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Limits of Symhedonia: The Differential Role of Prior Emotional Attachment in Sympathy and Sympathetic Joy

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Seven studies tested the hypothesis that compared with sympathy *symhedonia* (sympathy for another's good fortune) is inherently more contingent on prior emotional attachment to its targets. As predicted, Studies 1–4 found that reported attachment was higher for past episodes of symhedonia than for those of sympathy and that recalled incidence of sympathy exceeded that of symhedonia when the target was a stranger. Study 5 showed that whereas symhedonia was significantly higher for high- versus low-attachment targets sympathy was not. Study 6 found that sympathy is more likely than symhedonia when a relationship is strained. Study 7 found that both sympathy and symhedonia are weaker for nonclose (vs. close) others, but the disparity is significantly smaller for sympathy than for symhedonia.

Keywords: sympathy, symhedonia, attachment, sympathetic joy, negative

When it comes to the question of whether human beings can be genuinely happy for others, we are left with something of a standoff. On the one hand, common sense indicates that such experiences are real and even widespread. On the other hand, commentaries by some major thinkers of modern times tilt in the opposite direction.

Section III of Adam Smith's (1759/2000) *Theory of Moral Sentiments* opens with a lament:

> Our sympathy with sorrow, though not more real, has been more taken notice of than our sympathy with joy. . . . A late ingenious and subtle philosopher thought it necessary to prove by arguments, that we had a real sympathy with joy. . . . Nobody, I believe, ever thought it necessary to prove that compassion was such. (p. 60)

In Schopenhauer's view, although sympathy (or compassion) is real enough, its putative counterpart is not:

> Direct sympathy with another is restricted to his suffering. It is not roused, at any rate not directly, by his well-being, on the contrary, in and by itself this leaves us unmoved. (Schopenhauer, 1841/1995, p.145)

Schopenhauer's position is hardly unique:

> Pity is for men; rejoicing is for angels.—Jean-Paul (cited in Scheler, 1912/1954, p. 135)

> First Maxim: It is not in the human heart to put ourselves in the place of those who are happier than ourselves, but only in the place of those who are most to be pitied. (Rousseau, 1762/1950, pp. 184–185)

> I can sympathize with people's pains, but not with their pleasure. There is something curiously boring about somebody else's happiness. Aldous Huxley (Rosten, 1995, p. 216)

Two and a half centuries after Smith, various sources continue to treat *sympathy* (or *empathy*) as a nominally neutral term (e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Feagin, 1996). However, in spite of an occasional and curtly polite acknowledgment that sympathy is a concept capable of dual affective tone, its dominant meaning remains that of a negative emotional state anchored in and tending toward the alleviation of another's misfortune.

In the vernacular, expressions of "sympathetic joy" (*symhedonia*) are somewhat unusual, if not inappropriate. If a friend says that he just got engaged, it would be odd, if not downright uncouth, to reply, "You have my sympathy." Although English sports at least four separate terms (*pity, commiseration, compassion, sympathy*) to give lexical substance to "sympathetic sorrow," it offers none to denote its positive counterpart (see Royzman & Kumar, 2001; Rozin, Berman, & Royzman, 2005). This testimony to lexical inequality would be of far less interest if it did not mirror the sorry state of empirical knowledge about the very phenomenon that Smith felt to be the subject of such neglect in 1759.

Apparent lack of interest in symhedonia is puzzling. It would seem like a pressing topic for those with an interest in other-regarding affect in general and altruistic (benevolently other-regarding) emotions in particular (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg, 2000). Moreover, symhedonia (or something like it) finds no place in recent analyses of positive emotion (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001). This is so in spite of the fact that symhedonia may well be the model positive emotion, for it combines the moral weight of sympathy with the hedonic glow of joy and the interpersonal benevolence of gratitude. That is, whatever reasons there are to study positive emotions as a class — their alleged capacity to undo or forestall negative affect and their possible role in promoting exploratory, flexible thinking and ac-

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cumulation of social resources (see Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001, for review)—the selfsame reasons should apply doubly (or a few times over) to symhedonia. Finally, given that experiencing symhedonia does not appear to confer any obvious adaptive advantage either on its experiencer or on its target, its very existence represents an interesting challenge for evolutionary theory. (However, recent work by Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher [2004] has provided important indications of the advantages of sharing positive information or events in terms of enhanced well–being.)

In this article, we propose and test a claim that the key distinction between sympathy and symhedonia lies in the degree to which these two have prior emotional attachment as a precondition for their occurrence as well as a modulator of the intensity with which they occur, with symhedonia being hypothesized to be inherently more partial, selective, and, consequently, less wide ranging than sympathy proper. The proposal has its roots, among others, in some puzzling findings of laboratory studies that attempted but failed to consistently instantiate sympathy and symhedonia side by side.

In these studies (Krebs, 1975; Stotland, 1969; Stotland, Sherman, & Shaver, 1971; see also Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995, Study 2) participants were exposed to a number of situations in which confederates were apparently experiencing pain or pleasure (or negative and positive outcomes). While "distressed" confederates elicited a clear other-oriented vicarious response, those experiencing pleasure did not (see, especially, Krebs, 1975). (Indeed, it is this apparent difficulty of instantiating symhedonia within a laboratory, combined with a disinclination to report negative results, that may be the prime reason why experimental analyses of symhedonia are virtually nonexistent.) At the very least, the studies at hand further point to a gap in knowledge about symhedonia. At worst, they seem to give solace to the nihilistic views of Schopenhauer and Rousseau.

One possible explanation for the tension between what appears to be the popular stance (symhedonia, as felt, e.g., at nuptials, college graduations, ballet recitals, and the like is real and commonplace) and the predominant philosophical view (symhedonia is but a pleasant fiction), is that, relative to sympathy, symhedonia requires a relatively deep level of prior emotional attachment. This may be a level that is not easily induced within a single laboratory session toward a previously unknown confederate. If the requisite attachments are found primarily in close friendships, committed relationships, and close familial and romantic bonds (Royzman & Kumar, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), we may be in a position to explain why Schopenhauer and Rousseau found so little evidence of symhedonia around them. They might have construed most evident expressions of symhedonia as part of the more complex dispositional syndrome of love (Royzman, McCauley, & Rozin, 2005; Shand, 1920) and not as an independent entity at all. We will dub our general proposal the (symhedonia) *attachment-contingency hypothesis*. In terms of existing appraisal theories (see Lazarus, 1991; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1997, 1999), our attachment-contingency hypothesis may be restated as saying that while both sympathy and symhedonia depend on antecedent appraisals of goal (in)congruency on behalf of the target person, symhedonia is more likely to demand a further assessment that the target person stands in a certain relationship (prior emotional attachment) to oneself. Per the attachment-contingency hypothesis, the appraisal pattern underlying symhedonia should appear to be more complex or demanding than that underlying sympathy "proper."

Stated more fully:

> *Attachment-contingency hypothesis:* Compared with sympathy, the likelihood and magnitude (intensity) of symhedonia's activation is more contingent on the existence of prior emotional attachment toward its target.

