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Having "Been There" Doesn't Mean I Care: When Prior Experience Reduces Compassion for Emotional Distress

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The current research found that participants who had previously endured an emotionally distressing event (e.g., bullying) more harshly evaluated another person's failure to endure a similar distressing event compared with participants with no experience enduring the event or those currently enduring the event. These effects emerged for naturally occurring (Studies 1, 3, and 4) and experimentally induced (Study 2) distressing events. This effect was driven by the tendency for those who previously endured the distressing event to view the event as less difficult to overcome (Study 3). Moreover, we demonstrate that the effect is specific to evaluations of perceived failure: Compared with those with no experience, people who previously endured a distressing event made less favorable evaluations of an individual failing to endure the event, but made more favorable evaluations of an individual managing to endure the event (Study 4). Finally, we found that people failed to anticipate this effect of enduring distress, instead believing that individuals who have previously endured emotionally distressing events would most favorably evaluate others' failures to endure (Study 5). Taken together, these findings present a paradox such that, in the face of struggle or defeat, the people we seek for advice or comfort may be the least likely to provide it.

Keywords: affect, social judgment, hot–cold empathy gap, life events, compassion

Imagine an employee going through a rocky divorce. Struggling to endure the emotional distress of the divorce, the employee decides to request a leave of absence from work. Imagine further that the employee has to make this request to one of two supervisors. One of these supervisors has no experience with divorce, whereas the other supervisor endured a similarly trying divorce early in her career. Whom should the employee approach with this request?

Common sense might suggest that the supervisor who had endured divorce would be more understanding of the employee's plight. This intuition also has considerable empirical support, with research demonstrating that prior experience with an emotionally distressing event increases sympathy for others facing that same event (Batson et al., 1996; Loewenstein & Small, 2007). In the current research, we propose that rather than being sympathetic, people who have previously endured an emotionally distressing event may be prone to negatively evaluate others who fail to endure a similar event. We argue that constrained memory for the impact of past emotional distress (i.e., "I can't recall how difficult it was"), combined with knowledge of their own ability to endure the distressing event (i.e., "I did it"), leads people who have endured distressing events to render more negative evaluations (i.e., "Why can't you do it too?"). Thus, although lay intuition may encourage the employee to approach the supervisor who has lived through divorce, the current research suggests that the employee may ultimately be penalized for doing so.

The Benefits of Experience

The idea that prior experience with an emotionally distressing event[1] can facilitate sympathy is well supported. Research has shown that for a wide range of experiences—from childhood acne to physical abuse—people who have been through a distressing event tend to be more sympathetic toward others facing the same event compared with those with no experience (Barnett, Tetreault, Esper, & Bristow, 1986; Batson et al., 1996; Christy & Voigt, 1994; Clore & Jeffery, 1972; Hodges, Kiel, Kramer, Veach, & Villaneuva, 2010). For example, Batson et al. (1996) found that participants who had acne when they were younger experienced

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[1] In this article, we will use the term *emotional distress* to describe situations in which people must cope with unpleasant affective states in order to achieve their goals. These states refer to a wide range of negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear, sadness), drive, and feeling states (e.g., pain, fatigue; cf. Loewenstein, 2000).

more empathy and compassion when reading about an adolescent's experience with acne than did those with no such experience. Similarly, Christy and Voigt (1994) found that people who had been abused as a child said that they would be more likely to intervene if they saw a child being abused than were those who had never been abused. These findings suggest that prior experience with a similar event facilitates the ease with which another's perspective can be adopted, which increases sympathetic responding (e.g., Bandura, 1969; Batson, 1987, 1991).

The literature described here captures situations in which someone who has endured an emotionally distressing event evaluates someone else who is going through the same ordeal. Much less is known about how previously enduring distress affects our evaluation of others who *fail to endure* a similar event, that is, those who are unable to overcome or appropriately cope with the emotional distress produced by a trying event. Other than cases involving extreme emotional distress, there is a general expectation that people will manage to endure distressing events (Kim, Thomas, Wilk, Castro, & Hoge, 2010; Schwartz, 2000). People recognize that a soldier might be fearful of going on patrol, but there is an expectation that the soldier will complete his or her task. People recognize that being the target of bullying is emotionally challenging, but nevertheless expect a bullied student to cope in normatively appropriate ways and not, for example, resort to physical violence or dropping out of school. Unfortunately, people often fall short of these expectations (e.g., Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

This article examines how individuals who have previously endured an emotionally distressing event evaluate those who fail to endure similar distressing events. One possibility is that the shared experience breeds compassion. That is, those who have endured a distressing event in the past will have more compassion for those who fail to endure a similar situation. A second hypothesis, and the one endorsed here, is that those who have endured a distressing event in the past will in fact have less compassion for those who fail to endure a similar distressing event. Research on the hot–cold empathy gap and task completion support our prediction.

The Potential Downside of Enduring Distress

The hot–cold empathy gap suggests that difficulties recalling the impact of past emotional distress may lead people who have endured distress to be less compassionate toward others' failures to endure. First described by Loewenstein (1996), empathy gaps capture the tendency for people who are not affectively aroused (i.e., in a cold state) to underestimate the impact of affective or "hot" states (Loewenstein, 1996) on their judgments and behaviors. For example, empathy gap research has shown that when dieters are not feeling hungry, they tend to underestimate the extent to which hunger will impact their dietary choices (Nordgren, van der Pligt, & van Harreveld, 2008; Nordgren, van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2009). The empathy gap has been documented for a wide range of affective states, including sexual arousal (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006), fear (Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005), hunger (Nisbett & Kanouse, 1969), pain (Nordgren, McDonnell, & Loewenstein, 2011), and fatigue (Nordgren, van der Pligt, & van Harreveld, 2007).

Hot–cold empathy gaps are thought to result from constrained memories for affective states (Loewenstein, 1996; Nordgren, van der Pligt, & van Harreveld, 2006; Robinson & Clore, 2002). Though people can recall the situation that led to an affective state (e.g., "I was distraught because I was going through a divorce") and can recall the relative strength of the affective state (e.g., "That was the most distraught I have ever been"), they cannot freely bring forth the feeling of the affect (e.g., reexperiencing the agitation and sadness). In other words, although everyone has experienced fatigue, fear, and pain, if they are not currently experiencing an affective state, they will underestimate its influence over behavior.

Constrained memory for affective experiences means that once a distressing event has been overcome, people will have difficulty reliving their original emotional response to the event. Because people instead rely on their immediately accessible feelings in forming judgments, they may believe that their current "cold" state perceptions of the event reflect how they have always felt and reacted (e.g., Read & Loewenstein, 1999; Van Boven, Loewenstein, Dunning, & Nordgren, 2013). For example, the absence of emotional distress in response to a divorce that an individual is "over" will produce the inference that the divorce was less painful than was actually experienced. Because the impact of prior emotional distress is underestimated, divorce may now seem like a life event that can be readily overcome. Support for this account comes from research demonstrating a desensitization bias in emotional perspective-taking (Campbell, O'Brien, Van Boven, Schwarz, & Ubel, 2014). This study found that repeated exposure to an emotion-inducing stimulus (e.g., hearing the same joke a number of times) reduced empathic accuracy for others' reactions to that stimulus (e.g., predicting how funny others will find the joke). This occurs because people fail to account for how their emotional reactions have diminished over time and therefore mispredict that others who encounter the emotional stimulus for the first time would react less intensely than they in fact do.

