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Feeling empathy for organizations: Moral consequences, mechanisms, and the power of framing[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Organizations—especially small businesses—are vulnerable to social and economic upheaval. When misfortune befalls organizations, how much do we empathize with them? Here we present a framework for understanding the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of empathy for organizations. One key cause of empathy is framing: Although any organization is comprised of its constituent members, six studies find that the members frame (“members comprising an organization”) evokes more empathy than the organization frame (“an organization comprised of its members”). The effect of framing on empathy is mediated through anthropomorphism—how humanlike an organization seems. Studies also reveal moral consequences of framing. Increased empathy towards an organization translates to increased perceptions that its suffering is unfair, and to increased helping behavior to address that suffering. Theoretically, these results provide a multi-stage model of empathy for organizations. Practically, these results reveal how struggling organizations can increase empathy for their plight.

At the time this paper was written, the coronavirus pandemic was in full swing, and organizations—particularly small and micro businesses—were struggling to survive. The U.S. federal government created the Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) as part of the economic stimulus bill earmarked for small businesses. However, it is difficult to adequately fund the small businesses that make up more than 60% of all jobs in the U.S. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

As this and other economic catastrophes reveal, behind each small business, local store, non-profit, association, and co-operative is a set of human beings who are suffering (Sax, 2020; Yaffe-Bellany & Corkery, 2020). The suffering of the local deli and hair salon, for example, is the owner-operators'. Interestingly, the PPP application asks for the name of the business first, and only further down does it ask for owners' names. Similarly, legal grievances by owner-operators may be filed in the name of the organization even though it is they—specific human beings—who are hurt. This procedure contrasts with media reports, which often present the owner-operators first before revealing their organizations. Rather than framing the entity as the organization comprised by people (e.g., “Bon Appetit, owned and operated by Anne, Ben, and Charlie”), these reports frame it as the people who comprise the organization (e.g.,

“Anne, Ben, and Charlie, who own and operate Bon Appetit”).

These two ways of understanding organizations—the members vs. organization frame (Tang, Koval, Larrick, & Harris, 2020)—may seem subtle, but in this paper, we argue that the members frame can increase the extent to which a suffering organization is humanized and elicits empathy. It may also impact perceived unfairness of the suffering and people's subsequent helping behavior. In our research, we focus on small and micro organizations—small businesses constitute 99.9% of US businesses (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018) and 20 million businesses are owned and operated by 20 people or less—in which the organization can be perceivably considered as interchangeable with its members.

1. Framing organizations as collections of its constituent members can influence empathy

Although empathy has been defined in several different ways since its inception (Dymond, 1949; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hogan, 1969; Mehrabian, Young, & Sato, 1988), at its core, empathy is about connecting with and caring about others. In our research, we focus on empathic concern, or compassionate empathy, defined as “other-oriented

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emotions elicited by and congruent with a target's well-being that motivate prosocial behaviors toward them" (Zaki, 2019, p.3; although we do investigate other types of empathy). Compassionate empathy leads us to care about the fate of another (Decety & Cowell, 2015; Zaki & Cikara, 2015; Zaki & Ochsner, 2016), and subsequently value their welfare (Batson, Ahmad, & Lishner, 2009) and provide help (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014).

The idea that framing can impact empathy for organizations is supported by past, related research. Studies have revealed that people feel less concern for groups of people than an individual (Slovic, 2007; Small & Loewenstein, 2003), and provide more help when there is an identifiable beneficiary (Kogut & Ritov, 2005). Closer to our research question, people are less sympathetic towards an organization than to its CEO (Rai & Diermeier, 2015). However, earlier research tended to have two limitations—to compare one person or a small group of people to a large group, and to provide more information about "identifiable" individuals than the group. Compared to existing studies that examine differences in empathy between entities of different sizes (e.g., an individual vs. collective) and between two different entities (e.g., a CEO vs. the organization), we draw on framing research and the psychology of syntax to test differences in empathy for the same group of people—the target—based only upon how the target is framed. That is, the organization frame "Bon Appetit, which is owned and operated by Anne, Ben, and Charlie" may engender less empathy than the members frame "Anne, Ben, and Charlie, who own and operate Bon Appetit" despite identical information.