For the purpose of this discussion, "prior emotional attachment" is thought to involve two key dimensions: positive evaluation and relationship importance. High-attachment targets (i.e., close others) are those whom people evaluate very positively (ranking them highly among other good things of the world) and whose presence within their lives they value a great deal and are prepared to maintain at some personal cost. This conceptualization coincides rather well (we think) with the lay meaning of *attachment*, which, in its most paradigmatic forms (be it parental devotion, romantic love, or the affection of a pet owner for his or her charge) combines the language of high relationship importance/closeness ("You complete me"; "Life would be meaningless without you") with that of extreme positive valuations ("You are the best!"; "There goes my special little guy"; "Who is the cutest, smartest little doggie in the whole world?"). In accordance with this conceptualization, we would expect "best friends" and close family members to represent very high attachment targets (high positive evaluation, high relationship importance), "just friends" moderately high attachment targets, and so on. Among the existing conceptualizations of interpersonal closeness, ours is probably closest to the intimacy component in Sternberg's triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986). However, the underlying phenomenon is clearly one that many attachment-related construals have in common, including that embodied in Margaret Clark and colleagues' (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1979, see below) notion of "communal" versus "exchange" relationships.

With this specification of "prior emotional attachment" in mind, the attachment-contingency hypothesis amounts to a claim that if one is to feel symhedonia at all, a certain level of positive evaluation and relationship importance has to be already in place, whereas sympathy is relatively less demanding in this regard and is better able to extend itself to relatively low-(positive) valence targets whose company a person is unlikely to miss. *Relatively* is the key word here because we expect that instances of both emotions may be present even at rather low attachment levels.

Stated this way, the attachment-contingency hypothesis clearly goes against the grain of the views held by Schopenhauer (1841/1995, p. 145) and like-minded others who proposed that people can *never* sympathize with a happy individual, making symhedonia a psychological anomaly at best. We will refer to this putative alternative to the attachment-contingency hypothesis as the *symhedonia scarcity hypothesis*.

Yet another alternative set of predictions follows from considering two key distinctions between sympathy and symhedonia. The most fundamental difference between the two phenomena is one of hedonic sign: Whereas sympathy is inherently unpleasant and is likely to impair one's mood or interfere with future positive affect, symhedonia is inherently pleasurable. A second difference is that insofar as sympathy, but not symhedonia, is linked to behavioral intervention on behalf of a distressed individual, experiencing sympathy appears to be inherently more costly than experiencing

symhedonia. Consequently, we should expect people to minimize the likelihood of experiencing sympathy while maximizing the likelihood of experiencing symhedonia. Taken in and of themselves, these considerations may lead us to predict that people will expose themselves to sympathy-arousing events and allow themselves to experience genuine sympathy only very selectively and reluctantly (see Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994; see also K. D. Smith, 1992), reserving it for the most special of occasions (as when the targets are family or friends). On the other hand, because symhedonia is both pleasurable and virtually cost-free, people should spread their sympathetic joy as widely as possible, exploiting every opportunity within their reach. We call this the *symhedonia lower costliness hypothesis*.

Finally, related to the attachment-contingency hypothesis is the proposal that both symhedonia and sympathy are more likely to occur within the so-called communal (high-attachment) relationships rather than outside such relationships (see Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986; Mills & Clark, 1982). Some tentative evidence for one (symhedonia-related) component of this proposal comes from two studies by Clark and Williamson (Williamson & Clark, 1989, Study 3; 1992). Following upon these studies, Clark and Brissette's (2000) overall theoretical proposal is that "any emotion that indicates to oneself that one cares about the welfare of another person should occur more frequently and more intensely the more communal one's relationship with that other person" (p. 221). In and of itself, this proposal predicts that both sympathy and symhedonia should be more frequent and more intense under conditions of prior emotional attachment, without one being any more attachment dependent than the other. We call this the *equal contingency hypothesis*.

In summary, the *symhedonia scarcity hypothesis* predicts that symhedonia should be either nonexistent or extremely rare. The *symhedonia lower costliness hypothesis* predicts that symhedonia should occur more frequently and more intensely than sympathy for all targets, regardless of prior attachment. The *equal contingency hypothesis* predicts that both sympathy and symhedonia should be more frequent and more intense under conditions of prior emotional attachment, without one being any more selective than the other. Finally, the *attachment-contingency hypothesis* predicts that, compared with sympathy, both the frequency and the magnitude of symhedonia's activation are more enhanced by the existence of prior emotional attachment toward its target. Reported below are the results of seven studies carried out to test various aspects of the attachment-contingency hypothesis in a manner that would also allow us to shed light on the alternative hypotheses.

General Method

Because there is no word for symhedonia in English, we described symhedonia situations to a group of students and asked them how they would express this in English. The most common suggestion was "feeling happy for," so we used that phrase to instruct the participants in the following studies. A symmetrical locution ("feeling sad for") was adopted for sympathy.

With one exception (Study 3), all participants were students in introductory or sophomore-level psychology courses at the University of Pennsylvania. The questionnaires were administered in classroom settings.

To ensure that the participants' responses were as sincere and unhindered by self-presentational concerns as possible, all questionnaires were designed for totally anonymous responses and asked for no identifying information. On two occasions (Studies 3 and 6), relevant gender and age information could be inferred from the accompanying surveys. The total anonymity of the responses was stressed in each questionnaire's opening statement and by the setting of a large class lecture hall.

For the sake of normalizing the data as well as to ensure that the reported findings fit the logical form of the question posed by our philosophical predecessors (does symhedonia occur at all, and, if so, does it occur about just as often or substantially less often than sympathy proper?), all recency values obtained in Studies 1–4 were first converted to a common time unit (days; e.g., n hours were coded as n /24 days, n weeks as $n \times 7$ days; "no memory" responses were coded as 10 years, or 3,650 days). The day measures were then converted to rate in accordance with the following formula: $\frac{1}{2} \times$ reported recency (in days).[1] Analyses carried out with raw (days-converted) recency values yielded equivalent findings.

Women made up 60%–70% of all the groups used in these studies.

Study 1

For Studies 1, 2, and 3, we predicted that (a) the average symhedonia attachment rating should exceed that of sympathy and (b) the number of strangers reported to be targets of sympathy should exceed those reported to be targets of symhedonia.

Method

Participants. There were 28 participants, all students in a summer-session psychology course. Three participants did not report attachment ratings.

Materials and procedure. Student volunteers filled out a brief, anonymous questionnaire for a period of 10–15 min under the conditions specified in the General Methods section. The questionnaire asked the participants to think of the most recent time they felt happy or sad for another person, whether or not they knew him/her personally, followed by a request to rate the level of their prior emotional attachment to that person, with the highest point on the scale (100) representing *greatest emotional attachment possible* and the lowest *no prior emotional attachment whatsoever (this person was a total stranger)*. The same group of participants was asked to report on both sympathy and symhedonia (the questions were counterbalanced for order). The initial questionnaire was followed by the complete version of the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (for details, see Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Portrayed as a Personal Reaction Inventory, this scale contains a series of 33 self-descriptive statements that the participants rate as being true or false.

