Empathic and counter-empathic emotions shape social hierarchy based on group positionality

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Abstract

Hierarchical relations between social groups are influenced by structural and interpersonal forces that reify or dismantle inequality. Here, I review two categories of emotional antecedents to hierarchy maintenance – empathic and counter-empathic emotions – which directly impact the cooperative or competitive nature of intergroup relations. Empathy is the ability to understand and experience the assumed emotional states of other people while counter-empathy is the ability to understand but experience the *opposite* assumed emotional states of others. Feeling empathy is affiliative, facilitating group cooperation and social interconnectedness. In contrast, counter-empathy is disaffiliative, facilitating social domination and competition. Asymmetric power hierarchies between groups becomes perpetuated when people affiliate and thus experience empathy towards groups that are at the top of the hierarchy, as well as when people disaffiliate and experience counter-empathy towards groups at the bottom. In contrast, hierarchical relationships become attenuated when people affiliate with those at the bottom of the hierarchy or disaffiliate with those at the top. In this way, the hierarchy attenuating or maintaining consequences of empathy and counter-empathy depend on the target groups' positionality within the hierarchy, suggesting the importance of contextual power dynamics in understanding the implications of social emotions.

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Social hierarchies are ubiquitous in human societies, constructed at the nexus of forces that either enhance the existing social inequality between groups or attenuate it (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These forces operate on a continuum from interpersonal to societal level dynamics, including attitudes and stereotypes about groups that justify their positive or negative treatment (e.g., women being bad at math to justify hiring discrimination in STEM fields), belief systems that are aligned with the practices of privileged social groups more than others (e.g., Protestant work ethic), and institutions that codify laws and procedures that disproportionally help or harm certain groups (e.g., the criminal justice system disproportionally harming Black Americans). Furthermore, these forces are interconnected in how they impact hierarchy. As an example, individual attitudes can influence the type, scope, and impact of organizational policies through public support as well as through the people who have disproportionate access to policy creation and implementation (Erikson, 2015; Meyers & Nielsen, 2012).

One antecedent to interpersonal hierarchical forces is emotions. Emotions, elicited in response to internal or external stimuli which then prompt socio-functional behavioral responses, have been shown to be powerful predictors of how we relate to one another interpersonally (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) as well as on a broader group level (Mackie et al., 2000; E. R. Smith et al., 2007). Integrating literatures on emotion expression with theories on intergroup relations and hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 2004), in this review I discuss the importance of hierarchical group structures and asymmetrical power differences as consequential contexts for intergroup emotions (Cikara et al., 2022). Such a focus is relevant because positionality within a hierarchy shapes not only which emotions are felt, but also how they get

expressed as well as the consequences of that expression (Keltner et al., 2003; Van Kleef et al., 2008). In other words, all people are capable of various emotional expressions that can spur the creation of attitudes and engagement in behaviors that impact group relations. But when emotions are expressed by members of groups embedded within a social hierarchy where some groups have more power and status than others, the hierarchical *implications* of that emotional expression depend on that groups' societal power.

We can use the interplay between anger and the racial hierarchy within the United States as an example. Anger and resentment are strong predictors of collective action (Mackie et al., 2000; Stewart & Tran, 2018; Van Zomeren et al., 2004) and both White and Black Americans can feel resentful towards the other racial group due to perceived slights and discrimination (D. W. Davis & Wilson, 2022; Norton & Sommers, 2011). However, given the historical asymmetry in power such that White Americans enjoy disproportionate amounts of social, political, and economic power (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) compared to other racial groups, White Americans' anger/resentment (Outten et al., 2012) has farther-reaching consequences than the same emotions felt by Black Americans (Anderson, 2016; Phoenix, 2019). These consequences can be hierarchy enhancing, such as the Tulsa Massacre which occurred because armed White Americans grew resentful of the growing prosperity of the Greenwood Black community (Fenwick, 2020). The resulting riot, in a single day, destroyed 27 million (in today's) dollars of Black wealth that took years to amass. The emotional consequences can also be hierarchy attenuating, as White Americans' confrontation of racism and discrimination results in better outcomes (e.g., greater willingness to change and reduced backlash) than racial minorities' confrontations (Czopp et al., 2003; Rasinski et al., 2010) in part due to their higher positionality within society (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2014).