Framing can influence psychological processes in many domains, including emotion-laden issues (e.g., Druckman & McDermott, 2008), in judgment and decision-making (e.g., Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996; Kahneman, 2011), and in mind perception (e.g., Cooley et al., 2017). For example, people feel more positive about a treatment framed as 70% lives saved versus 30% deaths (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Other related work reveals that subtle changes in language syntax can alter moral judgments, as syntactical change alters how we mentally represent the information by redirecting the focus on who the agent is. For example, the passive voice (e.g., *The victim was attacked by the assailant*) makes the victim more salient than the active voice (e.g., *The assailant attacked the victim*), increasing perceptions of the victims' causal responsibility and victim blaming (Niemi & Young, 2016). We build upon these past findings by suggesting that framing through such linguistic syntactical changes affects empathy for organizations because the members frame makes the humanness embedded in organizations more salient.

2. The members frame increases empathy due to increased anthropomorphization

Both laypeople and scholars anthropomorphize organizations as entities that are capable of learning, having memory, and having personality (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Brickson, 2020; Burwell v. Hobby Lobby, 2014; Ripken, 2009; Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2015). We suggest that, similarly, by nudging participants to think of organizations as the collection of their members, they would be more likely to think of the humanness of an organization (i.e., anthropomorphize it) and then empathize with it. Closer to our current research, recent work has documented preliminary evidence that people were more likely to dehumanize organizational entities in the organization frame than the members frame (Tang et al., 2020). However, whereas Tang et al. investigated the effect of framing on perceived control, moral responsibility, and blame, we investigate the effect of framing on anthropomorphization, empathy, and helping behavior. In the broader scope of morality (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Schein & Gray, 2018), Tang et al. investigated questions surrounding moral agency—when an organization inflicts suffering—whereas here we investigate questions surrounding moral patiency—when an organization is the recipient of suffering.

In addition to the work on organization (vs. members) framing, earlier work has anticipated differences in empathy as an important reaction to these frames. In particular, Cooley et al. (2017), investigating the "paradox of group mind," has documented that people perceived more mind in a group framed as "15 people who compose the accounting company" (a members frame) rather than "an accounting company comprised of 15 people" (an organization frame). However, the only study from Cooley et al. (Study 2) that used this strict framing did not examine empathy, but only the perception of mind. In the study (Study 3) that examined the effect of experiential mind perception on sympathy, they compared "20 people in a company" to "a small company" to "a man," leaving key questions about whether a stricter difference in framing (i.e., one that keeps the number of people constant across conditions) would influence empathy, in addition to other downstream consequences.

Our work makes theoretical and methodological contributions beyond that of Cooley et al., who focus on mind perception. First, we contribute theoretically in understanding when people feel empathy for organizations. We highlight that people do so when an organization is framed as its members or when people can see the members through the organization frame. Second, we examine the type of empathy that may emerge from framing. Existing research on organizations and empathy has broadly studied empathy without differentiating between the different types, even though its antecedents and consequences differ. Additionally, we scrutinize the psychological process by investigating anthropomorphism as the intervening step between framing and empathy by measuring and manipulating anthropomorphization. Finally, we investigate two critical consequences that organizations often face in the real world: perceived unfairness and helping behavior.

Methodologically, we improve upon Cooley et al.'s work in three ways. First, we consistently use strict framing. Throughout our studies, we convey the same information (the total number of people, the structure of the organization, and each person's role) in both frames. Second, we use a range of organizations to generalize our results. While past research has mainly examined large, for-profit, white-collar companies (e.g., Cooley et al., 2017; Hans & Ermann, 1989; Rai & Diermeier, 2015; Tang & Gray, 2018), we use organizations from different industries (e.g., manufacturing, restaurants, law), different organization structures (e.g., for profits vs. co-ops; flat vs. hierarchical). Lastly, we present organizations in a variety of ways, including textually (written description) and visually (pictorial organizational chart), to generalize our findings.

3. Consequences of increased anthropomorphization and empathy

The increase in anthropomorphization and empathy in the members (vs. organization) frame has implications for social justice. Anthropomorphization and empathy precede caring about the victim of unfairness or injustice (Opatow, 1990). For example, when minority groups are dehumanized, people believe that they have fewer moral rights, find behaving unfairly towards them more acceptable, view them with contempt, and care less about their well-being (e.g., Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Opatow, 1990). As anthropomorphization and empathy increase, however, people become more concerned for justice for victims (e.g., Cartabuke et al., 2019; Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014; Opatow, 1990; Sakalli-Uğurlu, Yalçın, & Glick, 2007) and more likely to help them (e.g., Andrighetto, Baldissarri, Lattanzio, Loughnan, & Volpato, 2014; Batson et al., 2009; Decety & Cowell, 2015; Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016). Thus, we examine two further consequences: perceived unfairness of the target's suffering and effort people expend to help it.