Beyond their constrained memory for the impact of past emotional distress, people who have endured distressing events possess the knowledge that they managed to endure the emotional distress. Research has shown that tasks that have been completed seem easier than comparable tasks that have yet to be completed (e.g., Gist, 1987; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). For example, individuals who complete a challenging task tend to subsequently view the task as less difficult, and to predict that they could complete the task again, compared with individuals who have yet to complete the same task (Feather, 1966, 1968; Lenney & Gold, 1982; Manderlink & Harackiewicz, 1984). Having completed the task indicates that the task is manageable and could be completed again. This literature suggests that having previously endured an emotionally distressing event may decrease the perceived difficulty of coping with that event. If past distressing events seem easier to overcome in hindsight, those who have previously endured distressing events may be more likely to penalize individuals who fail to endure a similar distressing event in the present.

In sum, people who have previously endured an emotionally distressing event may utilize two key pieces of information when making assessments of individuals struggling or failing to endure a similar event. First, people who have endured distressing events will be unable to actively experience the motivational force associated with the emotional distress (e.g., Loewenstein, 1996; Nordgren et al., 2006). Second, these individuals possess the knowledge that they managed to endure the event. Both pieces of

information should make the distressing event seem less difficult to overcome in hindsight. We argue that this perception leads individuals to form negative assessments of those who fail to endure the distressing event. In other words, the combined experience of "I can't recall how difficult it was" and "I did it" leads individuals to render more negative evaluations (i.e., "Why can't you do it too?").

Though it may appear to be at odds with research demonstrating that prior experience fosters compassion, our central prediction is fully compatible with these findings. Although prior experience may generally increase compassion for those who have endured or are currently enduring a similar experience (e.g., Batson et al., 1996), we argue that when a target individual fails or struggles to endure an emotionally distressing event, having endured the event will in fact decrease compassion by decreasing the perceived difficulty of overcoming that event. To illustrate, compared with someone who has never endured divorce, a divorcee may be more likely to commiserate with a coworker's day-to-day efforts while undergoing a divorce, but may also be more prone to condemn the coworker if he succumbs to an emotional outburst at work. Having been there herself, the divorcee can understand the individual's situation. Yet because divorce seems less difficult to overcome in hindsight, emotional outbursts in the workplace may now seem unacceptable.

Unfortunately, the very conditions under which prior experience is proposed to reduce compassion (i.e., perceivers who have previously endured distressing events, and targets who struggle or fail to endure these events) characterize many real-world situations. Struggling graduate students may seek help from tenured faculty, and members of oppressed communities may appeal for aid from policymakers who overcame structural barriers themselves. Uncovering the potential downsides of overcoming adversity raises novel insights into how people treat those in need.

Current Research

In the current research, we present five studies designed to test the prediction that those who have previously endured an emotionally distressing event will form more negative evaluations of individuals who fail to endure a similar event. In Study 1, we test our predictions outside of the laboratory by exploring how participants at a polar plunge—an event that requires participants to plunge into icy water—evaluate another individual who failed to plunge, either before or after they participated in a plunge themselves. In Study 2, we aim to provide stronger causal evidence for this effect by randomly assigning participants to various stages of completion of a fatiguing exam, and then examining their evaluations of an individual who performs poorly on the exam. Study 2 also serves to rule out a critical alternative explanation—that participants who have endured the event are simply more knowledgeable about the event. Study 3 was designed to explore the mechanism behind this effect by testing whether individuals who have previously endured a distressing event render more negative evaluations of failure because the event seems less difficult to overcome in hindsight. Next, if our reasoning is correct, this effect should only occur when people who have endured a distressing event evaluate others who fail to endure the emotional distress. Study 4 tests this boundary condition. Finally, Study 5 examines whether the people's lay beliefs match the predicted effect, or whether people instead endorse the belief that those who have previously endured a distressing event would more favorably evaluate failures to endure the distress than would those who have never endured the event.

Studies 1 through 4 have two central conditions: a never-endured condition and a previously endured condition. The never-endured condition comprises individuals who have no experience with the distressing event, whereas the previously endured condition comprises individuals who have endured the event, but are no longer actively experiencing the distress. All participants read about and evaluated an instance in which someone failed to endure a similar emotionally distressing event. To capture the various types of negative evaluations that are associated with such failures, we used three types of measures—emotional reactions to the individual (Studies 1, 3, and 4), general evaluations of the individual (Studies 2 through 4), and behavioral intentions to help (Study 2; Nordgren et al., 2007). Compared with participants who never endured the event, we expected that participants who previously endured the event would form less positive evaluations, feel less compassion and more contempt, and be less willing to help an individual who failed to endure a similar distressing event.

Study 1

In Study 1, we conducted a field experiment to test whether previously enduring a distressing event would lead to more negative evaluations of those who failed to endure that event. Specifically, we examined participants' emotional reactions toward an individual who failed to complete a polar plunge—an event that requires participants to enter an icy body of water—either before (never-endured condition) or after (previously endured condition) they completed a plunge themselves. Five participants assigned to the never-endured condition indicated that they had previously completed a polar plunge or similar event in previous years, and were excluded from the analyses. We predicted that those who had endured this distressing event would experience less compassion and more contempt in response to another's failure to endure it.

Method

Participants. Participants were 54 individuals (M_{age} = 30.69, SD_{age} = 9.95; 37.5% female; 78% Caucasian, 9% Hispanic, 7% Asian American/Asian, 6% African American/Black) from Chicago, Illinois, and the surrounding area.

Procedure. Participants enrolled in a March polar plunge were approached for participation. Participants were approached in the waiting room of the event, which was an on-site, heated indoor facility. After agreeing to participate, participants were randomly assigned to the never-endured or previously endured conditions. Participants in the never-endured condition completed the study prior to the polar plunge, whereas participants in the previously endured condition provided their contact information and completed the study within 1 week after the polar plunge. In each condition, participants read about an individual named Pat who joins a polar-plunge team and is determined to take the full plunge. When the day approaches, Pat waits in the cold winter air in his swim trunks for his team's turn. Pat decides that he cannot endure the feeling of cold, despite his motivation to complete the plunge. Pat leaves without completing the polar plunge. After reading the

vignette, participants reported their compassion and contempt toward Pat, and then completed control and demographic measures.

