measuring Empathy: Reading the Mind in the Eyes

Respondents in both studies began the survey by completing 18 items from the Mind in the Eyes (MIE) test. The test was preceded by the following instructions:

"For each set of eyes, choose which word best describes what the person in the picture is thinking or feeling. You may feel that more than one word is applicable but please choose just one word, the word you consider to be most suitable. Before making your choice, make sure that you have read all 4 words. You should try to do the task as quickly as possible but you will not be timed."

Two sample items are presented in Figure 1. The correct answer for the female set of eyes is "desire" and "uneasy" is the correct answer for the male set of eyes. The items vary in difficulty as seen in these

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[2] The experiment in Study 1 included another condition that is not used in this paper. Half of the sample was given exactly the same material to read as in Study 2 while the other half of the sample was given a somewhat different version. Since we do use those assigned to the different version the sample size for analysis of the experiment is half of the total sample.

two examples.

Figure 1: Sample Items from the Mind-in-the-Eyes Test

1. joking
2. flustered
3. desire
4. convinced

1. apologetic
2. friendly
3. uneasy
4. dispirited

The test produced very similar distributions in the two studies as shown in the kernel density plots shown in Figure 2. In both samples the range of correct answers was 4 to 18 and the distributions were quite skewed. The mean was 13.3 (md = 14) in Study 1 and 13.0 (md = 13) in Study 2. The 1st, 5th, and 10th percentiles were 7, 9, and 10 in Study 1 and 5, 8, and 10 in Study 2. As expected, most people are fairly good at recognizing emotions in peoples' eyes. As these two study show, however, there is a substantial amount of variance in empathic ability in normal populations. Some people are exceptionally good at this task whereas others are two or more standard deviations below the sample mean. This measure has the twin virtues of being immune from social desirability effects and exogenous to political attitudes and values.

Given the skewed distributions of the MIE scores, they were rescaled to vary from 0 to 1 and then squared to bring them somewhat closer to a normal distribution (the long lower tail of each distribution remains to some extent). The means of the squared scores are .57 (md = .60) in Study 1 and .56 (md = .58) in Study 2. The 1st, 5th, and 10th percentiles are .08, .20, and .31 in study 1 and .12, .28, and .34 in study 2.

Figure 2: Distributions of Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test
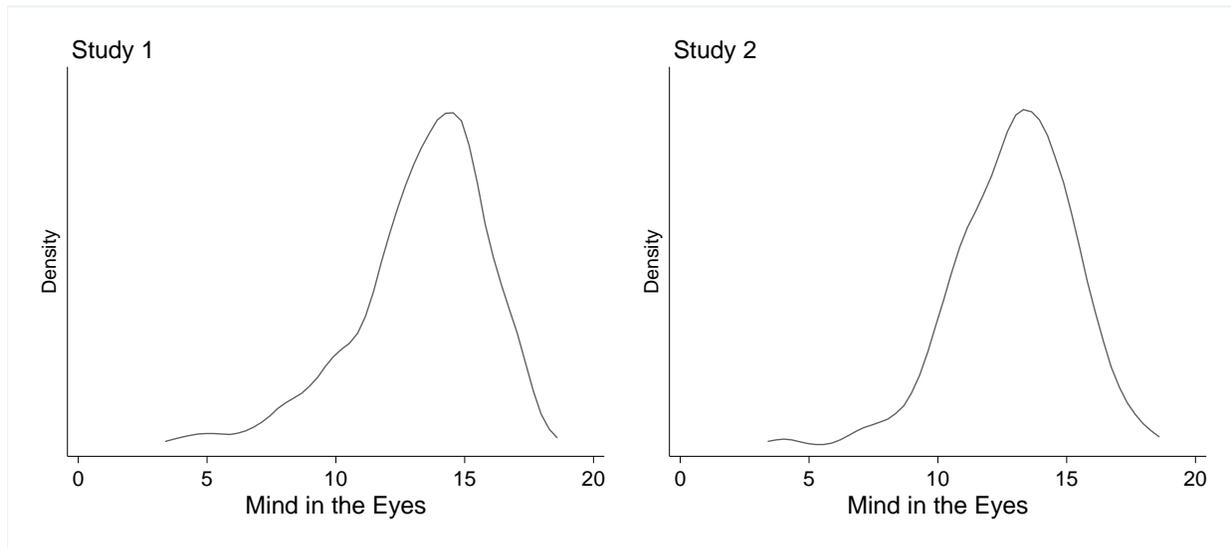
In order to assess the effects of empathy on attitudes toward those in need, respondents in each study read a description of a white male, high in deservingness, who had lost his job after the 2008-9 recession. The full text, which was accompanied by a photo of a somewhat dejected-looking white male in his late 30s, his wife, and two boys, read:

> Mark Sperling lost his job in 2011 when his company laid off some of their workers because their business had not recovered from the recession. Mark has had some part-time work over the past few years and has been actively looking for work but because of continuing high unemployment in the country has not been able to find a good full-time job. A former civil engineer, he has since been focused on updating his skills through local seminars, in hopes of increasing his chances of getting a new job. His wife Janine had been a stay-at-home mother since her two children were born but has had to get a job at the local library to help cover expenses while Mark looks for a job. He is very worried that without a job he will not be able to make payments on his home or support his family.

Our goal is to observe the effects of empathy when conservatives do and do not experience cognitive dissonance. We therefore randomly assigned respondents to one of two conditions that involved reading a short introduction immediately before the description of Mark Sperling. To *maximize* dissonance we had respondents in one condition (government) read the following introduction:

> During the recent recession, government programs played a major role in providing assistance to those in need. Please carefully read the following profile of a person who

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needed this type of assistance.