Specifically, we propose that increases in anthropomorphization and empathy in the members (vs. organization) frame would lead people to perceive the target's misfortune as more unfair. Existing theory and

findings that emotions drive moral judgments (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001; Zajonc, 1980), such as fairness appraisals, support the idea that anthropomorphization and empathy lead to perceived unfairness. Research on moral convictions show that people's moral outrage at an outcome that is incompatible with their moral values reduces how fair they perceive the procedure was (Mullen & Skitka, 2006). Even incidental emotions—emotions that are not related to the focal event—can influence their attitudes (e.g., Petty, DeSteno, & Rucker, 2001) and their decisions in moral dilemmas (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006). Furthermore, people's sense of justice is influenced by social relationships that are characterized by high concern for the target's well-being (e.g., Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998; Sherf & Venkataramani, 2015). For example, when people see a close other (vs. distant other) receive an unfavorable outcome, they judge it as more unfair.

That empathy precedes judgments of unfairness is also consistent with emerging theories of moral judgment. The theory of dyadic morality suggests that harm is the key driver of moral judgment (Schein & Gray, 2018), such as unfairness. However, mere perception of harm is insufficient for a moral judgment (Schein & Gray, 2018); one must care about, or empathize with, the victim as well. Taken together, existing theory and empirical research suggest that empathy spurs unfairness perceptions.

4. Current studies

Six studies test whether the members frame evokes more empathy for a target than the organization frame (Fig. 1). The Pilot Study first documents whether both the organization and members frames are prevalent in the real world and whether people naturally use both frames. Studies 1–5 test the effect of framing on empathy and judgments of unfairness. Study 1 additionally differentiates between compassionate, affective, and cognitive empathy that framing differences would elicit. Studies 2–3 test the proposed psychological process—attributing humanness to organizations—through mediation by measuring perceived anthropomorphization (Study 2) and moderation by individual differences in anthropomorphization (Study 3). Study 4 tested an intervention for how empathy in the organization frame can be restored by reminding participants of the individuals that make up the organization. Study 5 experimentally tested the causal link from empathy to perceived unfairness by examining whether suppressing empathy reduces perceived unfairness. Finally, Study 6 tests the behavioral consequences—effort expended on helping the target. Importantly, although we focus on framing differences with identical information, we also measure and control for six potential alternative explanations for our effects. In all our studies, we report all manipulations and measures. Note of chronology: Studies are numbered 1 to 6 for narrative style. Chronologically, studies were run in the following order: 3, 4, 2, 5, 1, 6.

In addition to examining how people empathize with an organization that is suffering (as a standalone target), we also study how they may judge the organization in conditions of comparison (i.e., of asymmetric misfortune, presenting two targets in comparison, in which one suffers, but the other does not). Our expectation is that inequality between two targets will be judged as more unfair in the members frame compared to the organization frame. Such comparison contexts speak to a pressing issue: why people seem to place more attention to inequality between individuals than institutions, even though the cost of organizational inequality hurts individuals massively (Card, Heining, & Kline, 2013;

Furman & Orszag, 2015; Song, Price, Guvenen, Bloom, & Von Wachter, 2015; Sutton & Callahan, 1987). Comparison contexts may thus inform whether or not this puzzle is associated with how organizations are framed.

5. Pilot: examining real-world organizational and members frames

We first document how organizations are naturally framed, by itself and by others, to show that organizational entities are indeed portrayed through the organization and members frames in the real world. Although recent research has used these two frames (Tang et al., 2020), we do not yet know whether perceivers or organizations themselves oscillate between these frames. As people react to organizations based on how they portray themselves publicly and how the media portrays them, we examine (1) how organizations frame themselves and (2) how others frame them. For the former, we selected microbreweries because they are small businesses that often market themselves through their own websites, and are often composed of groups of people that prominently make up the organization. For the latter, we selected the Supreme Court because the Court is made up of exactly nine justices and because as a national entity, people and the media often discuss it, its members, and its decisions.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Microbreweries

We used Google Maps to identify breweries in New York State by searching for “New York State microbreweries.” We chose New York State because microbreweries are popular in this state, and a listing of them is easily accessible through multiple channels, such as craft beer, county, and tourist websites. To code for the microbreweries in the organization frame, we counted the total number of times there were pictures of the brewery building or facilities and the brewery's logo or mascot, mentions of the organization itself (e.g., the brewery's name), and pronouns referring to the organization (e.g., it, its). For the members frame, we counted the total number of times there were pictures of the owner(s) or workers, mentions of the members (e.g., names of owners), and pronouns referring to the members (e.g., they, them, he, she). We aimed to code for at least 50 that appeared on the list. The RA, blind to our hypotheses, coded a total of 61.