While many emotions (e.g., anger, fear, and disgust) can impact the nature of intergroup relations (Crawford et al., 2014; Outten et al., 2012; Van Zomeren et al., 2004), there are two classes of emotions – empathy and counter-empathy – that are directly related to the nature of group relationships within a hierarchy. These social emotion sets have likely evolved, in part, to facilitate intragroup cohesion or division (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005), but have implications for intergroup relationships as well (Cikara, 2015; Dovidio et al., 2010). Here I argue that the types of behaviors, attitudes, and policy support influenced by empathic and counter-empathic emotions depends on the power of the groups in question. This suggests we can understand intergroup conflict to a greater degree if we embed our understanding of emotions within social hierarchical structures. Below I define empathy and counter-empathy and discuss how these emotions impact relationships between social groups.

Empathy and Counter-Empathy are Emotions that Signal Social (Im)Balance

Empathy has many definitions that span the cognitive and affective dimensions (M. H. Davis, 1983; Weisz & Cikara, 2021). Overall, empathy encompasses a cognitive recognition of, and a congruent emotional resonance to, the assumed positive and negative experiences of others. When we feel good in response to another person's good fortune, we are feeling positive empathy (Morelli et al., 2015; Telle & Pfister, 2014), which is sometimes labeled as "happy-for-ness" (Boecker et al., 2022). Similarly, when we feel negatively in response to another person's *mis*fortune, we are feeling negative empathy, or the more colloquial form of empathy. Negative empathy has several related concepts such as sympathy and compassion (Cuff et al., 2014). Regardless of the form, feeling empathy is adaptive for humans living in a social world. Empathy leads to prosocial, helping behaviors that facilitate affiliation, cooperation, and cohesion (Eisenberg & Di Giunta, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; FeldmanHall et al., 2015;

Telle & Pfister, 2014) between people as well as between groups.

While the action tendencies of empathy are well known, whether counter-empathy also has action tendencies is contested. Counter-empathy, primarily defined affectively, is the emotional reaction that is incongruent and opposite that of the assumed experiences of others (Cikara et al., 2014). Counter-empathy is comprised of two emotions: schadenfreude, or feeling pleasure at the misfortune of others, and gluckschmerz, feeling bitterness at the fortune of others (Smith & van Dijk, 2018). There is far more work on schadenfreude than gluckschmerz, in part because people are less willing to admit to feeling gluckschmerz than they are to feeling schadenfreude. Previous theorizing has characterized counter-empathy as an example of a passive emotion (Leach et al., 2003; van de Ven, 2018), meaning schadenfreude and gluckschmerz are not assumed to have action tendencies associated with them. In this way, counter-empathy is assumed to be felt in response to a stimulus but doesn't engender a behavioral response itself. However, the very nature of counter-empathy suggests that these emotions can and do lead to interpersonal and intergroup behaviors. Synthesizing past research, it appears that counter-empathy does have an action tendency associated with it, which is specifically tied to social dominance and competitive hierarchical relationships.

For example, there is evidence that schadenfreude is a social-dominance regulator, deployed to regulate the perceived status of individuals (Lange & Boecker, 2019). Those who are the targets of schadenfreude become perceived as having lower status than those who are not targets of schadenfreude. While not yet empirically tested, this same mechanism likely operates on a group level as well, with groups who are routinely met with derision in the face of their misfortune perceived as being lower in status. As another example, malicious envy, an emotion similar to gluckschmerz in typology, has been shown to have action tendencies. Malicious envy

refers to the longing for another person's material possessions or intrinsic characteristics that leads to a motivation to bring that person down. Importantly, malicious envy can be a precursor to aggressive behaviors that subsequently lead to schadenfreude (van de Ven et al., 2015), suggesting that a desire to see a person's positive attributes become diminished can motivate behaviors that lead to a person's misfortune. Indeed, watching rival sports teams lose becomes especially sweet after an ingroup loss and subsequent decrement in self-esteem (Leach & Spears, 2008). The desire to see rival teams lose can even lead people to prefer hurting outgroup teams more so than helping their own ingroup (Lehr et al., 2019). Furthermore, being the agent of causing someone's downfall, not just witnessing it, maximizes levels of reported schadenfreude (Greenier, 2015). This finding gives indirect evidence that the bitterness one can feel in response to people's fortunes, i.e., gluckschmerz, could compel them to cause harm to others, which then leads to heightened levels of schadenfreude.