[1] The reason for the doubling of the days-converted recency value may be elucidated by an analogy. Imagine trying to estimate an interevent interval for the arrivals of two consecutive buses to a bus station in a locale where buses are known arrive at some unspecified random rate. Assume that the only additional piece of information you have is that the last bus arrived and departed some 20 minutes ago. Since bus arrivals are presumed to occur at random, your entry into the bus station and the true interevent interval (the interval between the arrival of the last bus and the projected arrival of the next one) is as likely to have occurred at the beginning as at the end of that interval. Thus, your entry can be assumed to be equidistant from the interval's beginning and end point. Consequently, the true interevent interval can be estimated as 2×20 min (the reported recency of the most recent bus arrival); its reciprocal would then give us the estimated *rate* of bus arrival (per minute). The same logic applies to the present case. Because the occurrence of sympathy and symhedonia "in the wild" can be assumed to be random or close to random for any given person, and insofar as each participant's report represents his or her "point of entry" into the true interevent interval for consecutive occurrences of either sympathy or symhedonia, the true interevent interval for either sympathy or symhedonia may be estimated as the double of the reported recency value.

Results and Discussion

The mean sympathy rate was 0.28 per day (SD = 0. 62); the corresponding mean symhedonia rate was 0.14 per day (SD = 0.18). The difference was not significant by paired t test, $t(27) = 1.27$, $p = .21$.

Due to violations of normality in the distribution of attachment ratings, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test and Kendall's τ_b were used as measures of within-group mean difference and association, respectively. The sympathy ($M = 51.81$, $SD = 35.71$) and symhedonia ($M = 79.24$, $SD = 17.86$) attachment ratings were significantly different by Wilcoxon's signed-ranks test ($p < .001$, one-tailed). There was a significant positive association between sympathy and symhedonia rates ($\tau_b = 0.36$, $p = .01$). There were no significant associations between self-presentational concerns and either sympathy or symhedonia attachment ratings (ps = .70 and .83, respectively). Thus, our principal finding of the asymmetry in attachment ratings does not appear to be due to the participants' wishing to present themselves in a socially desirable manner.

We conducted a separate analysis for the relative incidence of sympathy and symhedonia toward complete strangers (the attachment ratings of 0). There were six such incidents for sympathy and none for symhedonia. The difference was statistically significant by Wilcoxon's signed-ranks test ($p = .01$).

In summary, Study 1 indicates that although symhedonia is not significantly less common than sympathy, it is linked with higher levels of preexisting emotional attachment than sympathy. This is consistent with the attachment-contingency hypotheses but opposes the predictions of the other three hypotheses. The finding does not appear to be accounted for by self-presentational concerns, as measured by the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale.

Study 2

Study 2 used the same materials and procedure as Study 1 but used a between-groups design, with participants answering a questionnaire either about sympathy or about symhedonia.

Method

Participants. There were 112 participants, all students in an undergraduate psychology course. Six did not report attachment ratings.

Materials and procedure. The procedure for Study 2 was exactly the same as for Study1, except that the participants were randomly assigned to receive either the "sad-for" or the "happy-for" version of the questionnaire described above.

Results and Discussion

The mean sympathy rate was 0.67 per day (SD = 1.94); the corresponding mean symhedonia rate was 0.41 per day (SD = 1.15). The difference was nonsignificant, $t(110) = 0.90$, $p = .36$. The mean prior emotional attachment ratings were 47.29 (SD = 36.58) for sympathy and 77.93 (SD = 22.75) for symhedonia, a significant difference, $t(104) = 5.26$, $p < .001$, one-tailed.

As before, we performed a separate analysis for the relative incidence of sympathy and symhedonia for complete strangers (the attachment ratings of 0). There were almost 6 times as many such incidents for sympathy (11) as there were for symhedonia (2; $p = .002$, Fisher's exact test).

The fact that the basic finding of higher prior attachment for symhedonia than sympathy held up in the between-groups design further argues against a view that the original result was due primarily to demand characteristics or some considerations of social or cultural appropriateness.

Study 3

One potential problem with both Studies 1 and 2 is that the participants were university undergraduates with an interest in psychology. The purpose of Study 3 was to see whether the findings of Study 1 would replicate in a representative community sample.

Method

Participants. We collected 139 usable questionnaires (63% from female respondents; mean age = 39.8 years). Seven of the participants did not report attachment ratings.

Procedure. The participants were recruited from the Philadelphia County Jury Pool. By random selection of adults residing in the city, a few hundred potential jurors are summoned to a jury pool each day. They are either called to be interviewed for participation in a jury or remain for the day and are then dismissed, having completed their jury-duty requirement. The jury pool is a representative sample of Philadelphians; however, those who completed our questionnaire were undoubtedly a somewhat biased subset of this group. People who agreed to do so received a reward of a candy bar or a pen for about 10 to 20 minutes of their time. Responses were generally received from about half of the people in the pool. The forms used were identical to those used in Study 1 and were presented to the participants as part of a larger set of surveys.

Results

The mean sympathy rate was 0.31 per day (SD = 0.90); the mean symhedonia rate was 0.25 per day (SD = 0.79). The difference was nonsignificant, $t(138) = 0.64$, $p = .51$.

The mean sympathy attachment rating was 53.00 (SD = 41.40), significantly lower than the mean symhedonia attachment rating of 66.65 (SD = 36.55), $t(131) = 3.30$, $p = .0006$, one-tailed. There were many more cases of sympathy (37) than symhedonia (14) to total strangers (Wilcoxon's signed-ranks test, $p = .0003$; see Table 1 to compare the results for Studies 1–3).

There was a positive association between sympathy and symhedonia rates ($\tau_b = 0.37$, $p < .0001$) and a somewhat smaller one between sympathy and symhedonia attachment ratings ($\tau_b = 0.23$, $p = .0003$). We performed two separate t tests and two separate Kruskal–Wallis tests to assess the effects of gender on sympathy–symhedonia rates and levels of prior emotional attachment for sympathy and symhedonia, respectively. There was one significant finding: The symhedonia rate was higher for men ($M = 0.45$) than it was for women ($M = 0.14$), $t(135) = 2.23$; $p = .02$. There was also a borderline significant finding: The sympathy attachment ratings were higher among women ($M = 58.1$) than they were among men ($M = 44.1$): $z(130) = -1.94$, $p = .05$.

Unlike Study 1, Study 3 did not include a measure of social desirability. However, one of the accompanying questionnaires included a single-question measure of religiosity ("How religious are you?" rated on a scale from 0 = *not religious at all* to 4 = *extremely religious*). Given that caring for others is a universally

Table 1
Summary of Results Comparing Symhedonia and Sympathy Across Studies 1–3

		Rate per day				Attachment			
		Sympathy		Symhedonia		Sympathy		Symhedonia	
Study	Condition	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
1	Students; most recent instance; within group	0.28	0.62	0.14	0.18	51.8	35.7	79.2*	17.9
2	Students; most recent instance; between groups	0.67	1.94	0.41	1.15	47.3	36.6	77.9*	22.8
3	Jury; most recent instance; within group	0.31	0.90	0.25	0.79	53.0	41.4	66.6*	36.5

Note. "Instance" refers to participants' example of symhedonia or sympathy.
* $p < .001$ (one-tailed), significantly different from value in the preceding column.

important religious ideal, and assuming that the participants were keen to respond in a socially desirable manner, one would predict a positive association between self-rated religiosity and the rate of either sympathetic emotion. There was, in fact, no relationship between religiosity and reports of either sympathy ($p = .88$) or symhedonia ($p = .29$) rates. There was also no significant association between religiosity and prior attachment ratings for sympathy or symhedonia (ps = 0.65 and 0.43, respectively).