5.1.2. Supreme court

We searched the New York Times for “Supreme Court” and “Nine justices.” To code for the Supreme Court in the organization frame, we counted the total number of times there were pictures of the Supreme Court bench or building, mentions of the organization frame (e.g., Supreme Court, the Liberal Court, the Roberts Court) and pronouns referring to the Court (e.g., it, its). To code for the Supreme Court in the members frame, we counted the total number of times there were pictures of the justices, mentions of the members frame (e.g., nine justices, liberal justices), and pronouns referring to the justices (e.g., they, them). We aimed to code for at least 50 (25 per frame) that appeared on the list, and our research assistant, blind to our studies and hypotheses, coded a total of 59.

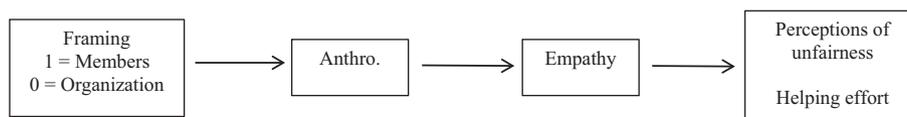


Fig. 1. The effect of framing on anthropomorphization and empathy, and further downstream consequences.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Microbreweries

The breweries presented themselves using both frames in their websites; however, they were more likely to present themselves using the members frame ($M = 29.74$, $SD = 36.47$) than the organization frame ($M = 9.36$, $SD = 10.81$), $t(60) = 4.68$, $p < .001$. Overall, the breweries portrayed themselves using the organization frame 28% and members frame 72% of the time.

5.2.2. Supreme court

Journalists discussed the Supreme Court using both frames in the same article; however, it was more likely to be mentioned in the organization frame ($M = 15.27$, $SD = 9.52$) than the members frame ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 5.73$), $t(58) = 7.74$, $p < .001$. Overall, the courts were portrayed using the organization frame 70% and members frame 30% of the time.

5.3. Discussion

Through examining two types of organizations, economic and legal, and how they and others portray them, these data suggest that people do indeed portray organizations using both the organization and members frames. The preliminary data suggests two types of frames are used to portray organizations: the members and the organization frame. In Study 1, we experimentally examine how framing influences people's reactions to organizations when they suffer.

6. Study 1: testing the framing effect on empathy

Study 1 provides a first test of our framing effect on empathy. In this study, participants read about an organizational entity (the target) consisting solely of three owner-operators. They read that the target suffers misfortune, and then rate how much they empathize with the target and how unfair they think the target's circumstances are. Importantly, we identify everyone by name in both the organization and members frames to address the confound that our results are due to the identifiability victim effect. Following past research, we use an external, uncontrollable cause (e.g., Callan, Ellard, & Nicol, 2006; Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Lerner & Miller, 1978) to minimize internal attributions of the target's misfortune. Doing so would alleviate concerns that people feel less empathy in the organization (vs. members) frame because the target should have been more competent, prepared, or coordinated to avoid the problem occurring in the first place.

Study 1 had three additional goals. First, we wanted to create a strict test of our hypothesis to ensure that participants would not believe that they are responding to different entities between the conditions. In the Pilot Study, we found that organizations are framed using both the organization and the members frame (e.g., as "Resurgence Brewing" and "Jeff and Erin"). Thus, as part of the first strict test of our hypothesis, we ask all participants in both conditions about their empathy and perceptions of unfairness towards "the group."

Second, existing research has not differentiated between the types of empathy that people might feel for an organizational target, even though extant literature identifies three key types: compassionate empathy (our target category), affective empathy, and cognitive empathy (e.g., Ekman & Ekman, 2017; Powell & Roberts, 2017; Weisz & Zaki, 2018; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). The first (also termed "empathic concern"), refers to positive feelings of compassion, concern, and care for others' welfare. The second refers to experience sharing, or vicariously feeling others' emotions. The third refers to the ability to mentalize and explicitly appraise others' thoughts and internal states. Given that these types of empathy have different antecedents and consequences (e.g., Bloom, 2017; Decety & Yoder, 2016), we examined whether framing specifically influenced one type or general empathy.