Finally schadenfreude activates reward circuitry in the brain (Cikara et al., 2011; Cikara & Fiske, 2011), which is perhaps the most substantial piece of evidence that counter-empathy has action tendencies. Schadenfreude is a positive emotion to feel, although it is spiteful and tied to a negative outcome for another person or group. In this way, it is rewarding to feel schadenfreude, which suggests that schadenfreude actives motivational reinforcement loops. Not only will people passively experience schadenfreude (Leach et al., 2003) but be more likely to seek out situations that engender schadenfreude as well. Indeed, research has found that people who felt more good than they anticipated feeling after harming others were more likely to reinforce that behavior in the future (Vollberg & Cikara, 2022). In sum, rather than being purely passive emotions, schadenfreude and gluckschmerz likely produce perceptions, cognitions, and even behaviors that alters the competitiveness and status of identified rival people and groups.

The outstanding question is, how do we determine towards whom we feel empathy and counter-empathy? Previous research has highlighted the prominent role of deservingness as a critical antecedent to empathy and counter-empathy (Feather & Sherman, 2002; Smith & van Dijk, 2018), which can be impacted by group membership, stereotypes, and motivated cognition (Reyna et al., 2006; Stürmer et al., 2006; Zaki, 2014). We feel empathy and affiliate with groups we perceive as broadly deserving of good things, while we feel counter-empathy and disaffiliate with groups we perceive as broadly undeserving of good things. Bringing these findings together, both empathy and counter-empathy can be understood as signals of perceived balance and imbalance in people's social world (van de Ven, 2018), leading to action tendencies that either perpetuate or correct the balance. More specifically, we feel negative empathy when we believe a negative outcome is not deserved, gluckschmerz when we believe a positive outcome is not deserved, positive empathy when a positive outcome is deserved for a group, and finally schadenfreude when a negative outcome is deserved (Table 1). Thus, positive empathy and schadenfreude signal that the world is functioning the way it ought (i.e., things that are deserved are occurring), which then support behaviors that maintains the balance. In contrast, negative empathy and gluckschmerz signal that something needs to be altered (i.e., things that are undeserved are occurring), which leads to behaviors that restore the world back to balance (Lange & Boecker, 2019; van de Ven, 2018).

Table 1: Matrix of Outcome Valence and Deservingness to Determine the Hierarchy Attenuating or Enhancing Nature of Empathy and Counter-Empathy.

	Outcome Deservingness: Deserving	Outcome Deservingness: Undeserving
Outcome Valence: Positive	Positive Empathy: HE towards High Status HA towards Low Status	Gluckschmerz: HE towards Low Status HA towards High Status

Outcome Valence: Negative	Negative Empathy: HE towards High Status HA towards Low Status	Schadenfreude: HE towards Low Status HA towards High Status

Note: HE stands for hierarchy enhancing, HA stands for hierarchy attenuating.

Again, feeling empathy and counter-empathy can lead to cognitions and behaviors that either maintain or restore social balance (Table 1)[1]. The deciding factor as to whether these emotions cause hierarchy attenuating or hierarchy enhancing outcomes depends on the positionality of the groups in the dynamic and which direction in the hierarchy these emotions are aimed. More specifically, hierarchical relations are enhanced after feeling empathic, affiliative emotions towards high status groups and/or feeling counter-empathic, disaffiliative emotions towards low status groups. The reverse situation attenuates hierarchy; feeling empathy towards low status groups and/or feeling counter-empathy towards high status groups can destabilize hierarchy. This is because feeling empathy towards a group facilitates behaviors that lead to cooperation and support while feeling counter-empathy towards a group facilitates behaviors that undermine a group's interest. Supporting a group that already has a disproportionate amounts of power or undermining a disadvantaged groups' position enhances hierarchy, while supporting a disadvantaged groups' desire for equal power or undermining an advantaged group's ability to maintain power attenuates hierarchy.