Discussion

The overall pattern of results for Study 3 is analogous to those for Studies 1 and 2; on the other hand, sympathy and symhedonia mean attachment ratings for Study 3 (53 vs. 66.6, respectively; *d* [effect size] = 0.28), although still significantly different, were considerably closer to each other than those reported in Study 1 ($d = 0.77$) or Study 2 ($d = 1.02$). The source of the difference appears to lie with the significantly lower attachment ratings for symhedonia as reported within the considerably older community sample. Is the age difference to blame? It appears so. Restricting our community sample to only the 14 individuals at or below 24 years of age yielded a higher symhedonia attachment rating ($M = 76.78$) that is comparable with those obtained in the previous two studies, whereas the sympathy attachment rating was about the same in the younger and older participants. The overall pattern hints at the interesting possibility that symhedonia becomes considerably less attachment sensitive as people advance from adolescence to and into middle age.

Although consistent with each other and with the attachment-contingency hypothesis, Studies 1–3 raise at least two concerns.

1. There appear to be at least two psychological accounts for why symhedonia is relatively uncommon under conditions of weak attachment. According to one view, registering a certain level of prior emotional attachment is an indelible component of symhedonia's eliciting conditions. It is, as Robert Solomon (1977) would put it, a part of symhedonia's inner logic as an emotion.

An alternative view could be discerned in the writings of Adam Smith (1759/2000, p. 62). On occasion, he can be read as saying that people's capacity for symhedonia is as great (and, presumably, as universal) as their capacity for sympathy, while still maintaining that their *experiences* of symhedonia are relatively rare. The apparent resolution to this contradiction lies in the supposed interaction between symhedonia and envy. Presumably, the same events that engage symhedonia also engage envy, and the two processes become integrated and more or less cancel each other out before ever reaching the level of conscious self-perception. According to this view, the reason that experienced symhedonia may be expected to be as common as sympathy in the context of prior emotional attachment is that it is in contexts such as these that envy itself is put on hold or held back by the competing response of love, allowing symhedonia to shine through in full force. According to this view, symhedonia is not attachment contingent per se; rather, it appears to be so under a limited set of social settings; cultural or social arrangements that mitigate envy should produce patterns of symhedonia and sympathy that are nearly equivalent in their social range. Call this the *envy-inhibition account*.

With this account in mind, imagine asking participants to report most recent episodes of sympathy and symhedonia directed at strangers, the target category for which the attachment-contingency hypothesis would predict symhedonia to be less especially unlikely vis-à-vis sympathy. In this situation, the envy-inhibition account would predict that envy, being the symhedonia-inhibiting force, should be inversely correlated with the reported rate of symhedonia, with this rate being especially unimpressive for the most envy-prone of the participants. The attachment-contingency hypothesis would make no such forecast. The aim of Study 4 was to consider these alternative predictions side by side.

2. Another possible concern about Studies 1–3 is as follows: Suppose that people treat their affective reactions as a source of information about their level of attachment, with episodes of symhedonia warranting inferences of higher levels of (and, perhaps, actual boosts in) emotional attachment than comparable episodes of sympathy. On this view, it is not that "I feel happy for Joe because I am particularly fond of him"; rather, "I perceive myself as being particularly fond of Joe because I feel happy for him." Call this the *backward inference account* (see Batson et al., 1995).

Batson et al. (1995) reported some evidence that people can infer their level of valuing another person's welfare from the degree of their sympathetic reaction to that person's presumed distress. However, even if it could be presumed that the same process affects symhedonia, it should not be able to explain the relative rarity of symhedonia directed at strangers, as revealed in Studies 1–3: It seems implausible that the stipulated redefinition

process should cause a symhedonia-affected person to "promote" a de facto stranger to the title of a casual acquaintance or higher (thereby ensuring that few of the initial targets of symhedonia would be regarded as strangers after the fact). Study 4 gave us a further opportunity to validate this pattern by asking participants to recall only those recent episodes of sympathy and symhedonia that had been directed at perfect strangers.

Study 4

Method

Participants. The study included a total of 25 participants, all students in a summer-session psychology course.

Materials and procedure. The procedure was analogous to that of Studies 1 and 2. The questionnaire for Study 4 was identical to that used in Study 1, with two exceptions: (a) The participants were asked to recall only those most recent episodes of sympathy and symhedonia that had been directed at perfect strangers; (b) the initial questionnaire was followed by a measure of dispositional envy, the Dispositional Envy Scale (R. H. Smith, Parrot, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999). As stated earlier, the measure was included to test the possibility that the hypothesized higher incidence of sympathy versus symhedonia could be accounted for by the symhedonia-inhibiting effect of envy.

There are arguments for and against using a measure of trait envy versus state envy directed to the target person. The matter was easy to decide because while the Dispositional Envy Scale has shown excellent validity and reliability, a similarly well-validated measure of state envy is yet to be reported.

Results

The mean sympathy and symhedonia rates were 1.25 per day ($SD = 2.78$) and 0.07 per day ($SD = 0.14$), respectively (Wilcoxon's signed-ranks test ($p < .0001$, one-tailed). The Dispositional Envy Scale mean was 15.19 ($SD = 6.18$). This was not significantly different ($p = .153$) from the dispositional envy mean that could be computed on the basis of the data reported for one of the samples in R. H. Smith et al. (1999). There were no statistically significant correlations between dispositional envy and either sympathy ($\tau_b = 0.07$) or symhedonia ($\tau_b = -0.07$).

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that when the target of a vicariously oriented response is a stranger, incidents of symhedonia are significantly less common than those of sympathy. This finding is in conflict with the backward inference account. Moreover, the sympathy–symhedonia difference cannot be explained by differences in individual envy orientation, as measured by the Dispositional Envy Scale.

Study 5

Sympathy and symhedonia both rely on the occurrence of some bad and good events in the lives of others. This means that a difference in the rate of sympathy and symhedonia within a given population may be, at least in part, attributable to the difference in the base rate of good and bad events occurring within that population. To illustrate, one would not be too surprised to discover that sympathy, not symhedonia, reigns supreme among visitors of a refugee camp or that symhedonia, not sympathy, pervades victory banquets and nuptials.

This leads to a question: Are the *opportunities* for the activation of symhedonia, in general, more or less plentiful than those for the activation of sympathy? Available psychological research indicates that "more plentiful" may, indeed, be the answer (see Myers, 1993, for a review; see also Diener & Diener, 1996; Myers, 1993, pp. 25–30; Zelenski & Larsen, 2000). One could then argue that the fact that the incidence of sympathy exceeds that of symhedonia in spite of more abundant triggers for symhedonia could only mean that the stranger effect reported in Study 4 would be even bigger if the base rates were brought in line with each other.