Finally, we examine a consequence of empathy: perceived

unfairness. Given that how unfair something is can be subjective, we examined whether framing would affect how unjust the target's suffering is. We predicted that people would have more compassionate empathy with the suffering target in the members frame than in the organization frame, despite receiving narrative that provides them with identical information. We also predicted that these differences in compassionate empathy would influence perceptions of unfairness. We had no strong predictions regarding affective and cognitive empathy. This study was preregistered at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=wf3bc2>.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

A power analysis based on a previous similar iteration of this study showed that, based on an effect size of $d = 0.27$, at least 434 participants are needed to detect an effect. In total, 437 Prolific Academic participants completed the study online (60% female, 0.2% non-binary, Age $M = 28.36$, $SD = 11.62$). As preregistered, we excluded participants who reported that they had completed "this exact same study" or "a very similar study" before, leaving 417 responses. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power showed that, with power of $B = 0.80$, we would have sufficiently detected an effect size of $d = 0.30$ or $f = 0.15$.

6.1.2. Procedure

All participants read about Abby, Cameron, and Ed, who are the sole owner-operators of their organization which produces electric tools, SunTools. They read that "business has not been going well" for the target, as consumer demand for electric tools have been dwindling "in a city that's quickly and surely turning to computer tech." Again, we manipulated frame through subtle changes in the vignette's text. In the organization frame, the target was first referred to as, "SunTools, an organization which produces electric tools, is solely owned and operated by Abby, Cameron, and Ed," and subsequently as "SunTools." In the members frame, the target was first referred to as, "Abby, Cameron and Ed, who produce electric tools, are the sole owners and operators of the organization SunTools," and subsequently as "Abby, Cameron and Ed."

6.1.2.1. Compassionate, affective, and cognitive empathy. After reading the information, participants responded to items about the empathy (adapted from Davis, 1983; Decety & Yoder, 2016; Zaki, 2019) they felt for the target and unfairness they perceived. To capture compassionate empathy, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the following: "I empathize with the group," "I feel sorry for the group," and "I feel concern for the group" ($\alpha = 0.87$). To measure affective empathy, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the following: "The emotions that the group is feeling bothers me," "I became sad when reading about the group," and "I got caught up in the group's feelings" ($\alpha = 0.92$). To measure cognitive empathy, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the following: "I can work out that the group would feel bad," "I can understand how the group would feel without being told," and "I can figure out whether the group feels happy or sad." ($\alpha = 0.89$).

6.1.2.2. Perceived unfairness. To capture unfairness, participants rated the extent to which they agreed that "The fact that the group has to adapt to a new environment or go out of business..." with the stems: "feels morally wrong," "feels unacceptable," "feels unjust," "feels unfair," "makes me morally outraged," "is disappointing," "is upsetting" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

6.1.3. Pre-test of manipulation

In a pre-test of our manipulation of framing, we recruited a group of online participants on Mechanical Turk and randomly assigned them to either the organization frame or the members frame. After reading their

respective scenarios, they answered the following two questions to gauge the extent to which they perceived the entity as an organization or a set of individual members: “Previously, you read about a group. To what extent do you view the group as: “individuals?” and “an organization?” The results showed that our manipulation was successful. Participants in the members condition viewed the groups as more similar to individuals ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.68$) than organizations ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.91$), $F(1,199) = 21.06$, $p < .001$, whereas those in the organization condition viewed the groups as more similar to organizations ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.57$) than individual members ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.93$), $F(1,199) = 10.63$, $p = .001$.

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Compassionate empathy

There was an effect of frame on compassionate empathy, in which participants felt more empathy in the members frame ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.11$) than in the organization frame ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.41$), $F(1,416) = 16.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.40$.

6.2.2. Affective empathy

Participants felt more affective empathy in the members frame ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.60$) than in the organization frame ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.51$), $F(1,416) = 4.22$, $p = .041$, $d = 0.20$.

6.2.3. Cognitive empathy

Participants felt more cognitive empathy in the members frame ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.05$) than in the organization frame ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.21$), $F(1,416) = 7.94$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.28$.

6.2.4. Perceived unfairness

There was a main effect of frame on perceptions of unfairness, in which participants perceived the outcome as more unfair in the members frame ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.39$) than in the organization frame ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.31$), $F(1,416) = 18.30$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.42$.

6.2.5. Mediation analysis

To test for mediation, we used a bootstrap model in the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 4, Hayes, 2013) with 5000 samples. We entered target as the IV, compassionate empathy as the mediator, and perceived unfairness as the DV. By manipulating target framing, the causal arrow from X to M is necessarily one-dimensional. However, another model swapping the positions of M and Y is also possible. We chose this particular model as past research has shown that people’s perceptions of injustice (which is related to unfairness) stems from empathy (e.g., Cartabuke et al., 2019; Opatow, 1990).