The dual hierarchy-enhancing or -attenuating impact of empathy and counter-empathy occur in part because people are biased when feeling these emotions across group and status

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[1] It is important to note that the relationship between outcome valence, outcome deservingness, and emotions are ideal cases. There can be situations where, for example, a group that we overall affiliate with, and thus are predisposed to feeling empathy and not counter-empathy towards them, has a misfortune that was deserved. Those situations likely make empathic and counter-empathic emotional responses more ambivalent and complicated. For example, few Democratic governors spoke out about former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's removal from office due to evidence of sexual harassment (Schwartz, 2021). This lack of public engagement reflected, perhaps, the ambivalent feelings of a person viewing a normally high-regarded ingroup member as having justly earned their punishment.

divides. People routinely feel less empathy and more counter-empathy towards outgroups compared to ingroups (Hoogland et al., 2015). This effect becomes heightened when people have high group identification (Combs et al., 2009; Ouwerkerk et al., 2018), they are in competitive settings (Cikara et al., 2014), and/or they feel a high degree of threat (Hudson et al., 2019). As most intergroup dynamics are marked by competition and threat, biased expressions of these affiliative and disaffiliative emotions means the hierarchy-entrenching forces of groups in power are stronger than the hierarchy-attenuating ones of those not in power (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Given that feeling counter-empathy can lead people to engage in aggressive and even harmful actions towards others (Cikara, 2015; Lehr et al., 2019; Vollberg & Cikara, 2022), this suggests that the mechanisms available to harm others will be disproportionately held by high power groups and aimed towards low power groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The power of empathy and counter-empathy to enhance hierarchy

As stated above, biased feelings of empathy and counter-empathy can lead to outcomes that enhance the degree of hierarchy when the targets of empathy are higher in power and the targets of counter-empathy are lower in power (Spears & Leach, 2004). Returning back to our racial example, White Americans have strong beliefs around fairness and justice and are prone to increased gluckschmerz and decreased positive empathy when they feel racial minorities are getting more than their fair share of resources (D. W. Davis & Wilson, 2022). This racial resentment leads to feelings of racialized schadenfreude and ultimately greater support for policies that hurt racial minorities even at the expense of their own self-interests (Brown et al., 2022; Sidanius et al., 2007). Thus, feeling schadenfreude in the wake of racial minority suffering is a signal that racial minorities, perceived as a broadly undeserving group, are receiving outcomes in line with their perceived level of deservingness in life.

Relatedly, White American's biased beliefs about what constitutes fairness can lead to increased feelings of empathy towards fellow White Americans (Johnson & Lecci, 2020), entrenching hierarchy through ingroup affiliation (Dixon et al., 2012). Such hierarchy maintenance does not require blatant antipathy towards lower-status outgroup members but instead relies on prioritization of higher-status ingroup goals over moral values such as equity (Cikara & Paluck, 2013). Given people expect other ingroup members to treat them favorably and reciprocate the treatment (Everett et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2012), high status group members prioritizing ingroup interests can become a self-generating cycle that keeps hierarchies intact through mutual positive evaluations. Indeed, positive ingroup evaluations are more strongly associated with believing hierarchy-supporting ideologies for high status groups compared to low status groups (Levin et al., 1998; Levin & Sidanius, 1999). This suggests that positive ingroup evaluations would also be more strongly associated with hierarchy supporting *emotions*, which can be either empathy or counter-empathy depending upon the target and situation. Similarly, feeling empathy is related to prosocial behaviors, but when ingroup affiliation happens in competitive settings, empathy can lead to an exacerbation of group negativity and polarization (Simas et al., 2020).

As another example, people are less likely to feel empathy and more likely to feel schadenfreude in the face of political repression when the group being repressed is a member of an outgroup rather than an ingroup. The extent of political repression can severe, such as a group peacefully protesting getting killed by the state's army (Ash & Dolan, 2020). The lack of empathy and the increase in schadenfreude makes collective action on behalf of the rival group less likely to occur (Stefaniak et al., 2020), increasing the inequality between political groups in line with ingroup political interests. The increase in political schadenfreude can change political

preferences as well; those who experience partisan schadenfreude are more likely to support candidates whose campaign promises include disproportionally harming rival political groups (Webster et al., 2022). In this way, a lack of empathy and the presence of schadenfreude can become a motivating force for group-based cruelty towards rival and marginalized populations (Serwer, 2018)

Empathy and counter-empathy also interact with hierarchy-enhancing belief systems as well. Ideologies like system justification (Jost, 2017) and social dominance orientation (SDO; Ho et al., 2015) relate to people's motivations to uphold hierarchy. In particular, SDO is directly measures how much individuals are invested in upholding group hierarchy and inequality. Several studies have found that those who are higher in SDO feel less empathy overall (Sidanius et al., 2013), but especially towards outgroups and low status groups (Hudson et al., 2019). In fact, there is evidence to suggest those with higher levels of SDO actually feel *more* empathy towards those in power (Lucas & Kteily, 2018). Similarly, those who have high levels of system justifying beliefs have reduced emotional affect towards the suffering of low status groups (Goudarzi et al., 2020), suggesting that their plight doesn't activate empathic responses to the same degree as those aren't motivated to justify inequality.