However, as some authors suggested (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), there is one context in which negative events may predominate, namely news reports in the media. This may also be the primary context within which people find themselves exposed to the lives of unfamiliar others in a way that warrants sympathy, symhedonia, and other affective responses. Thus, one may argue that the findings that sympathy outperforms symhedonia vis-à-vis strangers may merely reflect the higher ratio of negative to positive events in the context of televised news coverage or other media reports.

Another potential concern about Study 4 as well as its predecessors is that the questionnaires used in all of these studies follow the same basic recency format. It would be desirable to obtain corroborative findings using another methodology.

The goal of Study 5 was to address both of these concerns. The concern about the media bias was addressed by comparing people's reports of symhedonia and sympathy at two levels of attachment, both of which involved only the individuals whom the participants knew personally. Our prediction was that although the rates of both sympathy and symhedonia for high-attachment targets may exceed those for low-attachment targets, the discrepancy would be significantly lower for sympathy than for symhedonia. To address the concern about the questionnaire format, the recency probe was abandoned in favor of asking participants for a direct estimate of the number of times they have experienced either sympathy or symhedonia during a specific period (past week).

Method

Participants. There were 213 participants, all students in an undergraduate psychology course.

Materials and procedure. The participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the four versions of the questionnaire excerpted below. They were asked to keep the questionnaire facing down until everyone in the room had a copy. The instructions cited below were read by all the participants:

> To ensure that you begin and end your recall on time, listen carefully to the researcher's instructions.
>
> When you hear *START NOW*, start thinking of all the times *within the past 7 days* when you felt genuinely _____for another person [to] whom you _____. Continue until you hear the word *STOP*.
>
> Place a checkmark for each experience you recall as soon as you recall it.

Depending on a condition of the study, the blanks were filled with one of the following pairs of stems:

> Version 1: happy for/whom you *knew personally but to whom you had NO prior emotional attachment (i.e., a casual acquaintance).*

Version 2: happy for/to whom you *had a GREAT deal of prior emotional attachment to (i.e., a close friend, a family member, a romantic partner).*

Version 3: sad for/whom you *knew personally but to whom you had NO prior emotional attachment (i.e., a casual acquaintance*)

Version 4: sad for/to whom you *had a GREAT deal of prior emotional attachment (i.e., a close friend, a family member, a romantic partner*).

Once the questionnaires were turned over, the research assistant waited 30 s and having ascertained that everyone finished reading the instructions, gave the "Start now" signal and then the "Stop" signal 1 min later.

Results and Discussion

The data included 1 extreme outlier (27 instances of "feeling sad" for a casual acquaintance) whose results were excluded; this participant would have added support to our hypothesis.

Ignoring the relationship type information, the overall rate of sympathy ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.39$) was comparable with that of symhedonia ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.91$); $t(210) = 0.73$. The mean sympathy and symhedonia rates for the four conditions were symhedonia–close, $M = 2.06$, $SD = 2.98$; symhedonia–casual, $M = 1.04$, $SD = 1.20$; sympathy–close, $M = 1.60$, $SD = 1.35$; and sympathy–casual, $M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.41$.

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA; sympathy–symhedonia by close–casual) revealed two significant effects: a main effect of prior attachment level, $F(1, 208) = 14.91$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between prior attachment level and type of sympathetic response (sympathy vs. symhedonia), $F(1, 208) = 25.36$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1). Only the occurrence of symhedonia was clearly contingent on prior emotional attachment (the symhedonia rate was nearly 3 times as high under the conditions of high attachment as it was under the conditions of low attachment); sympathy was actually slightly (nonsignificantly) higher under conditions of low attachment.[2] The lack of an expected attachment effect for sympathy may be a result of the fact that a person has many more casual than close relationships, which, assuming that prior attachment is (relatively speaking) not an issue, gives one many more opportunities to experience sympathy in the former category. The higher rate of symhedonia in the sphere of close relationships is, most likely, a reflection of the underlying positivity bias in the base rate (see above).

In summary, these findings offer further support for the attachment-contingency hypothesis. Although the results do not rule out any possible base-rate explanation, they do challenge one obvious base-rate alternative to the hypothesis—the media bias account discussed earlier.

Study 6

Study 6 was to test yet another alternative to the attachment-contingency hypothesis. This alternative account was suggested to us by the comments of philosopher Joel Kupperman and can be summarized in the following propositions: (a) Feeling either sympathy or symhedonia depends on the meaning analysis of underlying negative and positive events in terms of the target person's goals, motives, and preferences. (b) The meanings of negative events are more universal than those of positive events; thus, in the former case, meaning analysis can happen without much knowledge of or about the target person.

If one is willing to accept both (a) and (b), it could be argued that the variable of interest is not attachment at all but something closely linked with attachment, namely familiarity. On this view (call it the *familiarity account*), sympathy and symhedonia are differentially sensitive not to the degree to which people care about another person or persons but to the degree to which people are acquainted with their preferences, values, and circumstances. Of course, the more familiar people are with a person, the more likely they are also to report caring for them or being "attached" to them, yielding the illusion that attachment rather than familiarity is the crucial factor at play.

In considering the options for untangling this alternative account from the attachment-contingency hypothesis, it is helpful to realize that attachment, as discussed here, need not be thought of as merely an interindividual property (one is more attached to *X* than *Y*) but also as something that can vary intraindividually or within persons (one is less attached to *X* at t_1 than at t_2). With this in mind, one test that stands to differentiate the attachment-contingency hypothesis and the familiarity account involves asking if sympathy should prove more robust than symhedonia when a previously good relationship goes bad. This should be the case in accordance with the attachment-contingency hypothesis, which posits that sympathy and symhedonia are differentially sensitive to attachment itself, not the intimate knowledge of another person's motives and preferences. Because the intimate knowledge should remain intact even as warmth and affection are compromised, the familiarity account will predict no difference between sympathy and symhedonia as such.

Method

Participants. The study generated 158 usable questionnaires (63% from women, with the respondents' mean age of 18.5 years), all from students enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course. A number of questionnaires were returned incomplete, presumably because these individuals could not think of some previously liked or close person who hurt them in the recent past.

Materials and procedure. As part of a larger in-class survey, the participants received one of the two (order-counterbalanced) versions of a questionnaire that asked them for their "current thoughts and feelings about a previously liked or close person who *recently hurt*" them (see McCullough et al., 1998). More specifically, the questionnaire instructed participants to simulate a bad and a good event in the life of an actual person who recently hurt them and then rate how happy and sad they would feel for that person on hearing an account of his or her good/bad fortune. The participants were instructed to simulate the events in a way that subjectively equated their magnitudes, so that the bad event was as bad as the good event was good. (The feedback from the participants during a smaller sample prestudy revealed that they did not have difficulty following the instructions, including vividly imagining positive and negative occurrences in the life of someone who recently hurt them or equating these occurrences for perceived magnitude). Although the questions were phrased in terms of counterfactuals, it was expected that once the participants imagined a positive or a negative event in the life of the previously close other, their Likert ratings would reflect the affective responses that these simulated experiences had produced. In an effort to minimize a possible response bias, we asked the participants for their "agreement/disagree-

[2] We would like to stress again that our hypothesis does not directly predict or require that sympathy be attachment insensitive, only that it be more so than symhedonia.