In the other condition (charities), we attempted to *minimize* dissonance with this introduction:

> During the recent recession, charities and volunteer organizations played a major role in providing assistance to people in need. Please carefully read the following profile of a person who needed this type of assistance.

The experiment was designed to either induce dissonance in empathetic conservatives by priming the government or eliminate dissonance by priming charities. We expected empathy in the government condition to generate stronger dissonance and greater denigration of the potential beneficiary among conservatives. In contrast, dissonance should be eliminated among conservatives in the charities condition and empathy should correlate positively with sympathy for Sperling and support for charitable assistance to him. With no expected conflict between empathy and values among liberals we expect empathy to be positively related to sympathy and their support for both government and charitable assistance.

We examine the potential conflict between empathy and ideology through willingness to support government assistance to someone in need and thus tap liberal and conservative beliefs through a belief in individualism, an aspect of ideology that is especially germane to the provision of government benefits. Study 1 contained six individualism items in agree/disagree format and Study 2 included four of those items. The items scaled well (alpha = .86 in study 1 and .77 in study 2), the scale distribution was relatively symmetric, and scores were distributed across the entire range (recoded to range from 0 to 1) of the scales in both studies.

We estimate simple analytic models that include the MIE measure, individualism, and their interaction and, where appropriate, the interaction with experimental condition. The majority of the dependent variables are categorical and thus most models were estimated with ordered probits. In addition to these simple models, we also estimated models that included controls for gender, age, education, and ideological self-identification. In no case did the joint effects of empathy and

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individualism change significantly with these additional statistical controls.

Results

Is there a relationship between ideology and empathy? If empathy drives support for social welfare policy we would expect liberals to be higher and conservatives lower in empathy. A simple way to assess this is by plotting the MIE scores against ideology. As a starting point, we depict mean empathy scores across levels of ideological self-identification measured on a 7-point scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. The box plots for the two studies are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Relationship between Mind in the Eyes and Ideology**
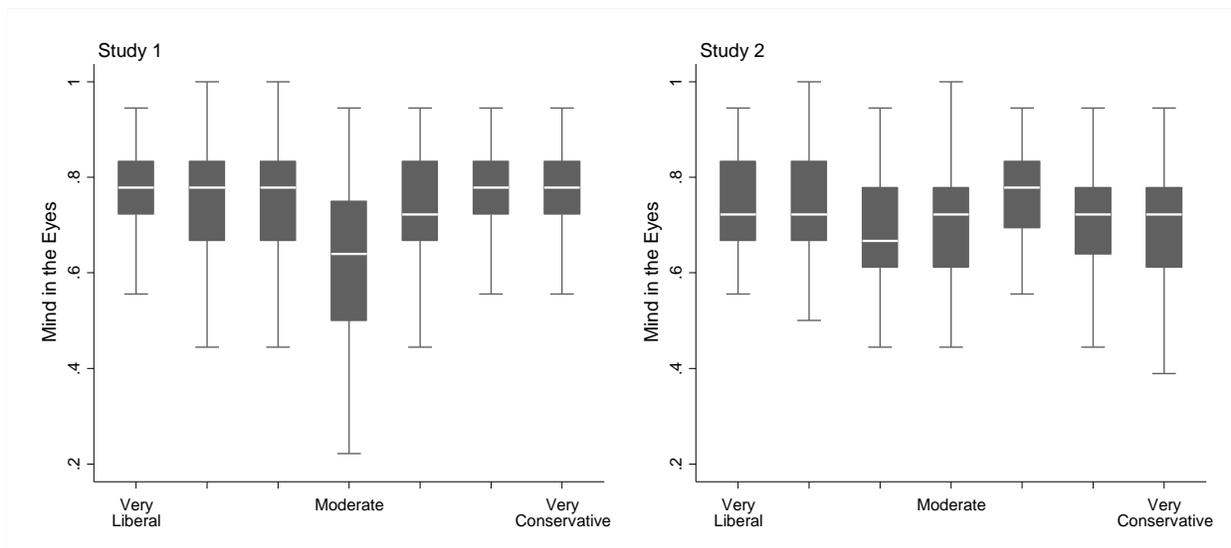
It is clear in Figure 3 that there is no relationship between ideology (self-identification) and empathic ability. There is a suggestion in Study 1 that moderates may be somewhat lower in empathy than liberals and conservatives but that finding is not replicated in Study 2. The lack of relationship between empathy and ideology extends to other measures of ideology. In particular, individualism has a weak negative relationship with MIE in Study 1 (-.12) and virtually no relationship in Study 2 (-.04). Empathy is also unrelated to a measure of belief in limited government in Study 1 (-.03) and to a measure of egalitarianism in Study 2 (.03).

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<u>Responses to a Needy Individual</u>

We begin analysis of the experimental results by examining the joint effects of empathy (MIE) and individualism on expressions of sympathy for Mark Sperling in the government condition, designed to heighten cognitive dissonance among conservatives. Immediately after reading about him, respondents were asked "How much do you care about what happens to Mark Sperling?"[3] In Figure 4 the predicted probability that respondents cared "a great deal" or "quite a bit" about Sperling is plotted across the range of MIE as it varies from the 10th to 99th percentile[4] for those who strongly reject and strongly support individualism. This relationship is plotted separately for the two studies, based on ordered probit estimates shown in Table A2.

Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities of Care, Government Condition

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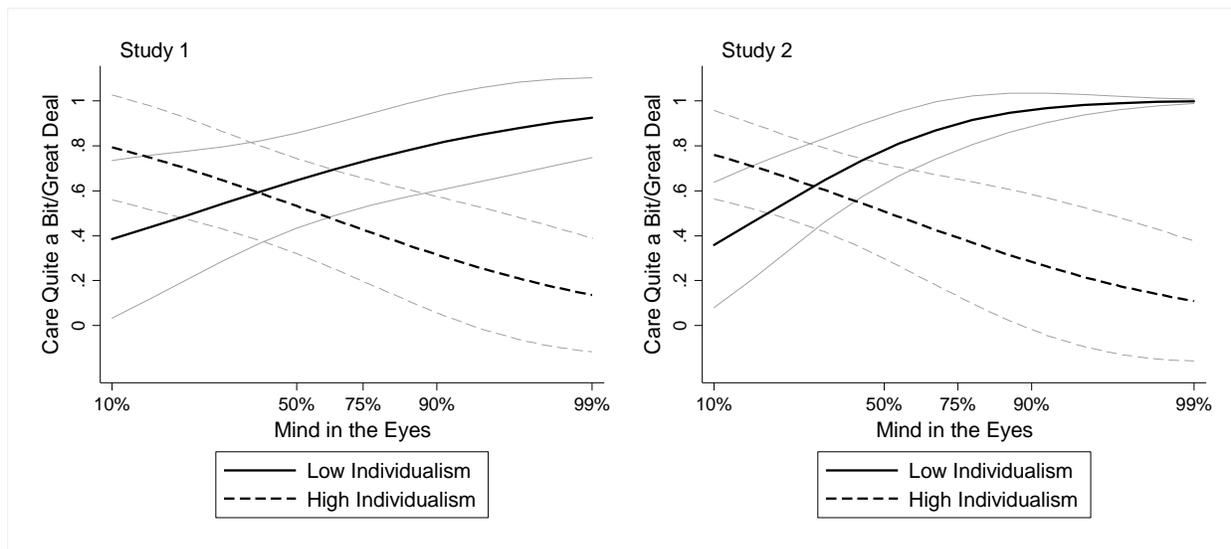
[3] The response categories for this question were "don't care at all," "care a little," "care somewhat," "care quite a bit," and "care a great deal." Diagnostics showed strong violations of the proportional odds assumption for the ordered probit model with those five response categories. The diagnostics indicated that "don't care at all" and "care a little" were relatively indistinguishable as were "care quite a bit" and "care a great deal." Combining those response categories resulted in a three category variable that was more consistent with the proportional odds assumption.

[4] We exclude those below that 10th percentile since they are very far from the mean and, in these samples, close to abnormal psychologically.

The estimates are very similar across the two studies. Among those who reject individualism, empathic skills are directly linked to an increased concern about Sperling. Despite using the very lowest score for individualism (those who most firmly reject the belief that people can get ahead on their own), those who reject individualism but have poor empathic skills, as assessed by MIE, express little concern for Mark Sperling. Those high in MIE are very likely to say that they care a great deal or quite a bit about him. In both studies, increasing empathy among liberals generates substantially greater sympathy for Sperling.

In contrast, the relationship between MIE and sympathy toward Sperling is sharply negative for those who embrace individualism. The greater their empathic ability, the less they say they care about him. This is not simply ignoring feelings of empathy which would result in no relationship between empathy and concern. Instead, the negative relationship strongly suggests that as empathy increases among people with conservative values they experience conflict that results in even less concern about Sperling than their less empathic ideological counterparts.

Individual differences in empathy influence more than one's level of concern for Sperling when he is in need of government assistance. Respondents in the government condition were also asked "How strongly do you support or oppose extending government unemployment benefits for people like Mark Sperling who have been unemployed for a long period of time?".[5] Once again, we modeled this as a function of the interaction between MIE and individualism. The probit estimates are shown in Table A3 and the predicted probabilities of very strongly or strongly supporting extending unemployment benefits are shown in Figure 5.

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[5] The original response categories for this question were "very strong oppose," "strongly oppose," "somewhat oppose," "somewhat support," "strongly support," and "very strongly support." As with the caring question, diagnostics indicated severe violation of the proportional odds assumption in the ordered probit model. In order to overcome this it was necessary to dichotomize the categories by combining "very strongly support" and "strongly support" into one category and the other four response categories into a second category.

Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities of Supporting Unemployment Insurance, Government Condition
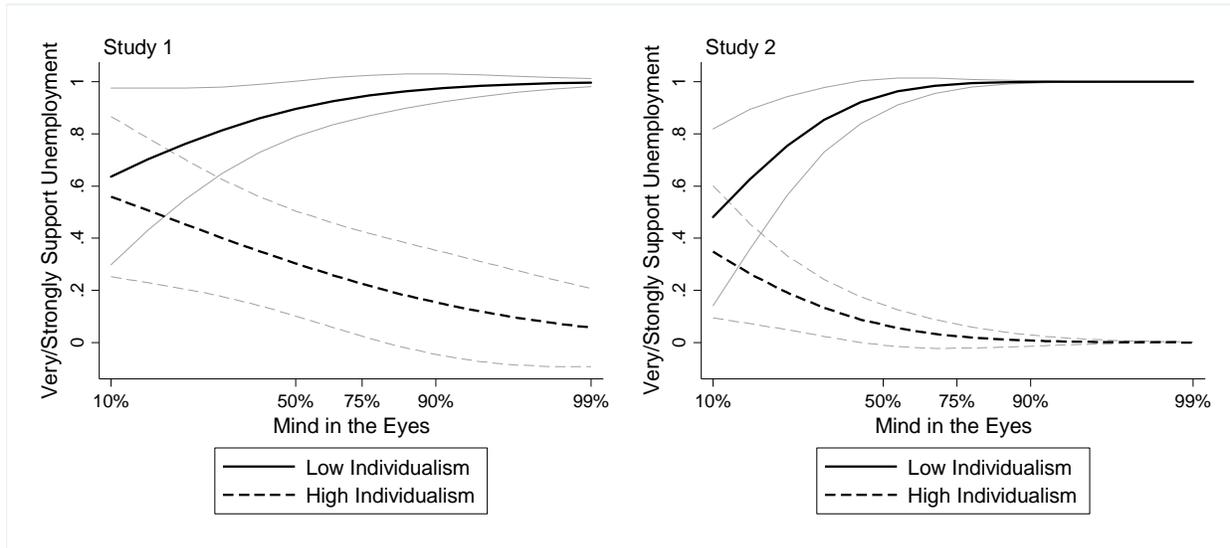
The relationship between empathy and support for unemployment insurance closely parallels that depicted for expressions of sympathy. Among those who reject individualism, there is only lukewarm support for the provision of government benefits among those low in empathy but support rises dramatically at higher levels of empathy. Just the opposite trend is seen for those high in individualism: At low levels of empathy, there is modest support for the extension of unemployment benefits. But this disappears completely as empathy increases. These reverse relationships between empathy and support for the extension of government unemployment benefits are made clear in Figure 5.