Measures

Emotion. Participants indicated the extent to which they experienced specific emotional reactions to the polar plunger. In measures adapted from Nordgren et al. (2007), we assessed both positive and negative emotions in the form of compassion (Batson, 1991) and contempt (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999), respectively. The compassion items were "sympathy" and "compassion" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$), and the contempt items were "contempt," "anger," and "disgust" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). For each of the five items, we asked participants, "When you think about the polar plunger, to what extent do you feel . . .?" They responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Control variables. Participants in the previously endured condition indicated the number of previous polar plunges they had attended. In addition, participants in the previously endured condition indicated how deep they had entered the water during the polar plunge on a scale from 1 (*did not go in*) to 7 (*full body immersed*). Likewise, participants in the never-endured condition indicated the level of submersion they anticipated in the plunge.

Results and Discussion

No demographic variables yielded any effects on the dependent measures in this study, nor did the demographic composition of the sample differ between the previously endured and never-endured conditions. Demographic variables will therefore be omitted from further consideration.

As predicted, participants in the previously endured condition felt less compassion toward the failed polar plunger ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.80$) than participants in the never-endured condition ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(52) = -2.42$, $p = .019$, 95% CI [−1.94, −0.18], $d = 0.65$. Participants in the previously endured condition also felt more contempt for the failed polar plunger ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.58$) than did participants in the never-endured condition ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(52) = 2.97$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.35, 1.82], $d = 0.79$. Controlling for participants' level of submersion (or anticipated submersion) did not alter the results. In examining the previously endured group, six participants had completed more than one polar plunge. Our results were robust to the exclusion of these participants, suggesting that our results are not contingent on a subgroup of polar plunge "experts" who may view the task differently than do those who completed the plunge only once.

This pattern of results suggests that, as expected, having previously endured the polar plunge decreased participants' compassion and increased contempt toward another who failed to endure that event. One main benefit of Study 1 is external validity—we demonstrate the effect among active polar-plunge participants in the field. To better hone in on causality, Study 2 utilized an experimental paradigm to test the proposed effect.

Study 2

In Study 1, we provided initial support for our prediction by finding that participants who had been through the polar plunge felt more negatively about an individual who failed to endure the cold temperatures than did those who had yet to endure the event. Our explanation of these results draws on the hot–cold empathy gap to suggest that constrained memory for the impact of past emotional distress, combined with knowledge of their own ability to endure the distressing event, led people who had endured the event to render more negative evaluations. One alternative explanation of Study 1's results is an informational account. It is possible that the polar plunge was actually an easier event than one might imagine, and participants in the previously endured condition simply possessed more knowledge. We designed Study 2 to rule out this alternative explanation.

To do so, we randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions (currently enduring vs. previously enduring vs. never endured) in a between-subjects design. The added currently enduring condition allows us to rule out the possibility that the task was simply easier than the participants expected. The currently enduring participants experienced the same distressing event as did participants in the previously endured condition (and thus both had task experience), but only the former made their evaluations while actively experiencing the associated emotional distress. Thus, if the informational account is true, participants in both the previously endured and currently enduring conditions should be less compassionate toward an individual who fails to endure the emotional distress. If our account holds, participants in the previously endured condition will be less compassionate than will those currently enduring the distressing event. Although both groups will have experience with the task, only participants currently enduring the event will be able to appreciate the motivational force of the emotional distress.

The distressing event in question was a strenuous test of mental endurance, which was designed to induce mental fatigue (Nordgren et al., 2006, 2007). We note that although all people—and students in particular—have endured fatiguing examinations broadly, we argue that the knowledge that one has made it through a particular type of event creates the tendency to penalize those who fail to endure the event. The knowledge that one overcame a specific event may not generalize to related, but distinct, events. For example, a law student's completion of the bar exam may lead her to criticize another who struggles with the bar, but not someone who struggles to complete a medical licensing exam. Thus, to have a never-endured condition, we created a test that represented a unique experience unfamiliar to undergraduate students. Specifically, the test was named the Cognitive Ability and Persistence Battery (CAP-B), a test said to be developed for use by organizations to evaluate current and prospective employees along several dimensions, such as self-control and memory. In addition to being labeled a unique experience, the content of the test was unusual (i.e., memorizing a series of nine-digit number strings) compared with the type of tests that students typically complete.

Participants in all conditions were asked to evaluate an individual who struggles with the test's fatiguing nature and consequently cannot complete the test. In the currently enduring condition, participants evaluated the target individual while experiencing the fatiguing test. Participants in the previously endured condition

evaluated the individual 1 week after completing[2] the test. Participants in the never-endured condition evaluated the individual without having experienced the test themselves. Given that the test was ostensibly designed to assess employee skill, we also extended our dependent measures in Study 2 to participants' evaluations of the employee and their beliefs that the employee should be rehired by the organization. Our key prediction was that participants in the previously endured condition would make less favorable evaluations and would be less willing to rehire the employee than would those in the currently enduring and never-endured conditions.

Method

Participants. Participants were 135 students enrolled at a large Midwestern university (M_{age} = 20.68, SD_{age} = 1.64; 64% female; 39% Caucasian, 36% Asian American/Asian, 9% African American/Black, 4% East Indian, 6% Hispanic, 6% Other).

Procedure. Participants completed the study on computers in individual cubicles. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: currently enduring, previously endured, or never endured. All participants were first informed that the purpose of the study was to examine the use of an employee screening test (i.e., the CAP-B) in a variety of samples.

In the currently enduring condition, participants began the testing procedure upon arrival to the laboratory. In a design adapted from Nordgren et al. (2006, 2007), participants completed a strenuous memory test that lasted for 20 min. The memory test required participants to memorize a series of nine-digit number strings. Each number string appeared for 11 s, after which participants were asked to memorize the numbers for 7 s before they were prompted to enter the number string to the best of their ability. After 20 min of the fatiguing test, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. At this point, participants read a vignette about an employee who was asked to complete the CAP-B test. The employee was motivated to perform well on the test, but became too fatigued halfway through and could not complete it. Participants then evaluated the employee. Finally, participants indicated their current level of fatigue, completed open-ended questions examining awareness of the hypotheses (e.g., "What do you think the researchers are testing in this study?"), and were debriefed. No participants indicated awareness of our specific research hypotheses.

The previously endured condition was similar to the currently enduring condition, except that participants evaluated the employee 1 week after completing the fatiguing test. After completing the test themselves, participants in the previously endured condition were informed that there would be a follow-up questionnaire to collect additional information about their perceptions of the CAP-B. Upon beginning the follow-up survey, participants were shown a description of the test and asked whether or not they recalled participating in the test. All participants recalled the experience. Participants then completed the vignette portion of the study and were debriefed as in the currently enduring condition.

Finally, participants in the never-endured condition did not complete the fatiguing test. Instead, upon arrival to the laboratory, participants in the never-endured condition viewed a description of the test and sample questions before completing the vignette portion of the study.

Materials

Manipulation check. To ensure whether participants in the currently enduring condition were distinguishable from those in the previously endured or never-endured conditions in terms of fatigue, participants indicated their current levels of fatigue on a scale from 1 (*not at all fatigued*) to 7 (*very fatigued*).