Results showed that the members frame increased compassionate empathy (above), and increased empathy subsequently increased perceptions of unfairness ($b = .66$, $SE = .04$, $t = 15.77$, $p < .001$). This indirect pathway was significant, $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.1771, 0.5127]. Furthermore, compassionate empathy continued to mediate the effect after including affective and cognitive empathy simultaneously as mediators, $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.0979, 0.3432]. Affective empathy also mediated the effect, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.0027, 0.2060], but cognitive empathy did not, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [-0.0576, 0.0085].

6.3. Discussion

Study 1 provided initial evidence that framing a target using the members (vs. organization) frame elicited more empathy and perceptions of unfairness. However, only compassionate empathy and affective, but not cognitive empathy, mediated the pathway from frame to unfairness. This suggests that while participants could better cognitively understand how the target feels in the members frame, increased understanding does not lead to changes in perceptual unfairness. The

finding is consistent with some past theorizing that affective empathy and compassionate empathy both arise out of concern and distress for the victim (e.g., Davis et al., 1999). The effect size for compassionate empathy was more than twice as large as that for affective empathy, however, additionally suggesting that while people felt compassion and were emotionally affected, much empathetic responses was out of concern and care for the target.

These results are consistent with past results showing that people feel less sympathy for a corporation compared to a CEO (Rai & Diermeier, 2015), and feel more sympathy for “a man and “20 people in a company” compared to “a small company” (Cooley et al., 2017). To preview our later results in Study 6, these results would also be consistent with past research showing that compassion is more likely to elicit helping behavior compared to affective empathy (Bloom, 2017). Importantly, participants in this study compared the same target, just framed differently. In the next study, we explore the proposed pathway through which the members frame elicits more empathy—anthropomorphization. In subsequent studies, we also focus on compassionate empathy (which we henceforth denote as “empathy” as a shorthand). This is because, in addition to showing the strongest effect of framing, past research suggests that compassionate empathy is more effective than affective empathy in increasing helping (e.g., Batson, O’Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983; FeldmanHall, Dalglish, Evans, & Mobbs, 2015).

7. Study 2: anthropomorphization as the mechanism for increased empathy

The goals of Study 2 were threefold. First, we generalize our findings by using another method to manipulate the framing of the target. Instead of describing the target, we presented participants with an organizational chart in both conditions. As in Study 1, participants responded to items in which the target was referred to as “the group” in both conditions. Second, we examine our proposed mechanism, anthropomorphization, or the tendency to see humanness in non-human entities, as driving the effect of framing on empathy and perceived unfairness (Fig. 2).

Third, we examine and measure two potential alternative mechanisms: expected effort and anticipated stress. Empathy requires cognitive and emotional effort (Cameron & Payne, 2011). It is thus possible that empathy is reduced in the organization frame because people anticipate finding it more effortful or stressful to empathize with the target when they conceptualize the target as an organization.

We pre-registered this study at <http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=ci6cx6>. We predicted that the members frame would increase anthropomorphization of the target, which would increase empathy and consequently perceived unfairness. We made no a priori predictions regarding expected effort and anticipated stress.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

A power analysis using G*Power showed that, with an average empathy effect size of $d = 0.31$ in Study 1, with power of $\beta = 0.80$, we should aim to recruit 330 participants to detect an effect. In total, we recruited 402 Mechanical Turk workers (50% female, 0% non-binary, age $M = 36.33$, $SD = 11.13$). A sensitivity analysis using G*Power showed that with power of $B = 0.80$, we would have sufficiently detected an effect size of $d = 0.28$. By the time we ran Study 2, an article with a similar manipulation had been published (Tang et al., 2020). We thus excluded participants who reported that they have done a similar study before. As pre-registered, we asked participants whether they have done this study or a very similar one before and excluded those who answered “Yes, I have done this exact study” or “Yes, I have done a very similar study” to the question, “Have you done this study before?”, leaving 347 responses for analyses.

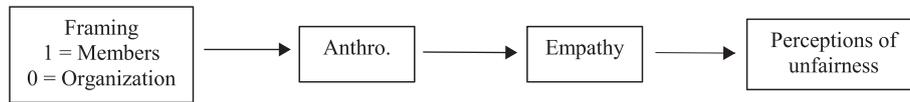


Fig. 2. Members framing increases anthropomorphization, which increases empathy and perceptions of unfairness.

7.1.2. Procedure

All participants were first saw Alpha via an organizational chart of its members taken from Tang et al. (2020), Fig. 3). One advantage of a visual representation is that all participants are able to see the full organizational structure, complete with members and their names, eliminating the possibility that participants would perceive the organization frame as more abstract or misidentify the number of members in the organization.