The power of empathy and counter-empathy to attenuate hierarchy

Empathy and counter-empathy can also attenuate hierarchical inequality when empathy is felt towards low status groups while counter-empathy is felt towards high status groups. The literature supporting empathy's ability to promote prosocial, helping behavior among advantaged groups is substantial, which is partly why empathy is often the emotion targeted in intergroup conflict interventions (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Klimecki, 2019; Zaki & Cikara, 2015). Increasing the amount of empathy high status groups feel towards low status groups has been

shown to increase positive stereotypes about the low status group, interest in contact, as well as awareness of group disparities (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). Feeling empathy by high status group members towards lower status groups can further spur support for collective action to attenuate the status differences between the groups (Selvanathan et al., 2018). Finally, empathy felt by lower status groups towards fellow low status groups also attenuates hierarchy. For example, members of groups that are lower in power are more likely to feel empathy for other low status groups and thus support policies that put protections in place for all marginalized populations (Sirin et al., 2017). Feeling a sense of linked fate can lead marginalized individuals to be more interested in coalitions with other marginalized groups to agitate for change (Cortland et al., 2017).

There is very little research on the impact of feeling counter-empathy towards those at the top of the hierarchy. This could be because the phenomenon is harder to study, as groups with power are better positioned to shield themselves from any negative consequences of being the targets of counter-empathy. Theoretically, however, the resulting outcomes from feeling counter-empathy towards those with more power should be destabilizing to hierarchical structures. For example, work on social comparisons suggest that counter-empathy is amplified when the comparisons are unfavorable (Boecker et al., 2022), such as when a peer does well while one does poorly. While social comparisons become complicated at the group level (Bergh et al., 2020), research on the "underdog" effect suggests under certain circumstances, people can feel satisfaction when the more advantaged group loses (Kim et al., 2008; Vandello et al., 2007) as well as bitterness when the more disadvantaged group fails. Furthermore, to the extent to which people's belief systems prioritizes equality (Ho & Kteily, 2020), counter-empathy towards those at the top should prompt collective action in support of those at the bottom. Newer constructs

like left wing authoritarianism (Costello et al., 2022) has brought an analytic focus to political slogans like "eat the rich", suggesting that part of a more militant liberal ideology is to dismantle existing hierarchies and to even rejoice at the suffering of the bourgeoisie.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Empathy and counter-empathy are emotions that help humans navigate problems related to social cohesion and conflict. Schadenfreude and positive empathy are signals that the social world around us is balanced while negative empathy and gluckschmerz are signal that the social world is unbalanced. The social consequences of feeling empathy and counter-empathy depend upon whether the group in question is high or low power and perceived deservingness. When we feel a group is deserving, we feel positive and negative empathy in response to good and bad outcomes respectively. In contrast, if we feel a group is undeserving, we instead feel gluckschmerz in response to good, and schadenfreude in response to bad, outcomes. Because deservingness is often associated with positionality within a hierarchy, feeling empathy and not feeling counter-empathy towards high status groups enhances hierarchical relations between groups, while feeling those same emotions towards low status groups attenuates it.

While there are substantive amounts of research on the power of negative empathy in promoting prosocial behaviors, there is relatively less work on positive empathy and schadenfreude's impact on behaviors, with the research on gluckschmerz being almost non-existent. More research is needed to fully explore the proposed action tendencies of counter-empathy, which I theorize is related to dominance and competition. Furthermore, much of the work is divorced from the power dynamics embedded within social categories. For example, research on ingroup and outgroup empathy gaps often use social groups that are also characterized by different levels of societal power, making it unclear as to whether the patterns

of results are due to group membership, power differentials, or a combination of both (Hudson et al., 2019). As another example, while all groups can experience group level emotions, many groups are constrained in which emotions they can verbalize and/or act on due to their lower level of societal power (Phoenix, 2019). Contextualizing emotions within power structures has primarily been done with anger, and it is clear that additional research is needed on the consequences of asymmetry of emotional expression for empathy and counter-empathy.

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