Are pandas like people? Compassion collapse in the environmental domain

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Introduction

How do people decide when and how much to give to charitable campaigns? Recent research suggests that people are highly sensitive to the ways in which donation requests are framed. Ironically, most individuals display a *decrease* in compassion (both affective and behavioral) as the number of victims in need *increases*, a phenomenon known as "compassion collapse" (Cameron & Payne, 2011). Various explanations for this effect have been put forward, including evolutionary, attentional, psychophysical and motivational accounts.

Our research extends past efforts in two important directions. First, previous research has almost exclusively focused on *human* suffering, and it is unknown whether compassion collapse will emerge in the environmental domain (i.e., when victims are non-human). Second, little research has examined individual differences in compassion collapse; for example, individuals who care deeply about an issue may be less likely to demonstrate the effect when confronted with multiple vs. single victims in need. In a series of studies, we test the hypothesis that individuals who do not identify as environmentalists (i.e., non-environmentalists) will donate *less* to environmental conservation efforts as the number of animals in need of aid *increases* (compassion collapse) whereas environmentalists will not show such an effect.

Methods

Studies are conducted via internet and random-intercept surveys and include both hypothetical and real donation scenarios. All participants are undergraduates at a large U.S public university. We utilize three between-subjects paradigms: (1) comparing donations to a single identified animal in need vs. donations to two identified animals; (2) examining the effect of statistical information about a group of animals vs. specific information about a single animal; and, (3) comparing donations as a function of the proportion of animals that can be helped. After reading the donation request letter and providing a (real or hypothetical) donation, participants then rated their donation-relevant affect (e.g., sympathy, guilt), reported their attitudes towards the animals being helped, and indicated their environmentalist identity.

Results and Discussion

Results suggest that compassion collapse: a) emerges in the environmental domain; and, b) is moderated by environmentalism. Among non-environmentalists, single, identified animals in need of aid received significantly greater donations than did either multiple animals or single animals who were contextualized, and individuals donated more to protect animals in a small population vs. a large population. However, the effect disappeared among environmentalists. These effects are partially mediated by the warm glow generated by the donation requests.

Our findings hold important applied implications for environmental organizations (e.g., reframing fundraising campaigns to emphasize individual animals in need of aid) as well as theoretical implications for the explication of compassion collapse. Further examining individual and group differences in susceptibility to compassion collapse may clarify the underlying psychological mechanisms at work as well as point the way towards effective interventions.

Keywords

Decision-making; charismatic megafauna; charity; prosociality; moderator effects

References

Cameron, C. D. & Payne, B. K. (In press). Escaping affect: How motivated emotion regulation creates insensitivity to mass suffering. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.