The government condition was designed to maximize cognitive dissonance between empathy and conservative political beliefs. But this dissonance does not arise for those low in individualism among whom empathy is strongly related to expressions of caring and support for government assistance to someone in need. The charities condition was designed to eliminate dissonance for conservatives in order to assess whether empathy also boosts their support for assistance to someone in need when such assistance does not conflict with their principles. By framing assistance in terms of charity and private giving we should have removed the conflict between empathy and political ideology

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for conservatives.

Figure 6 depicts the predicted probabilities of caring greatly or quite a bit about Sperling in the charity condition as a function of empathy among those high and low in individualism. These values are generated from ordered probit estimates in Table A2. In sharp contrast to the government condition there is now a strong *positive* relationship between MIE scores and expressions of caring for Sperling among those high in individualism. This finding provides clear evidence that MIE captures individual differences in empathy equally well for liberals and conservatives. The negative relationship between MIE and compassion, or MIE and support for government assistance, among those high in individualism in the government condition is not due to an inadequate measure of empathy. Once an unemployed individual is described as someone in need of non-governmental assistance, empathy predicts expressions of sympathy just as well for conservatives as for liberals in the government condition.

There is one unexpected result shown in Figure 6: the negative relationship between MIE and expressions of caring for those low in individualism in both studies. In essence, liberals high in empathy are less sympathetic toward Sperling than those low in empathy when he requires charitable assistance. We had not predicted this finding and are hesitant to read too much into it. Nonetheless, one interpretation is that liberals may experience dissonance between their feelings of sympathy toward Sperling and their political values which prioritize government over charitable assistance. This prospect requires further research attention. It does suggest, however, that liberals are just as likely as conservatives to experience cognitive dissonance.

**Figure 6: Predicted Probabilities of Care, Charities Condition**
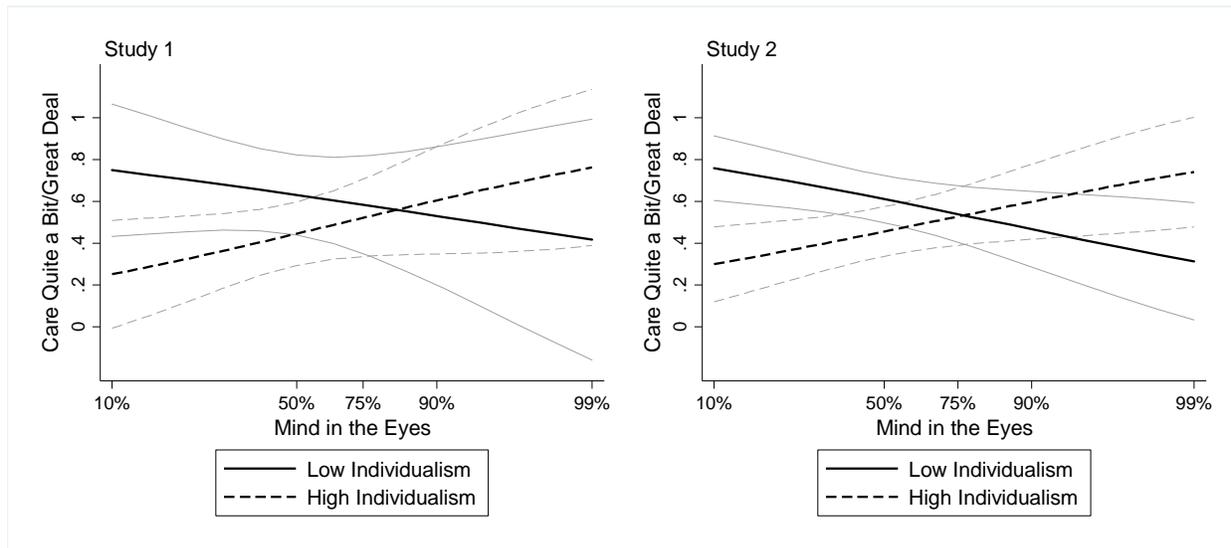
In the charities condition, respondents were asked about their support for charitable assistance to Sperling.[6] Figure 7 shows the predicted probabilities of very strong or strong support for this type of assistance to Sperling among those high and low in individualism (the probit estimates are shown in Table A4)[7]. Consistent with evidence on who cares about Sperling in the charities condition, empathy boosts support for charitable assistance among those high in individualism. This effect is exactly opposite to the negative relationship observed between empathy and unemployment assistance in the government condition among the same respondents (those high in individualism). This reinforces the conclusion that empathy is positively related to both caring and the desire to provide assistance to a

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[6] The question read "How undeserving or deserving is Mark Sperling of assistance from charitable organizations?" The response categories for the charitable assistance question were "extremely undeserving," "very undeserving," "somewhat undeserving," "somewhat deserving," "very deserving," and extremely deserving." As we found with the question on unemployment benefits, the coding that minimized violations of proportional odds resulted in a dichotomous variable pitting "extremely deserving" and "very deserving" against the other four categories combined.