Employee evaluations. To assess participants' evaluations of the employee, participants rated the employee on two dimensions related to competence ("competent" and "capable") on sliding scales from 0 (*not at all*) to 100 (*extremely*; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). The mean of these items served as an index of competence (r = .89).

Willingness to rehire. To assess possible behavioral consequences for the employee, we asked participants to recommend whether or not the employee's contract should be renewed. Participants completed three items related to willingness to rehire (e.g., "I would definitely renew this employee's contract") on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The mean of these items served as an index of willingness to rehire (Cronbach's α = .85).

Results and Discussion

No demographic variables yielded any effects on the dependent measures in this study, and these were omitted from further consideration.

Manipulation check. To examine whether our test was indeed a fatiguing event, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) examining the effect of condition on current fatigue. The results revealed a significant main effect of condition on fatigue, $F(2, 132) = 4.44$, $MSE = 1.94$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$. Based on recommendations to use planned contrasts to test specific research questions (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985; Steiger, 2004), we conducted a planned contrast to examine whether participants in the currently enduring condition (+2) reported significantly higher levels of fatigue than did participants in the never-endured (−1) or previously endured (−1) conditions. The results revealed that participants in the currently enduring condition reported significantly higher levels of fatigue (M = 4.79, SD = 1.08) than did participants in the never-endured (M = 4.05, SD = 1.57) or previously endured (M = 4.03, SD = 1.47) conditions, $t(132) = 2.95$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.49, 2.50], $d = 0.51$, indicating that our manipulation was successful.

Next, to examine the dependent measures, we conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs with planned contrasts. Specifically, planned contrasts examined whether participants in the previously endured condition (−2) gave the employee significantly less favorable evaluations and were less willing to rehire the employee than were participants in the never-endured (+1) or currently enduring conditions (+1).

Employee evaluations. A one-way ANOVA revealed that competence evaluations varied significantly by condition, $F(2, 132) = 5.63$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .079$. In line with our predictions, the

[2] All participants successfully completed the test. Given that participants evaluated an individual who failed to endure the test, overcoming the experience was operationalized as completion of the test, rather than some performance metric.

planned contrast revealed that participants in the previously endured condition rated the employee as significantly less competent ($M = 41.86$, $SD = 18.84$) than did participants in the never-endured condition ($M = 47.37$, $SD = 15.97$) and the currently enduring condition ($M = 54.29$, $SD = 15.63$), $t(132) = 2.67$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [4.67, 31.22], $d = 0.46$.

Willingness to rehire. There was also a significant effect of condition on willingness to renew the contract, $F(2, 132) = 3.96$, $MSE = 0.86$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = 0.059$. As predicted, the planned contrast revealed that participants in the previously endured condition were significantly less willing to rehire the employee ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.79$) than were participants in the never-endured condition ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.89$) and the currently enduring condition ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(132) = 2.52$, $p = .013$, 95% CI [0.20, 1.68], $d = 0.43$.

Taken together, the results of Study 2 support our predictions. Participants in the previously endured condition were less willing to rehire and provided less favorable evaluations of the employee who struggled with the test than did those in the never-endured and currently enduring conditions. It is important that this difference persisted when including the currently enduring condition because it rules out an information account for this effect; participants in the currently enduring condition completed the same test as did the participants who previously endured the test (and thus possessed similar knowledge about the test), but only the former made their evaluations while actively experiencing the associated mental fatigue.

Study 3

In the first two studies, we found that, across two different events, people who had previously endured a distressing event evaluated another's failure to endure that event more negatively than did those who had never endured (or were currently enduring) that event. The goal of Study 3 was to examine the process that drives this effect. Prior research has found that people have a constrained memory for affective states, and once a state is overcome, they can no longer appreciate its motivational force (Nordgren et al., 2006). Moreover, unlike people who have not endured or are currently enduring a distressing event, people who have endured a distressing event might use the knowledge that they managed to endure the event when they make assessments of another's struggles to endure. We predict that the combination of a constrained memory for the impact of past emotional distress and knowledge of one's own completion of the event makes the event seem easier to overcome, which, in turn, makes struggling with the event appear more blameworthy (Alicke, 2000). Based on this reasoning, we predicted that the perceived difficulty of overcoming the emotionally distressing event would mediate the effect of enduring the event on evaluations of another's failure to endure.

We tested these predictions in the context of unemployment, a life event in which a person is actively searching for employment but is unable to find work. A large body of research has accumulated to suggest that unemployment is an emotionally distressing life event (e.g., Grossi, 1999; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Thus, in Study 3, participants in varying states of unemployment (currently enduring vs. previously endured vs. never endured) read a scenario about a man who begins selling drugs because he is unable to find work. Participants then rated how much compassion they felt for the unemployed individual and provided general evaluations of the individual.

Method

Participants. Participants were 227 American residents drawn from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 33.37$, $SD_{age} = 11.82$; 44% female; 78% Caucasian, 8% Asian American/Asian, 5% Hispanic, 5% African American/Black, 4% Other).

Procedure. Participants were recruited for the study on the basis of their responses to a preselection survey. The currently enduring group consisted of involuntarily unemployed people actively seeking employment. The previously endured group consisted of people who are currently employed, but had previously been unemployed while actively searching for employment. Finally, the never-endured group consisted of people who are currently employed and have never experienced an interruption in their employment since their first job. During the study, participants read about a man struggling to make ends meet. The man had attempted to apply to many jobs, but with no luck. Though he was motivated to persist and find gainful employment, he felt distressed by the constant rejection and lack of progress. One day, the man was approached by a friend who needed help selling small quantities of illegal drugs. Fed up with dealing with unemployment, he immediately took the offer and ended his search for (legal) employment. After reading the vignette, participants then completed the dependent measures and control variables.

Measures

Compassion. Participants indicated the extent to which they experienced compassion toward the man, as in Study 1.

General evaluations. Participants also completed measures that assessed their general attitudes toward the unemployed individual. Specifically, participants rated the man on four evaluative dimensions (*good, bad*; *positive, negative*; *like, dislike*; and *desirable, undesirable*) on 7-point scales (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$; Nordgren et al., 2007).

Perceived difficulty. Participants completed an item designed to assess the perceived difficulty of unemployment ("It is difficult to overcome being unemployed") on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*).

Control variables. In addition to measuring employment status, we assessed relevant control variables: political orientation, socioeconomic status, geographic location, education, and demographic variables. It is possible that factors such as political orientation are related to both employment status and evaluations of the unemployed. Participants in the previously endured and currently enduring conditions also completed items assessing the length and frequency of the job search (e.g., "How long ago were you unemployed?"/"How long have you been unemployed?"), and the activeness of their job search while unemployed (number of resumes sent, intensity of job search). Participants in the never-endured and previously endured conditions indicated whether they were employed full or part time, and the occupational category of their job.

Results and Discussion

As in Study 2, we conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs, followed by planned contrasts examining whether participants in the previously endured condition (−2) reported significantly less compassion, less favorable evaluations of the individual, and lower perceived difficulty to overcome unemployment than did participants in the never-endured (+1) or currently enduring (+1) conditions.