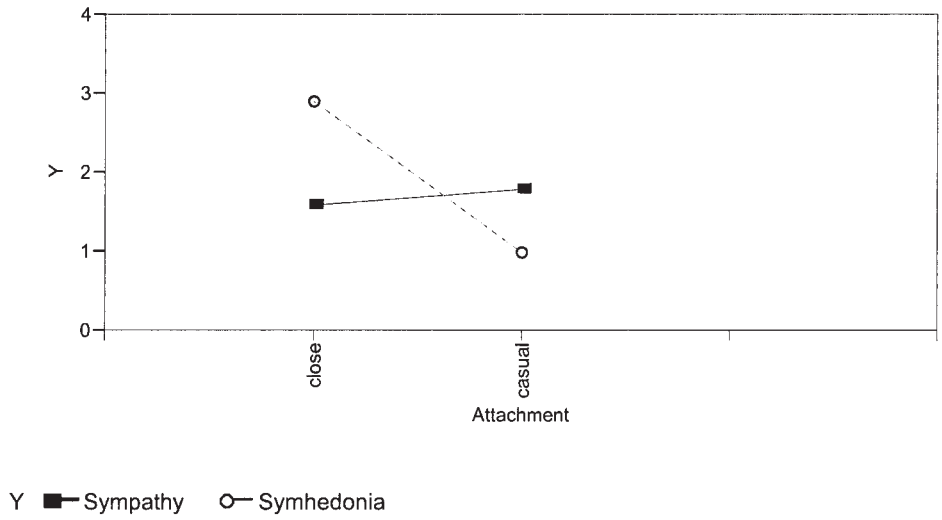

Figure 1. Sympathy and symhedonia frequency (within past 7 days) as a function of attachment type.

ment" rather than merely for their agreement with various questionnaire items.

The two versions of the questionnaire resulted when the instructions for considering the two events were counterbalanced for order. The sympathy and symhedonia probes were preceded by a five-item "grudge scale" (the five items used were extracted from a subscale in McCullough and colleagues' more comprehensive measure of revenge motivation; see McCullough et al., 1998). The scale measured the extent to which the participants sought to distance themselves from the person who had hurt them, with the range of possible scores varying from the minimum of 5 to the maximum of 25.

Results

There was no effect of the order in which the participants were asked to imagine and report their reactions to the two types of events, $F(1, 156) = 0.005$, $p = .94$. The mean sympathy and symhedonia ratings were 3.65 ($SD = 1.15$) and 2.93 ($SD = 1.18$), respectively. The mean difference was 0.71, favoring sympathy, paired t test, $t(157) = 8.37$, $p < .0001$, one-tailed. There was a significant positive correlation between the ratings of sympathy and those of symhedonia, $r(158) = .57$, $p < .0001$, one-tailed.

There was a significant negative correlation between sympathy and the grudge scale, $r(158) = -.24$, $p = .001$, one-tailed. There was also a significant and somewhat larger negative correlation between the extent of one's grudge and symhedonia, $r(158) = -.33$, $p < .001$, one-tailed.

Discussion

The findings of Study 6 give further support to the attachment-contingency hypothesis. As predicted, it appears that when one feels victimized by a previously close or liked person, one's capacity to experience genuine sympathy for that person is likely to withstand the damage to the relationship better than one's capacity to experience symhedonia for the same person.

All the studies considered thus far aimed at testing but one aspect of the attachment- contingency hypothesis, stating that compared with sympathy, the occurrence of symhedonia is significantly more contingent on the level of prior emotional attachment toward its target. None of these studies bears directly on the (logically independent) claim that the felt intensity of symhedonia is likely to be significantly more contingent on the level of prior attachment toward its target. The purpose of Study 7 was to explore this second proposition.

Study 7

Method

Participants. There were 160 participants, all students in an undergraduate psychology course.

Materials and procedure. The procedure was analogous to that reported for Studies 1, 2, and 4. The participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the four versions of the questionnaire. The within-group factor was the type of altruistic emotion (sympathy vs. symhedonia) being probed. The between-groups factor was relationship type (as a proxy for prior emotional attachment), with half the participants being assigned to imagine sympathy—and symhedonia-arousing incidents whose target was a casual acquaintance—and the other half assigned to imagine sympathy/symhedonia incidents whose target was a best friend. The participants rated their degree of sympathy or symhedonia on a 0–100 scale (0 = *I would feel nothing positive* [*negative*]; 100 = *I would feel just as happy* [*sad*] *for him/her as if that good* [*bad*] *thing happened to me*"). As in Study 6, the participants were instructed to simulate the incidents in a way that subjectively equated their magnitudes, so that the bad event was as bad as the good event was good and vice versa.

The sympathy–symhedonia probes were counterbalanced for order and were preceded by an attachment manipulation check that asked the participants to indicate their agreement or disagreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) with a series of four statements describing their feelings concerning the target person. The four statements were "I truly enjoy spending time with this person," "I trust him/her completely," "My life would be far emptier if he or she were gone," and "I care about him/her a lot."

Results and Discussion

The mean attachment reported for the casual acquaintance and best friend conditions were 10.35 ($SD = 2.66$) and 18.12 ($SD = 2.55$), respectively, $t(158) = 18.76$, $p < .001$, one-tailed, suggesting that the manipulation was successful.

To test for possible effects of attachment, type of sympathetic response, and the interaction between the two, we performed a 2 (order: sympathy first vs. symhedonia first) × 2 (attachment level: best friend vs. casual acquaintance) × 2 (type of sympathetic response: sympathy vs. symhedonia) mixed ANOVA, with order and attachment as between-groups factors and type of sympathetic response as a within-group factor. The analyses revealed two significant main effects and one significant interaction effect. One main effect was the within-group effect of response type, $F(1, 156) = 30.20$, $p < .001$, with sympathy stronger than symhedonia. The second main effect was the between-groups effect of relationship type, with higher total sympathy and symhedonia for the best friend than for the casual acquaintance, $F(1, 156) = 76.60$, $p < .001$, one-tailed. Most critically, the predicted interaction was significant; sympathy ratings for the best friend ($M = 85.85$) and the casual acquaintance ($M = 69.87$) were closer to each other than the corresponding ratings for symhedonia (best friend, $M = 83.53$; casual acquaintance, $M = 56.74$), $F(1, 156) = 12.07$, $p < .001$, one-tailed (see Figure 2). No other effects were significant.

A further set of analyses was performed to assess a possible relationship between sympathy, symhedonia, and attachment level within the casual-acquaintance category. There were significant correlations between attachment and symhedonia, $r(78) = .63$, $p < .001$, one-tailed; attachment and sympathy, $r(78) = .34$, $p = .002$, one-tailed; and sympathy and symhedonia, $r(78) = .55$, $p < .001$, one-tailed. Applying a test of significance for nonindependent correlations (Howell, 1997, p. 265), the difference between the first two correlations proved statistically significant, $t(75) = 3.42$, $p < .01$, one-tailed. Sympathy, though somewhat more intense than symhedonia, appears to be more independent of prior attachment.