[7] The coefficients in the MTurk data look relatively small compared to their standard errors despite the relatively large effect size (for those high in individualism) shown in Figure 7. In addition to the relatively small sample size, the coding of the individualism scale partially obscures the effect of empathy among conservatives since the coefficient for MIE indicates its effect when individualism is at its lowest value. If we reverse the direction of the individualism scale the coefficient for the effect of empathy when individualism is highest is 2.22 with a standard error of 1.64.

needy individual among conservatives once conflict between compassion and ideology is removed. The

results in Figure 7 also partly replicate the negative relationship between empathy and compassion for

those low in individualism. In this case we see declining support for charitable assistance as empathy

increases in Study 2 (YouGov) but no obvious relationship in the MTurk data in Study 1.

**Figure 7: Predicted Probabilities of Supporting Charitable Assistance, Charities Condition**
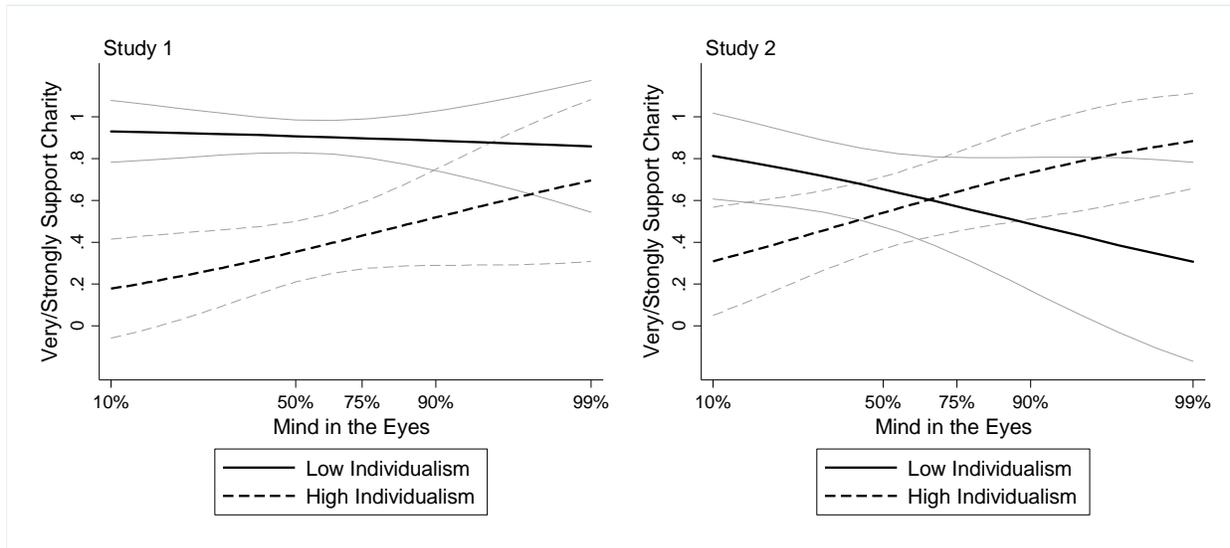
We examine more closely the effects of empathy on evaluations of Mark Sperling through an

analysis of three traits questions that were asked after respondents had read about Sperling in Study 2.

Specifically, we asked respondents whether they saw Sperling as competent or incompetent, intelligent

or unintelligent, and talented or untalented (on a 6 point balanced scale). This is a difficult test because

Sperling was intentionally described as deserving: someone who lost his job through no fault of his own

and was taking positive actions to get another job. Not surprisingly, few respondents viewed him very

negatively and most of the observed variation was among gradations in positive assessments. Responses

to the three questions were very highly correlated and we combined them into a single measure that

ranges from 0 to 1. The combined scale was regressed onto MIE , individualism, and their interaction as

in earlier analyses. The regression estimates are provided in Table A5 and predicted values for those

highest and lowest in individualism are shown in Figure 8.

The effects of empathy on trait assessments depend on whether a respondent was in the

government or charities condition. Among those high in individualism, empathy has a negative effect on

ratings of Sperling in the government condition. Just the opposite is observed in the charities conditions.

Empathic conservatives are more positive about Sperling than less empathic conservatives but only

when sympathy does not conflict with individualism. Just the opposite is seen for those low in

individualism. As for caring and government assistance, empathy boosts positive assessments of

Sperling's traits in the government condition. There is some weak evidence that empathy increases

negative assessments of him in the charities condition.