Compassion. A one-way ANOVA revealed that compassion varied by unemployment group, $F(2, 224) = 6.20$, $MSE = 2.00$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .052$. The planned contrast demonstrated that participants who previously endured unemployment experienced significantly less compassion toward the individual ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.54$) than did participants who never endured unemployment ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.37$), and participants currently experiencing unemployment ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(224) = 3.10$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.44, 1.98], $d = 0.41$.

Evaluations. Likewise, ratings of the individual varied significantly by unemployment group, $F(2, 224) = 6.99$, $MSE = 1.34$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .059$. The planned contrast revealed that participants who previously endured unemployment made less favorable evaluations of the individual ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.08$) than did participants who never endured ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.21$) and were currently enduring ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.19$) unemployment, $t(224) = 3.27$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.41, 1.67], $d = 0.43$.

Perceived difficulty. There was also a significant effect of unemployment group on the perceived difficulty of overcoming unemployment, $F(2, 224) = 3.71$, $MSE = 2.75$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .03$. As predicted, participants in the previously endured group thought unemployment was less difficult to overcome ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.62$) than did never-endured participants ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.84$) and currently enduring participants ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.48$), $t(224) = 2.35$, $p = .028$, 95% CI [0.07, 1.87], $d = 0.33$.

Mediation. We also tested whether the perceived difficulty of overcoming unemployment mediated the negative effect of enduring the event on compassion. A bootstrapping analysis of mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) with 10,000 resamples with replacement indicated a significant indirect effect, with a point estimate of .07 and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of [0.006, 0.196]. This suggests that decreased perceived difficulty of overcoming unemployment mediated the effect of previously enduring on compassion. Participants who previously endured unemployment were less compassionate because they thought unemployment was less difficult to overcome.

Next, focusing on evaluations of the unemployed individual, the bootstrapping analysis estimated the indirect effect to be .15, with a 95% bias corrected interval of [0.06, 0.29]. Again, this interval excluded zero, suggesting that the perceived difficulty of overcoming unemployment also mediated the effect of overcoming unemployment on the negativity of evaluations of the individual.

Control variables. When examining the control variables, only length of unemployment for participants currently enduring unemployment was significantly related to compassion, $\beta = .22$, $t(74) = 1.96$, $p = .054$, with longer times since last employment predicting increased compassion for the individual. It is likely that the frustrations and hardships associated with unemployment develop over time, increasing its perceived difficulty, and thus increasing compassionate feelings toward an individual struggling with unemployment. We therefore conducted supplementary analyses to investigate whether the effects of unemployment group were limited to participants who had been unemployed for a long time. To do so, we tested whether length of unemployment moderated the effect of unemployment status on compassion and evaluations of the individual.[3] Specifically, we employed moderated regression analyses and regressed the dependent measures onto length of unemployment, unemployment group (+1 = previously endured; −1 = currently enduring), and their interaction. Only unemployment group was a significant predictor of compassion ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .019$) and evaluations of the unemployed individual ($\beta = -.25$, $p = .006$). The other effects were nonsignificant, including the interactions ($\beta_{compassion} = -.14$, $p = .222$; $\beta_{evaluations} = -.13$, $p = .262$), indicating that our results hold regardless of participants' length of unemployment.

Taken together, the results of Study 3 further support our predictions. The mediated relationship gives support to our explanation for the effect of enduring the event on the evaluation of another's failure to endure. We found that individuals who previously endured unemployment believed that unemployment was less difficult to overcome, and this, in turn, predicted reduced compassion and more negative evaluations of an individual who commits illegal acts in response to unemployment. The results of Study 3 again help to rule out an information account. Participants who previously endured unemployment made less favorable evaluations than did currently enduring and never-endured participants. If enduring unemployment simply increased participants' knowledge that the event was not as difficult as predicted, we would expect both currently and previously unemployed participants to both make less favorable evaluations.

Study 4

Study 4 served two main goals. First, we have proposed that enduring an emotionally distressing event can lead to negative evaluations of individuals who fail to endure a similar event. Integrating the current framework with past research on experience and sympathy (e.g., Batson et al., 1996), we propose that an important boundary condition of the current finding is the perceived failure of another individual to adequately endure a distressing event. Specifically, we predict that past research suggesting that prior experience increases sympathy holds for perceptions of individuals currently enduring the event, whereas the current effect exists for the perceptions of individuals perceived to struggle or fail to endure the event. Having endured distress may facilitate the perspective-taking and self-simulation required for sympathy (e.g., Bandura, 1969; Batson, 1987, 1991), but lead to the underestimation of the impact of the affective states experienced by another who fails to endure the distressing event. To test these predictions, participants who had either never or previously endured bullying evaluated a bullied teen who either violently aggresses against the perpetrators and nearby innocent students (bullying-induced failure condition) or continues to endure the experience (managing-to-endure condition). "Fighting back" and

[3] Only participants in the currently enduring and previously endured unemployment groups ($n = 160$; 70% of the sample) were included in these analyses, as these were the only groups for whom length of unemployment was an appropriate measure.

lashing out against others is largely assumed to be a maladaptive means of coping (Schwartz, 2000; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Consistent with this notion, a pretest of the vignettes revealed that participants rated the teen in the bullying-induced failure vignette as coping significantly worse with the emotional distress compared with the teen in the managing-to-endure vignette.[4]

Second, Study 4 served to rule out an alternative explanation. We have argued that individuals who have previously endured an emotionally distressing event will form more negative evaluations of failures to endure a similar distressing event. One alternative explanation is that overcoming a distressing event shapes general evaluations of failure to endure (e.g., decreased tolerance for "giving up") rather than failure induced by the distressing event in particular. In other words, having endured bullying may decrease tolerance for failures to endure, regardless of the cause of that distress, perhaps by increasing the perceived importance of resilience. One way to rule out this alternative explanation is to examine the specificity of this effect. To do so, we added a control condition: grief-induced failure. If enduring bullying only influences the evaluation of a corresponding failure to endure distress (i.e., bullying-induced failure), and does not influence evaluations of unrelated failures to endure (e.g., grief-induced failure), then it would support our explanation.

We tested these predictions by randomly assigning participants to one of three conditions (bullying-induced failure vs. managing-to-endure vs. grief-induced failure) in a between-subjects design. The primary dependent measures were participants' evaluations of and compassion toward the other. We predicted that, compared with those who never endured bullying, participants who had previously endured bullying would feel more positively about and more compassion toward the bullied teen in the managing-to-endure condition, but feel less positively about and less compassion toward the teen in the bullying-induced failure condition. We predicted that participants' experience enduring bullying would not influence evaluations of grief-induced failure.

Participants

Participants were 323 individuals (M_{age} = 31.63 years, SD_{age} = 11.38 years; 42% female; ethnicity not reported) recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Procedure

Prior to the study, participants responded to a questionnaire regarding their history with bullying. Participants were sorted into previously endured and never-endured groups based on their responses to a dichotomous measure assessing history of bullying ("Were you ever bullied or teased?"; McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, & Swinson, 2003). Participants also indicated the length, severity, and frequency of bullying to provide convergent evidence for this measure.