In the organization frame, the organization's name appeared at the top of the chart. Participants read that "Alpha is an organization that sells widget tools. These are all the people who work there and make up Alpha." In the members frame, the name of the organization was placed at the bottom of the chart. Participants read that, "These are all the people who work and make up Alpha, an organization that sells widget tools." Participants then read that the target used to be able to sell a good number of widget tools per month, but because of an economic downturn, it is selling half as much as it used to (see SOM for complete scenarios). They subsequently answered questions about the target using the generic label, "group," as in Study 1.

To capture anthropomorphization, we used two items taken from Waytz et al. (2010), "To what extent do you think that the group has a mind of its own?" and "To what extent do you think that the group has its own set of beliefs?" ($r = 0.70, p < .001$).

To measure empathy, we used the same items from Study 1 (e.g., "I empathize with the group"; $\alpha = 0.90$).

To capture effort, we used three items from Cameron et al. (2019); namely, the extent to which they felt that caring about the group would "be effortful," "take a lot of energy," and "be mentally tiring" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

To capture anticipated stress, we used five items from Cameron et al. (2019); namely, the extent to which reading about the group and thinking about what happened to the group would make them feel "discouraged," "stressed," "overwhelmed," "distressed," and "uncertain

how to help" ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Finally, to measure perceived unfairness, we used the same items from Study 1 (e.g., "The outcome of the group after the economic downturn feels unfair"; $\alpha = 0.88$).

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Anthropomorphization

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of frame on anthropomorphization, in which the members frame ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.24$) was anthropomorphized more than the organization frame ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 346) = 6.66, p = .010, d = 0.28$.

7.2.2. Empathy

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of frame on empathy, in which the members frame ($M = 5.34, SD = 1.21$) evoked more empathy than the organization frame ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.35$), $F(1, 346) = 4.67, p = .031, d = 0.23$.

7.2.3. Perceived unfairness

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of frame on perceived unfairness, in which the outcome in the members frame ($M = 3.76, SD = 1.26$) was perceived as more unfair than that in the organization frame ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.19$), $F(1,346) = 4.06, p = .045, d = 0.22$.

7.2.4. Expected effort

There was no main effect of frame on expected effort ($M_{members} = 3.43, SD = 1.70, M_{org} = 3.32, SD = 1.68, F(1,346) = 0.36, p = .549, d = 0.06$).

7.2.5. Anticipated stress

Although participants felt more stress for the members frame ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.52$) than for the organization frame ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.42$), this difference was not statistically significant, $F(1,346) = 1.83, p = .178, d = 0.14$.

7.2.6. Mediation analyses

We first attempted to replicate the results from previous studies by examining whether the indirect pathway from framing to empathy to perceived unfairness was supported. A bootstrap analysis using the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 4, Hayes, 2013) with 5000 samples showed that the pathway from frame to empathy to perceived unfairness was significant, $b = -0.15, SE = 0.07, 95\% CI = [-0.2874, -0.0196]$.

We also examined whether stress or expected effort as alternative explanations by entering both variables simultaneously with anthropomorphization in Model 4 of the PROCESS macro. Anthropomorphization continued to mediate the effect of frame on empathy, $95\% CI = [0.0143, 0.1565]$, although expected effort, $95\% CI = [-0.0738, 0.0348]$, and stress, $95\% CI = [-0.0388, 0.2123]$, did not.

Next, to test for serial mediation, we used a bootstrap model in the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 6, Hayes, 2013) with 5000 samples. We entered target as the IV, anthropomorphization as the first mediator (M1), empathy as the second mediator (M2), and unfairness of outcome as the DV. By manipulating target framing, the causal arrow from IV to M1 is necessarily one-dimensional. However, other models swapping the positions of M1, M2, and the DV are also possible. We chose this particular model as past research has shown that people's attributing human characteristics to a victim increases empathy felt for the victim, which in turn increases perceptions of injustice (a form of unfairness; e.

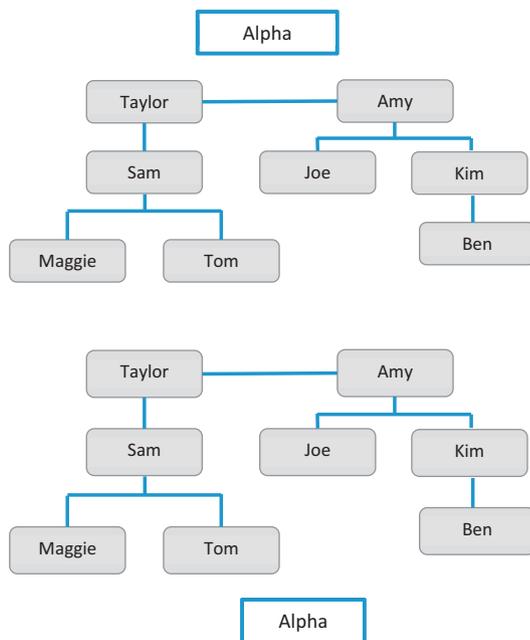


Fig. 3. Organizational chart for organization frame (top) and members frame (bottom).

g., Cartabuke et al., 2019; Opatow, 1990).