General Discussion

Conclusions, Concerns, and Caveats

We conducted a series of exploratory studies testing various aspects of the attachment-contingency hypothesis by tapping into two potential sources of sympathy and symhedonia in everyday life, actual and imagined (simulated) experiences of others. Our findings are most consistent with the attachment-contingency hypothesis: Sympathy and symhedonia differed in the extent of their attachment sensitivity or communal bias, with symhedonia being the more selective, partial, or attachment sensitive of the two.

On the other hand, our results do not fit well with the symhedonia lower costliness hypothesis. They also challenge the symhedonia scarcity hypothesis. It is true that in Study 7, the rated intensity of sympathy ($M = 78.06$) exceeded the rated intensity of symhedonia ($M = 70.48$). But both means were high in absolute terms, with the overall sympathy being only 1.11 times higher than the overall symhedonia. In short, in direct contradiction to the symhedonia scarcity hypothesis, symhedonia appears be somewhat (but nonsignificantly) less common and only trivially less intense than sympathy.

Consistent with the equal contingency hypothesis, the reported intensity of both sympathy and symhedonia was significantly higher when the target person was the best friend rather than a casual acquaintance (Study 7). Also, consistent with the equal contingency hypothesis, the likelihood of experiencing symhedonia seems biased toward high-attachment targets (Studies 1–3, 5). On the other hand, contrary to this hypothesis, the likelihood of experiencing sympathy did not seem to vary consistently as a function of prior attachment (Studies 1–3, 5). Moreover, the equal contingency hypothesis is not equipped to account for the findings of sympathy's greater range, robustness, or the relatively weak tie

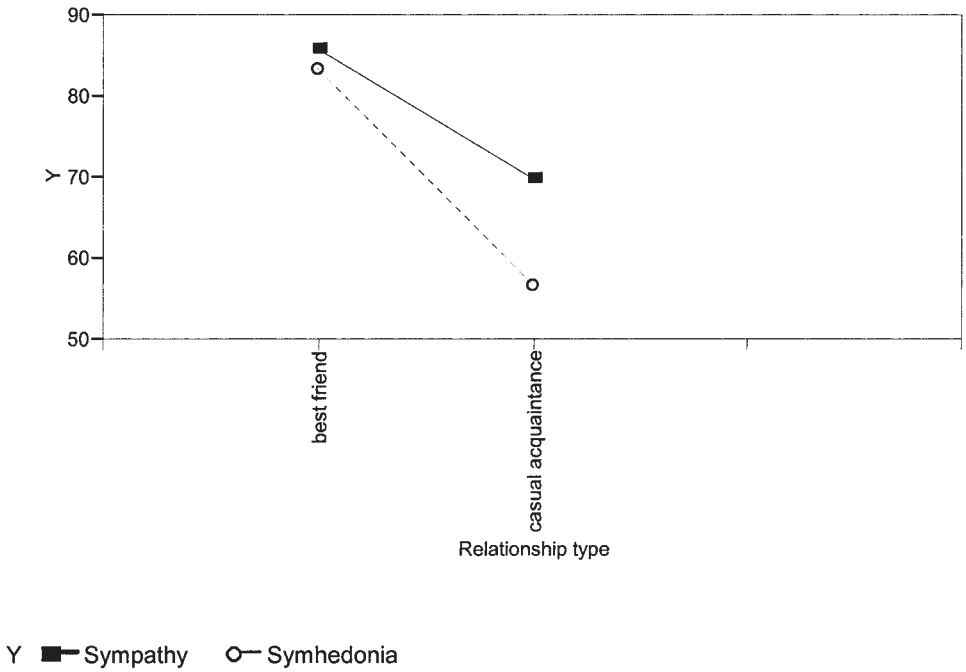

Figure 2. Sympathy and symhedonia intensity as a function of relationship type.

between the intensity of sympathy and attachment. However, consistent with the work of Daniel Batson and colleagues (Batson, 1991; Batson et al., 1995) and the stipulations of Margaret Clark et al. (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark et al., 1986; Mills & Clark, 1982), we found that the reported intensity of sympathy is attachment sensitive, although not nearly to the same degree as symhedonia.

In the course of considering alternative explanations for our findings, we also confronted the possibility that the difficulty of arousing symhedonia for low-attachment targets is merely a by-product of the interaction between some (perfectly impartial) symhedonia-generating process and a selectively inhibiting external factor, that is, envy (this account represents an extension of a position held by A. Smith [1759/2000]). Yet, contrary to the implications of such an account, we found no inverse relationship between symhedonia for low-attachment targets and individual envy orientation, as measured by the Dispositional Envy Scale (Study 4). This finding is more consistent with (though does not constitute direct evidence for) the position that symhedonia is inherently more attachment-sensitive than sympathy than it is with the position that symhedonia's partiality is a by-product of the selectively inhibiting operation of envy.

We think that the seven studies reported herein, although individually problematic, converge into a network of mutually supportive "checks and balances," with a problem posed by one study being addressed, more or less, by the next and vice versa. For example, the media bias hypothesis, potentially marring the results of Study 4, is largely diffused by the findings of Studies 5–7. Indeed, assuming a desire for explanatory parsimony, the findings of Studies 6 and 7 go against any alternative base-rate account, including one that would argue that the reported sympathy–symhedonia asymmetry with respect to attachment occurs because people are privy to more positive experiences of close others than to those of distant others (perhaps because the former are more likely to share their positive experiences). Although not without merit, this account would not only leave unexplained the simulation-based reports of Studies 6 and 7 but would also not tell us, in and of itself, why the same should not apply on the negative side of the ledger. After all, as with positive experiences, there are as many, if not more, negative experiences that people tend to reserve (in the form of the proverbial "whining" and "moaning") for those with whom they are most close; indeed, the prospect of social support in response to negative life events is said to be one of the major advantages of sustaining a close relationship (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Moreover, even if we did find that college-age adults were more promiscuous in the sharing of their negative experiences than their positive ones, this finding would not be unambiguously counter to the attachment-contingency hypothesis. For this could be precisely because by this juncture people had spent enough time on the receiving side of both sympathy and symhedonia to learn that for genuine (and sufficiently intense) symhedonia one must go to the select few, whereas sympathy can be solicited far more broadly. Studies 6 and 7 are important because they reveal a pattern consistent with the attachment-contingency hypothesis—even as the alternative base-rate interpretation is kept in check.