During the study, participants read a vignette about a high school student. In the bullying-induced failure and managing-to-endure conditions, the student had recently moved to a new high school and had been repeatedly teased and bullied by the other students. The student experienced daily feelings of hurt and humiliation. One day at the cafeteria, a group of bullies began to publicly tease the student in the cafeteria and threw a half-eaten apple at him. In the bullying-induced failure condition, following the provocation, the student lost control over his emotions and behaved violently toward the bullies and other nearby students. Several students were hurt and needed to receive medical attention. In the managing-to-endure condition, the student was hurt by the experience, but continued to endure the emotional and physical pain associated with bullying. In the grief-induced failure condition, the student commits the same acts of aggression as in the bullying-induced failure condition, but the aggression is said to stem from the grief associated with the loss of a sibling. Following the vignette, participants completed the dependent measures and control variables. Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Materials

Compassion. Participants completed the compassion measures as in Studies 1 and 3.

General evaluations. Participants also completed measures that assessed their general evaluations of the bullied student as in Study 3.

Control variable. In addition to the primary dependent measures, we assessed the severity, length, and frequency of participants' experience with bullying. Severity of bullying was measured on a scale from 1 (*I wasn't bullied at all*) to 5 (*extremely serious*), and frequency of bullying was measured on a scale from 1 (*never bullied*) to 7 (*constantly bullied*). Participants indicated length of bullying by responding to an open-ended question ("For how long were you bullied?").

Given that individuals who previously endured bullying, but responded similarly to the struggling protagonist, may not be as punitive as those who responded in a less aggressive manner, we assessed participants' own reactions to bullying. To do so, participants completed the Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (Schäfer et al., 2004), which assessed which of 10 strategies they had used to cope with bullying, if any (e.g., "I tried to avoid the situation," "I got help from family/parents," "I fought back"). Participants were permitted to select more than one strategy. To ensure that no participants were currently enduring bullying, participants indicated whether or not they were currently being bullied on a dichotomous yes–no item, and the frequency of current bullying from 0 (*not bullied*) to 5 (*daily*). Only participants who indicated no current bullying were included in the study.

Results and Discussion

First, to provide support for the validity of our dichotomous measure of bullying, we analyzed whether severity, and frequency of bullying differed depending on participants' responses to the dichotomous measure (cf. Schäfer et al., 2004). Participants who

[4] A pretest examined whether the teen was viewed as differentially enduring the distress in the failure versus managing-to-endure conditions. Sixty-six online participants read both scenarios and then completed three items assessing perceived coping (e.g., "He is handling the situation as best he can") on scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The results indicated that participants viewed the teen in the failure condition as coping significantly worse with the distress (M = 2.48, SD = 1.12) compared with the teen in managing-to-endure condition (M = 4.15, SD = 1.10), $t(65) = -13.59$, $p < .001$, d = 3.37.

responded "yes" to the dichotomous bullying measure indicated that they were bullied more frequently ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.72$) than did those who responded "no" ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.55$), $t(320) = 24.07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.59, 1.88], $d = 2.69$, and also indicated that they were bullied more severely ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.73$) than did those who responded "no" ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(320) = 10.96$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.05, 1.50], $d = 1.23$.

Compassion. A 2 (bullying history: previously endured vs. never endured) × 3 (scenario: bullying-induced failure vs. managing-to-endure vs. grief-induced failure) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of scenario condition, $F(2, 317) = 48.64$, $MSE = 2.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .235$, and no main effect of bullying history, $F(1, 319) = 0.10$, $MSE = 2.75$, $p = .752$, $\eta^2 < .01$. This was qualified, however, by the predicted Bullying History × Scenario interaction, $F(2, 317) = 3.22$, $MSE = 2.75$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = .020$ (see Figure 1). Within the bullying-induced failure condition, participants who previously endured bullying were significantly less compassionate toward the student ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.35$) than were those who never endured bullying ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1, 319) = -2.16$, $p = .033$, 95% CI [−1.03, −0.05], $d = 0.44$. By contrast, within the managing-to-endure condition, participants who previously endured bullying were marginally more compassionate toward the student ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.02$) than were those who never endured bullying ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 319) = 1.66$, $p = .099$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.65], $d = 0.29$. As predicted, no significant differences emerged between previously endured participants ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.38$) and never-endured participants ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.81$) in compassion toward the student in the grief-induced failure condition, $F(1, 317) = 0.31$, $p = .76$, 95% CI [−0.57, 0.78], $d = 0.06$.

General evaluations. A 2 (bullying history: previously endured vs. never endured) × 3 (scenario: bullying-induced failure vs. managing-to-endure vs. grief-induced failure) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of scenario condition, $F(2, 317) = 103.46$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .395$, indicating more positive evaluations of the student who did not aggress against others, and no main effect of bullying history, $F(1, 317) = 0.28$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p = .595$, $\eta^2 = .001$. This was qualified, however, by the predicted Bullying History × Scenario interaction, $F(2, 317) = 4.52$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .028$. Within the bullying-induced failure condition, participants who previously endured bullying made marginally less favorable evaluations of the student ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.25$) than did those who never endured bullying ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.91$), $F(1, 317) = -1.95$, $p = .054$, 95% CI [−0.84, 0.01], $d = 0.38$. By contrast, within the managing-to-endure condition, participants who endured bullying made significantly more favorable evaluations of the student ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.01$) than did those who never endured bullying ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.98$), $F(1, 317) = 2.24$, $p = .027$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.83], $d = 0.39$. Again, no significant differences emerged between previously endured participants ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.01$) and never-endured participants ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.00$) in compassion toward the student in the grief-induced failure condition, $F(1, 317) = 1.00$, $p = .321$, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.64], $d = 0.20$.

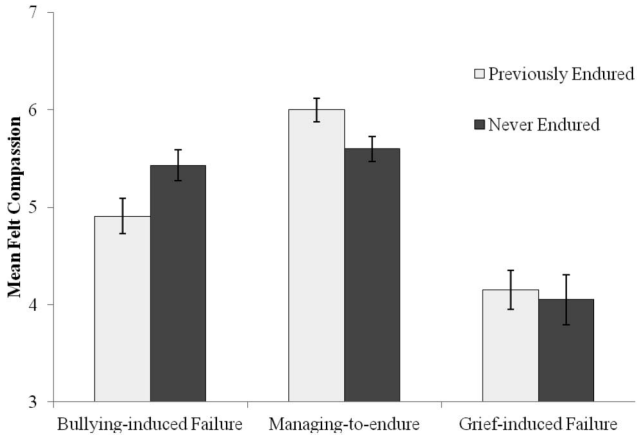

Figure 1. Mean compassion as a function of bullying history and scenario condition (± *SE*) in Study 4.