**Figure 8: Predicted Values of Traits, Study 2: Government and Charity Conditions**
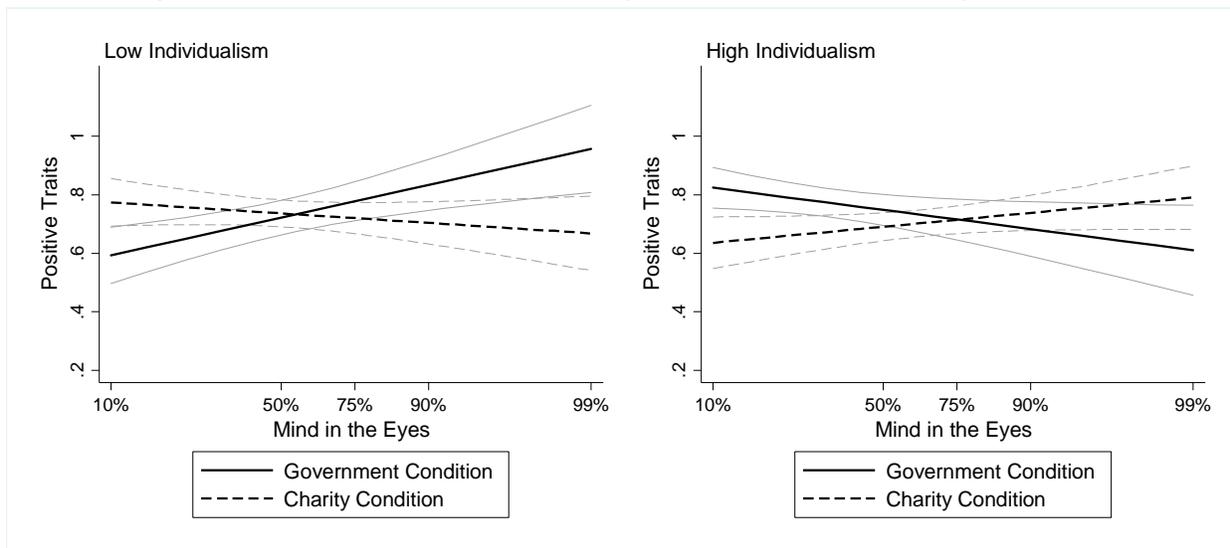
Long-Term Effects of Empathy and Dissonance

To this point we have focused on the effects of empathy toward a single individual in need. Is

the effect of empathy limited to individual cases or episodic events? We think that the consequences of

empathy, and its political regulation, accumulate over time. For liberals, exposure to those in need

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generates sympathy and a desire to provide assistance. With repeated exposure these responses should

reinforce liberal values. We therefore expect support for liberal policies to increase with greater

empathy among people low in individualism. Conservatives respond very differently to situations like

this. In order to resolve cognitive dissonance they appear to denigrate needy individuals and withhold

sympathy and support for government assistance. Over time these processes should lead those high in

individual to be less supportive of government assistance and less supportive of government programs

in general. Bolstering conservative values would also help to overcome the distress aroused through

cognitive dissonance.

We demonstrate these relationships by analyzing the determinants of general political

orientations and social welfare policy attitudes in empathy and individualism. To begin, we consider

responses to a question asked in both studies: "Which is more important: Insuring that each individual

has as much opportunity as possible, even if that means some people enjoy far more success than

others OR insuring greater equality of income, even if that limits individual opportunities." Since the

question contrasts greater equality with individual opportunity it is possible that responses are driven

solely by the value placed on individualism. The predicted probability of choosing equality over

individual opportunity is shown in Figure 9 as a function of empathy and individualism (based on the

probit estimates in Table A6).

Figure 9: Predicted Probabilities of Choosing Greater Equality over Opportunity
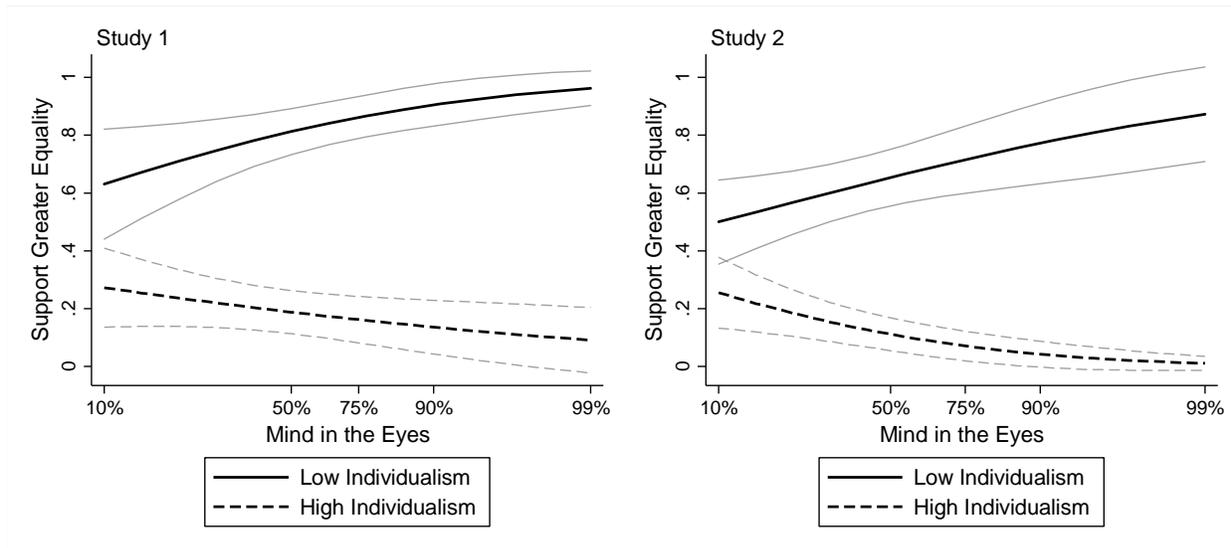

The relationships are very similar across the two studies. The effect of individualism on support for greater equality over opportunity is clear. However, individual differences in empathy also exert a significant influence. Among those low in individualism, support for greater equality increases with higher scores on the MIE measure. Highly empathetic liberals are much more strongly supportive of greater equality than less empathetic liberals. Even among the least individualist (most liberal) respondents in our studies, support for greater income equality is equivocal for those low in empathy. Empathy has exactly the opposite effect for those high in individualism. Although support for greater equality is weak across all levels of empathy it does decrease at higher levels of empathy. The most empathetic conservatives are most opposed to trading opportunity for greater income equality.