Base-rate concerns aside, it could be argued that a possible reason for at least some aspects of our asymmetrical findings is that it is easier to imagine genuine sympathy toward a nonclose other than it is to imagine genuine symhedonia toward that same person. Is this a viable alternative to the attachment-contingency hypothesis? At one level, this *is* the hypothesis. That is, if the argument is that absent a special relationship, it is hard to take the perspective (as in "imagine the feelings/imagine oneself in the place") of a person experiencing a positive event (while the negative variant of the process is relatively attachment insensitive), then we welcome this as a specification of one potential mechanism that makes the sympathy–symhedonia attachment gap possible. The idea that symhedonia is inherently biased toward those whom people especially care about is compatible with a number of proposals of how this bias is implemented at the neurocognitive level, including the proposal that the mind is designed to take the perspective of others with relative ease (attachment or no attachment) when others are in a state of distress but requires that extra push when they are in a state of bliss.

On the other hand, if the objection is that it is actually harder to imagine a positive event in the life of a nonclose other (i.e., a casual acquaintance) than it is to imagine a negative event for the same person, we doubt that this is really the case. The available psychological research indicates that (a) most events that people experience in their daily lives are evaluated as either neutral or positive (see Myers, 1993, for a review); (b) most people, including college students, report feeling happy most of the time (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1996; Myers, 1993, pp. 25–30; Zelenski & Larsen, 2000). Given this context of ambient positivity, the idea that our participants found imagining a positive event in the life of an acquaintance more difficult a task than imagining a negative event in the life of the same acquaintance seems strained. Intuitively speaking, it does not seem difficult at all to us to imagine good things happening to people we do not know (awards, babies, reunions, winning lotteries, etc.). Of course, the most direct test of this idea is to ask the participants themselves. We did just that in a prequel to Study 6 to find that the students did not have difficulty vividly imagining bad and good occurrences in the life of someone who recently hurt them or equating such occurrences for subjective magnitude.

An alternative criticism could grant that compared with sympathy, symhedonia is, indeed, harder to experience for low-attachment targets than high-attachment targets but maintain that this has little to do with attachment per se. A version of this account has been pitted against the attachment-contingency hypothesis in Study 6, with the findings favoring the hypothesis.

Directions for Future Research

We believe there is room for methodological improvement. One problem shared by all of the studies reported herein is that none of them manipulated attachment directly. As a result, there remains a possibility that symhedonia and sympathy are differentially sensitive not to attachment per se but to some other variable associated with attachment. Remedying this may not be an easy task. In fact, our work (and the formulation of the attachment-contingency hypothesis itself) was predicated on the observed difficulty of inducing a symhedonia-appropriate level of attachment toward a previously unknown confederate in the course of a single laboratory experiment. Still, we believe that there is one approach to attachment induction that is well worth trying, namely making participants feel genuinely sympathetic first. Our belief in the promise of this manipulation stems, in part, from Batson et al.'s (1995; Study 3) finding that sympathy may, indeed, induce caring (emotional attachment) for the needy person as a function of

feeling sympathetic for that person. This might pave the way for an experimental test of the attachment-contingency hypothesis by permitting us to contrast the effect that prior exposure to a sympathy-rousing experience has on sympathy versus symhedonia. Should such a study yield results consistent with the attachment-contingency hypothesis (feeling sympathy first helps people "warm up" to feel symhedonia later), it may also offer a partial explanation for the upward trajectory of many a popular narrative, from *Rocky* to *Harry Potter*, whose ultimately triumphant characters begin as underdogs mired in obscurity and defeat. Perhaps creators of such narratives are implicitly aware of and are intuitively exploiting the attachment-building function of sympathetic sorrow hypothesized above.

It would also be interesting to see if the finding of lower sympathetic bias under conditions of high attachment could be replicated by tracking people's sympathy and symhedonia over a period of time characterized by a naturally occurring fluctuation in one's attachment toward a given person or a collective of persons.

Another potential avenue of research is suggested by viewing our findings in light of Abraham Tesser and colleagues' self-evaluation maintenance model (Erber & Tesser, 1994). According to the traditional version of this model, whether or not a person may be expected to feel happy or envious in the wake of a close other's success depends crucially on whether the success is ego-relevant or not, with ego-irrelevant successes giving rise to happiness (and approach) and ego-relevant ones to envy (and distancing). An attenuated version of this pattern is said to hold for nonclose others (Tesser & Collins, 1988; Tesser, Pilkington, & McIntosh, 1989). This model has at least two important implications for the present discussion. First, Tesser and colleagues posited that social comparison processes (and, consequently, the comparison-engendered negative affect) will be relatively absent when no close relationship exists. Because it is precisely here that the sympathy–symhedonia gap has been shown to be at its greatest, their model offers further support for the idea that relative lack of symhedonia (vs. sympathy) for nonclose others is due not to interference from envy but, most likely, to symhedonia's inherently greater attachment prerequisites. A part of this proposition could be investigated more directly by examining a relationship (or lack thereof) between individual differences in symhedonia and social comparison orientation (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Second, because our studies did not directly vary or control for ego relevance or differentiate between those positive outcomes that would count as "successful performance" and the rest, it is possible that there is a subpopulation of positive outcomes (others' superlative performance with high ego relevance) for which both incidence and intensity of symhedonia would be considerably less than could be estimated from our mean figures. A future experiment varying outcome valence, ego relevance, and even type (performance-related vs. fortuitous) orthogonally would be very worthwhile.

Also, granting Westermarck's (1906) argument that only impartial emotions (i.e., emotions whose occurrence remains relatively constant regardless of one's relationship to the target person) are able to give rise to and properly support moral ideas, the present findings may shed light on what has been described elsewhere as the apparent bias at the heart of prosocial morality (Royzman & Kumar, 2001). The alleged bias consists of the fact that, whereas commonsense morality gives sturdy support to the idea that people have an "objective" duty to alleviate the distress of the distressed (hence, the welfare state, international aid, and the ready intervention on behalf of the oppressed), it does not appear to comprise a similar intuitively felt obligation to further promote happiness of the nondistressed or make the already happy happier, even when the resultant utility is roughly the same (Royzman & Kumar, 2001). Further conceptualization and research along these lines would be well advised.

Finally, although the studies performed thus far took care to exclude considerations of social desirability from the participant's reports, they all tapped the relevant aspects of people's experience of sympathy and symhedonia in a relatively direct way. It would be worthwhile to see if people will make social and moral judgments that are consistent with the supposition that they experience symhedonia as more selective than sympathy, even when they are not asked to report on the experiences themselves. For example, assuming that in everyday life symhedonia is experienced as inherently more selective and less robust than sympathy, and that individuals have an intuitive appreciation of this fact, it would be worthwhile to ask (a) whether, barring a special relationship, people will find a dearth of symhedonia less morally reprehensible than absence of sympathy proper and (b) whether people will find the knowledge that someone expressed symhedonia for an unidentified person more diagnostic of the nature of their relationships than the knowledge of an analogous expression of sympathy. As the attachment-contingency hypothesis would have it, the answers are yes and yes.

In conclusion, we emphasize that what we have accomplished in this article is to call attention, with evidence, to what we believe to be a fundamental difference between two key altruistic emotions: sympathy and symhedonia. We do not have a definite theoretical account for this difference: Our research was mainly motivated by our own observations in the real world and the comments of various authors who came before us. We do believe, however, that any future theorizing about and measurement of sympathy, symhedonia, and the like would be well advised to take into account the asymmetry we endeavored to document.

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