Control variables. In assessing the control variables, gender was a significant predictor of compassion, $F(1, 321) = 10.66$, $MSE = 2.07$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .032$, with females reporting higher levels of compassion for the bullied student. This finding is consistent with some past research (e.g., Batson et al., 1996; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). However, an ANOVA examining the effect of gender, bullying history, and condition on compassion revealed no significant interaction with gender, $F_{3\text{-way interaction}}(2, 311) = 1.02$, $MSE = 1.57$, $p = .360$, $\eta^2 = .007$, nor did controlling for gender change the pattern of results.

We also conducted supplemental analyses examining the effects of participants' self-reported coping styles. Specifically, we examined the effects of participants' own retaliation (fought back = 1; did not fight back = 0), scenario condition, and their interaction on compassion and evaluations of the teen in a two-way ANOVA.[5] Only a significant main effect of scenario condition emerged to predict compassion, $F(2, 170) = 27.11$, $MSE = 1.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .242$, and evaluations of the teen, $F(2, 170) = 42.92$, $MSE = 1.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .336$. The Scenario × Retaliation interactions did not reach significance, $F_{\text{compassion}}(2, 170) = 2.02$, $MSE = 1.53$, $p = .136$, $\eta^2 = .023$, and $F_{\text{evaluations}}(2, 170) = 1.69$, $MSE = 1.18$, $p = .187$, $\eta^2 = .020$, and there were no main effects of retaliation.[6] These null effects are perhaps related to the small number of participants who indicated that they fought back across scenario conditions ($n = 46$). This is a point to which we return in the General Discussion section.

The results of Study 4 provide evidence for an important boundary condition of the effect: the perceived failure of another to endure the distressing event. When evaluating an individual enduring an emotionally distressing event, having endured the event facilitates compassion, likely by facilitating the ease with which the other's perspective is adopted ("I've been there too"; Batson, 1987, 1991; Batson et al., 1996). When evaluating an individual who fails to endure the distressing event, having previously endured the event may reduce compassion because the event seems less difficult to overcome in hindsight. In turn, others' struggles to adequately endure the event seem unacceptable. Importantly, the

[5] As in Study 3, only participants who had previously endured bullying ($n = 176$; 55% of the sample) were included in these analyses, as these were the only groups for whom coping strategies was an appropriate measure.

[6] None of the other coping strategies yielded significant main effects or interactions on the dependent measures.

results of Study 4 also rule out the alternative explanation that previously enduring distress shapes evaluations of failures to endure broadly, and instead supports our prediction that that enduring distress influences the evaluation of a corresponding failure to endure.

Study 5

In Study 5, we sought to test whether people's lay beliefs would match our pattern of data. In other words, would people intuitively understand the results of the current study, or would they mistakenly believe that individuals who have previously endured a distressing event would more favorably evaluate failures to endure? In many cases, shared experiences do foster sympathy, as when perceivers are actively experiencing the emotional distress (Studies 2 and 3), or the target is perceived to endure the distress (Study 4). Because people who have endured distress have "been there, too," observers may mistakenly predict that people who have endured a distressing event would render more favorable evaluations of failures to endure than would those who have not endured this experience.

To test this possibility, we described the bullying-induced failure scenario from Study 4 to a new group of participants. These participants then predicted which of two teachers would be less likely to penalize the bullied teen's violence: a teacher who managed to endure bullying at a similar age or a teacher who never endured bullying.

Method

Participants. Participants were 112 individuals (M_{age} = 31.63 years, SD_{age} = 10.01 years; 67% male; ethnicity not reported) recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Procedure. Online participants enrolled in a study ostensibly about interpersonal decision making. Participants were presented with descriptions of scenarios, and were asked three questions about their decision making in these scenarios (e.g., "Which of the following individuals would you be more likely to approach for information about jazz music? Person A is an expert in classical music, and Person B is an expert in folk music"). Embedded in these scenarios was the critical measure. Specifically, participants were provided with the bullying-induced failure vignette from Study 4. Following the vignette, participants were informed that the bullied teen would now face one of two teachers following his actions: Teacher A, who "overcame bullying as a teen," or Teacher B, who "has no previous experience with bullying." Participants were then asked to indicate which teacher the teen should approach to receive a more lenient punishment. Participants then completed the questionnaire regarding their history with bullying as in Study 4, to examine whether bullying history would affect their predictions. We predicted that all participants—regardless of bullying history—would believe that the teacher who endured bullying would be less likely to penalize the teen's failure to endure bullying.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, most participants (99 out of 112) predicted that the teacher who had previously endured bullying would more favorably evaluate the teen's failure to endure, $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 66.04$, $p < .001$, $w = .77$. Most participants who previously endured bullying (42 out of 45), $\chi^2(1, N = 45) = 33.80$, $p < .001$, $w = .87$, and who never endured bullying (57 out of 67) were more likely to select the teacher who previously endured bullying, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 32.97$, $p < .001$, $w = .70$. There were no significant differences in teacher selection between these groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 1.79$, $p = .181$, $w = .13$. These results suggest that people mispredict the extent to which those who have endured a distressing event will be more compassionate toward another's failure to endure distress.

General Discussion

When struggling to endure an emotionally distressing event, it would seem that people should turn to those who have endured that same experience. Yet it appears that this intuition may be misguided, as it fails to take into account the psychological consequences of enduring these distressing events. Across five studies, we demonstrated that previously enduring an emotionally distressing event led to more negative evaluations of those who failed to endure a similar emotionally distressing event. In Study 1, people who previously completed a polar plunge felt less compassion and more contempt for an individual who failed to complete the polar plunge. Study 2 ruled out a critical alternative explanation—that participants who endured the distress are simply more knowledgeable about the experience—and found that participants who previously endured a fatiguing test more negatively evaluated another's failure to endure that test than did participants who had never endured or were currently enduring the test.

Building on these initial results, Study 3 explored the process behind this effect, finding that participants who had previously endured unemployment penalized another's failure to endure unemployment because they viewed this experience as less difficult to overcome. Moreover, Study 4 revealed that the effect is specific to evaluations of failures to endure: Compared with participants who had never endured an emotionally distressing event, participants who had endured the event made less favorable evaluations of an individual failing to endure, but made more favorable evaluations of an individual who was managing to endure, the event. Finally, in Study 5, observers failed to anticipate this effect of enduring distressing events, instead believing that someone who had endured distress would be most lenient toward failures to endure. By testing our predictions across a wide range of distressing events and instances of struggle and failure (from merely opting out of a polar plunge to engaging in illegal behavior), we have provided evidence for the generalizability of this effect. The current research suggests that experience offers a powerful tool for predicting and understanding who will be the most sympathetic in the face of failure to endure distress.