We can look at these processes more closely through two questions that were included to help understand the political consequences of empathy: In Study 1 respondents were asked "The U.S. government recently changed the way Social Security benefits are calculated so that the annual cost of living raises are smaller than in the past. How strongly do you support or oppose this change?" And in Study 2 respondents were asked "How strongly do you support or oppose the U.S. government paying for all of the cost of prescription drugs for senior citizens who are living on very little income? Both

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questions probe support for greater government spending on a group that is almost universally considered deserving: Low income senior citizens. We show predicted probabilities for both questions in Figure 10 (ordered probit estimates are shown in Table A7).

Figure 10: Predicted Probabilities for Social Security Benefits
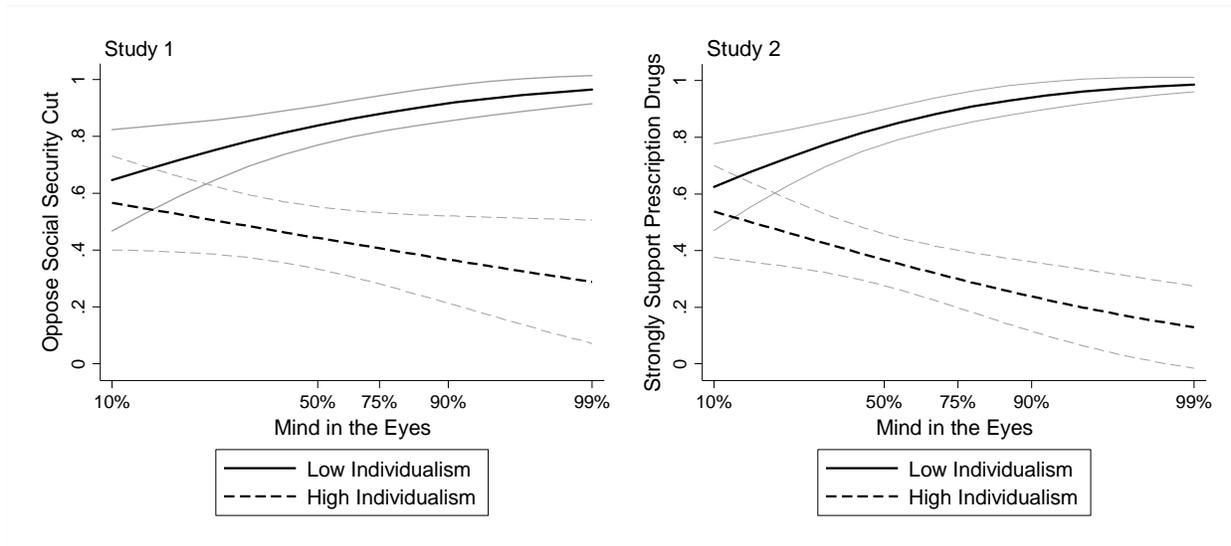
Once again, empathy significantly increases support for government assistance among liberals, in this case government benefits for the elderly. Among those low in individualism, empathy is associated with stronger opposition to cuts in social security benefits (Study 1) and increased support for prescription drug benefits for the elderly (Study 2). Empathy has substantial effects for conservatives as well but they are in the opposite direction. Increasing empathy among those high in individualism is associated with greater support for cuts in social security benefits and decreased support for prescription drug benefits for seniors despite their being a generally sympathetic group.

Robustness

We considered a number of alternative explanations for these findings. The models just presented were based on the most parsimonious specification: The MIE measure, individualism, and an interaction term. We also estimated all of the models with gender, age, education, and (in Study 1) race/ethnicity) included as predictors. None of the results we presented were significantly changed in

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this expanded model. We then added liberal-conservative self-identification to the models and again it had no significant effect on our estimates of the empathy and individualism coefficients.

The moderating effect of empathy on individualism in these models looks superficially like those typically found when measures of political sophistication (knowledge) are used to examine the conditional effects of predispositions such as individualism on policy preferences or candidate support. However, there is no evidence that empathy acts as a proxy for sophistication in these models. First, there is no significant correlation between MIE and political knowledge in either study. Second, we included a measure of political knowledge and its interaction with individualism in all of the models. The interaction term was frequently significant, as predicted by Zaller (1992). But this had no effect on the results presented so far; any interaction between knowledge and individualism is independent of the joint effects of empathy and individualism.

It is also possible that high empathy conservatives have other untested attributes that are not modeled and might account for the trends observed in our analyses. For example, the negative effects of empathy on support for benefits to the elderly may be a reflection of a general disregard for the welfare of others despite high scores on the MIE measure. Study 2 included a six item measure of Machiavellianism (Cristie and Geis 1970) that taps a negative view of human nature and a willingness to manipulate people for self-interest. As has been documented in other research (Lyons, Caldwell, Shultz 2010) we find a *negative* relationship between empathy and Machiavellianism. This does not vary by ideology (individualism); even among conservatives, increasing empathy is associated with significantly lower levels of Machiavellianism.[8] In addition, we examined the possibility that variation in empathy among conservatives is related to religiosity. We again found no evidence of any link between religiosity and empathy.

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[8] In another sample we also found a strong negative relationship between empathy and social dominance orientation.