Theoretical Implications

Our results have important theoretical implications for the empathy gap perspective. Typically, research in this paradigm compares participants in either a "hot state" (e.g., experiencing pain) or a "cold state" (e.g., people not experiencing pain) along measures such as empathy toward someone experiencing a similar situation. Such an approach conflates the effects of emotional states (feeling

pain) with knowledge about the experience (knowing what the painful experience was like). Thus, it has remained unclear how *previously enduring* a hot state (i.e., knowledge without the accompanying emotional state) would affect feelings toward another facing a similar situation. The current research provides initial evidence for the importance of disentangling these factors by suggesting that actively shared emotional experience is critical to the formation of positive interpersonal judgments, whereas knowledge without emotion may, in some cases, have negative consequences for interpersonal judgment. Of course, people who have, for example, overcome unemployment may possess different knowledge than do those who are currently unemployed, and thus future research should continue to explore the orthogonal effects of emotional states and experiential knowledge on sympathy for others' struggles.

In highlighting the importance of decoupling emotional states from knowledge, the current research also complements recent work proposing a desensitization bias in emotional perspective-taking (Campbell et al., 2014). In Campbell et al.'s (2014) research, repeated exposure to an emotion-inducing stimulus (e.g., hearing the same joke a number of times) reduced empathic accuracy for others' reactions to that stimulus (e.g., predicting how funny others will find the joke) by attenuating participants' own emotional reactions. Though examining different aspects of experience (too much experience vs. having endured an experience) and different consequences (empathic accuracy vs. evaluations of failure), both approaches underscore the importance of actively experiencing emotion in forming interpersonal judgments.

Outside of the empathy gap perspective, other literatures examining shared experiences could benefit from exploring the distinction between currently and previously enduring events. Given the impact that shared experiences have on a diverse array of phenomena, such as memory (Hirst, Manier, & Cuc, 2003; Weldon, 2001), cognition (Barsalou, Niedenthal, Barbey, & Ruppert, 2003), and communication in groups (Levine & Higgins, 2001), it may be important for future research to examine the potentially divergent effects of currently and previously shared experiences on other outcomes. For example, on-the-job training programs are shared experiences used to socialize new individuals into organizations. If these programs are led by individuals who have long ago completed the program, these leaders may now underestimate the difficulty of acquiring the skills taught by the program, leading them to produce a deprived learning experience.

Limitations and Issues for Future Research

Despite the advances made by the current studies, there are remaining questions that should be addressed in future research. First, we examined the effect of enduring distress on evaluations among individuals who managed to endure the event (i.e., completed the exam, entered the icy water). It remains unclear how individuals with prior experience, but who failed to endure the distress, would respond. One possibility is that failing to endure the event increases compassion by increasing the perceived difficulty of overcoming that event (e.g., Zuckerman, 1979). Consistent with this suggestion, participants in Study 4 who also responded to bullying with violence were marginally more likely to be compassionate toward the bullying-induced failure. We are, however, reluctant to make conclusions based on these data, given the small number of participants who reported that they had fought back.

A potential counterpoint to this prediction is that even if an individual previously struggled to endure a distressing event, she may recall her ability to endure the event in a more favorable light than reflects reality. Research has accumulated to suggest that people tend to distort negative autobiographical information to become more positive and self-enhancing over time (D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008; Gramzow & Willard, 2006; Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Thus, outside of clear, unambiguous failures to endure (e.g., not completing a comprehensive exam), motivated reasoning may prevent the accurate recall of one's own difficulty with the event. In turn, reduced compassion for those who fail to endure the event may persist.

As a practical matter, we also note that, in many situations, distinguishing between unsuccessful and successful prior experience groups presents some complications. Namely, those who have failed to endure the distressing event often cannot be distinguished from those currently enduring the event; individuals who fail to overcome unemployment remain unemployed, and those who fail to quit smoking are still smokers and experience the associated cravings. Future research should nonetheless seek to tease apart the effects of prior experience and success on evaluations.

The current research likewise generates questions about how aspects of the experience itself influence evaluations of failures to endure. Given that the perceived ease with which the event can be overcome seems to drive the effect, manipulating aspects of the experience that affect recall of the distress may affect failure evaluations. For example, Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, and Redelmeier (1993) found that adding a few moments of less intense pain near the end of a distressing event can decrease retrospective evaluations of the overall intensity of the pain. Based on our theorizing, we would anticipate that people who experienced less distress near the end of an event may be more prone to penalize another's failure to endure compared with people who experienced constant (or increased) distress near the end of an event. Importantly, these results would also suggest that individual differences in habituation versus sensitization to emotional experiences might be an important predictor of compassion toward perceived failure to endure (Campbell et al., 2014).

Finally, the current findings might be used to shed light on an important question in the political sphere: How do people from marginalized groups respond to members of their community once they have achieved success? Previous work addressing this question has suggested that members of marginalized communities (e.g., women, Black Americans) who achieve political or corporate success often espouse a conservative ideology that downplays structural barriers to success for others who share their identity (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998). Although this phenomenon has been attributed to strategic positioning on the part of elites (e.g., Lewis, 2013), the current research would also suggest that diluted memories of struggling to overcome barriers combined with knowledge of their own success leads successful members of oppressed groups to become more receptive to the conservative individualist ideology that emphasize individual agency over structural constraint. Given the continued importance of this question, future work should explore potential empathy gaps among members of minority groups when they reach the top.

Applications

The current research has important implications for interpersonal dynamics, as well as policies regarding how people treat others facing distressing life events. Many social programs are designed with the input of those who endured distressing events, including rehab programs designed by former addicts, and social welfare programs crafted by individuals who used to live in poverty themselves.[7]

In this vein, a pressing direction for future work is the exploration of strategies that may combat the negative effects of enduring distress on compassion toward others' struggles. The critical question is whether there are ways for people to maintain the empathy afforded by the distressing event once they return to a cold state. Perhaps this can be achieved by having people reflect and commit to their evaluations during an experience (e.g., writing down or verbalizing views during the search for employment) or by having people take notice of their own struggles during the experience. This approach aims to increase sympathetic responding to others' failures by bridging the gap between hot and cold perspectives.

An alternative approach might be to encourage perceivers to place less emphasis on their own subjective experience with the event when assessing others' failures. For example, a counselor who overcame addiction could consider other struggling patients or the large number of people who relapse when trying to forgive a patient's transgressions. This approach acknowledges the difficulty inherent in reliving one's own affective states, and instead facilitates conscious correction against potential bias (e.g., Wegener & Petty, 1995).

Conclusion

At the outset of this article, we posed a question: When struggling with an emotionally distressing event, such as divorce or the loss of a loved one, are people best served by seeking help from others with or without similar experiences? Despite widespread beliefs in the power of shared experience to facilitate compassion, we have shown that for people failing to endure the distress, those who have previously endured a similar experience may represent the toughest critics. This finding has important consequences for how people treat those in need, and who will be most likely to help the distressed. Future research may seek to unveil interventions that combat the negative effects of enduring distress on evaluations of failure.

[7] As a caveat to these points, we note that those who have previously endured distressing events are not necessarily inaccurate in their perceptions of the experience itself. In many cases, people who have endured distress are correct in noting what is possible to achieve, such as the veteran polar plunger telling novices that the experience is manageable. Nonetheless, from the perspective of those struggling, it is beneficial to know from whom to seek help or comfort.

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