Conclusions

In the analyses reported in this manuscript, empathic ability as measured by the Mind in the Eyes test had strong positive effects on support for government assistance to the needy and aroused increased support for social welfare programs among liberals (those who reject individualism most strongly). Importantly, empathetic liberals also expressed greater sympathy and concern for an individual who had fallen on hard times, helping to explain their greater general support of government social welfare assistance. As expected, increasing empathy among liberals was associated with sympathy for the needy and a desire to provide assistance. While the MIE measure only directly taps empathic ability — the capacity to accurately read emotions in other people — the results from these studies show that people who score high on this measure do report feeling greater sympathy for someone in need and a desire to provide assistance.

It is easy to believe that empathy works the same way for all humans. Shouldn't someone who is especially attuned to the feelings of others feel sympathy and concern for another human being in need? We have shown, however, that empathy can conflict with conservative beliefs about the need for individual responsibility. In this case, we have argued that empathetic conservatives experience cognitive dissonance in which empathy and conservatism clash, thus creating psychological discomfort. Dissonance theory predicts that conservatives will resolve this conflict by reducing sympathy for those in need. As seen in the charity conditions, empathetic conservatives do feel sympathy and care about those in need of assistance. When there is no conflict between empathy and beliefs, higher scores on MIE are associated with greater sympathy for liberals and conservatives alike. But when conservatives' beliefs and empathy conflict, sympathy and concern for the needy is substantially reduced and potentially suppressed. The negative effects of empathy on support for social welfare programs and egalitarianism suggests that empathic conservatives, who like others are regularly confronted with news

media stories about the needy, bolster their conservative beliefs over time by paradoxically becoming

even more opposed to social welfare programs than less empathic conservatives.

Table A1: Sample Characteristics

	MTurk	YouGov		MTurk	YouGov
	%	**%**		**%**	**%**
Sex			**Income**		
Male	54.6	44.3	*20k or less*	17.6	15.0
Female	45.4	55.8	*21k-40k*	30.9	23.3
			41k-60k	19.6	26.3
Age			*60k-100k*	23.3	16.3
18-25	23.6	6.3	*100k+*	8.6	19.3
26-40	49.1	16.5			
41-60	24.2	43.3	**Party ID**		
61+	3.2	34.0			
			Democrat	42.8	30.3
Race			*Independent*	24.1	37.5
White	79.0	100.0	*Republican*	33.1	31.3
Black	8.6				
Asian	6.1		**Ideology**		
Hispanic	5.3		*Liberal*	52.2	29.0
Other	1.0		*Moderate*	6.1	26.5
			Conservative	41.8	44.5
Education					
HS or Less	12.7	33.0			
2 yr. degree or less	42.3	34.5			
Bachelors	34.4	22.3			
Professional	10.6	10.3			

Table A2: Cares About Sperling

	Study 1			Study 2	
	coef	std. error		coef	std. error
Mind in the Eyes	2.67	1.62		5.41	1.92
Individualism	3.08	1.72		4.26	1.74
MIE x Individualism	-5.62	2.90		-9.41	3.20
Condition (charity)	2.38	1.69		3.45	1.25
Condition x MIE	-4.04	2.51		-7.07	2.21
Condition x Individualism	-5.65	2.91		-6.95	2.15
Condition x MIE x Individualism	9.11	4.61		13.03	3.85
threshold 1	0.46			1.13	
threshold 2	1.23			2.11	
N	204			396	

Note: Entries are maximum likelihood ordered probit estimates with standard errors.

Table A3: Support Extending Unemployment Insurance, Government Condition

	Study 1			Study 2	
	coef	std. error		coef	std. error
Mind in the Eyes	3.64	1.91		7.35	2.44
Individualism	2.00	1.96		3.95	2.16
MIE x Individualism	-6.30	3.20		-12.19	4.20
threshold 1	0.92			2.62	
N	99			128	

Note: Entries are maximum likelihood probit coefficients with standard errors.

Table A4: Support Charitable Assistance, Charities Condition

	Study 1		Study 2	
	<u>coef</u>	<u>std. error</u>	<u>coef</u>	<u>std. error</u>
Mind in the Eyes	-0.33	2.66	-2.15	1.64
Individualism	-4.02	2.56	-3.05	1.80
MIE x Individualism	2.63	3.64	4.75	2.99
threshold 1	-1.96		-1.64	
N	105		133	

Note: Entries are maximum likelihood probit coefficients with standard errors.

Table A5: Positive Trait Assessments, Study 2

	<u>coef</u>	<u>std. error</u>
Mind in the Eyes	0.55	0.19
Individualism	0.54	0.19
MIE x Individualism	-0.89	0.34
Condition (charity)	0.43	0.16
Condition x MIE	-0.72	0.26
Condition x Individualism	-0.82	0.27
Condition x MIE x Individualism	1.29	0.46
constant	0.40	0.12
N	395	

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors.

Table A6: Support for Greater Equality

	Study 1		Study 2	
	coef	std. error	coef	std. error
Mind in the Eyes	2.22	1.00	2.26	1.13
Individualism	0.23	1.08	0.11	1.28
MIE x Individualism	-3.35	1.65	-4.59	2.23
threshold 1	0.44		0.45	
N	413		391	

Note: Entries are maximum likelihood probit coefficients with standard errors.

Table A7: Support for Assistance to the Elderly

	Study 1		Study 2	
	coef	std. error	coef	std. error
Mind in the Eyes	2.06	0.84	-2.93	0.94
Individualism	0.65	0.83	-1.51	1.01
MIE x Individualism	-2.81	1.28	4.85	1.74
threshold 1	-1.15		-1.22	
threshold 2	-0.50		-0.72	
threshold 3	0.24		0.14	
threshold 4	0.92		0.65	
threshold 5	1.43		0.93	
N	413		395	

Note: Entries are maximum likelihood ordered probit coefficients with standard errors.

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