Results revealed that framing influenced anthropomorphization (above), which was significantly associated with empathy ($b = .23$, $SE = .05$, $t = 4.58$, $p < .001$), and empathy was significantly associated with perceived unfairness, $b = 0.50$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 10.95$, $p < .001$. The serial pathway was significant, $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [0.0086, 0.0906].

7.3. Discussion

By directly measuring the extent to which people anthropomorphized each frame, Study 2 provided evidence that organizational targets evoke more humanness in the members than organization frame, which leads to increased empathy and perceived unfairness. The impact of framing on empathy did not appear to be sufficiently explained by the two alternative explanations we examined: People did not expect to expend more effort caring about the target, and although the stress of reading about the target and its outcome was higher in the members (vs. organization) frame, neither mediated the effect of frame on empathy. This suggests that even though people may anticipate exerting effort to care about a victim, they may not necessarily refrain from empathizing with the victim. It is possible that they may avoid empathizing with a victim if they have a choice (Cameron et al., 2019), but when they are confronted with a victim, they still empathize despite the costs.

Overall, these results support our proposed model that frame influences target anthropomorphization, which influences empathy and perceived unfairness. We note, however, that mediation analyses such as this are compatible with only one of several models possible, and manipulating the mediator is necessary to determine causal direction. Thus, we continue to test our proposed mechanism using a moderation methods in Studies 3, 4, and 5.

8. Study 3: individual differences in anthropomorphization as moderator of empathy

In addition to generalizing the findings in previous studies using a different context, Study 3 served two main goals. First, we test the anthropomorphization mechanism by examining whether or not it acts as a moderator of our effects of framing on empathy. If framing's effect on empathy is driven by anthropomorphizing the members frame, then people with a high tendency to anthropomorphize non-human entities (such as organizations) should feel more empathy in the organization frame compared with those with a low tendency to do so (Fig. 4).

Our second goal was to examine perceptions of unfairness in a different way: how the two frames impact how we judge two organizations with unequal outcomes—one that suffers and one that does not. Including a comparison non-suffering target, rather than simply presenting one suffering target, was motivated by economists' observations that inequality between organizations is just as, if not more, problematic than inequality between individuals for organizational members and society at large (e.g., Furman & Orszag, 2015; Song et al., 2015), even though people tend to care more about the latter than the former. Given the plight that small businesses faced regarding the inequality in funding during this pandemic, it is important to examine how even perceptions of unfairness could fluctuate depending on how the business is framed. Put together, we test the entire moderated mediation model, in which the effect of framing on empathy is moderated by individual differences in anthropomorphization, and increased empathy increases perceptions of unfairness (Fig. 4).

Given that in real life, small businesses and others refer to these small organizations using the organization or members frame (Pilot Study), in this study, we used a naturalistic way of evaluating the organization by asking them about the target using the label (e.g., Alpha vs. the 20 people) instead of the generic term, "group" as in Studies 1 and 2.

8.1. Method

8.1.1. Participants

We aimed to recruit at least 50 participants per condition (Simmons, 2014; this study was run before Studies 1 and 2), and in total, 318 participants from Mechanical Turk completed the study (39% female, age $M = 33.04$, $SD = 9.82$). We excluded participants who did not follow instructions or pay attention to the prompts (Bai et al., 2017; Friesen, Campbell, & Kay, 2015; Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014). We excluded two suspicious participants who did not properly list their Mechanical Turk ID ("YES" and "MECHANICAL TURK"), whose responses started and finished within a minute of each other, and who had extremely similar demographics. We also excluded one participant who wrote nonsensical responses where we allowed open responses (writing "99,000" and "feel like" in the comments section),¹ leaving 315 responses. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power showed that, with power of $B = 0.80$, we would have sufficiently detected an effect size of $d = 0.32$ or $f = 0.16$.

8.1.2. Procedure

First, participants completed the IDAQ (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2010), a 15-item measure assessing the extent to which people anthropomorphize, or perceive humanness, in non-human targets. Example items include, "To what extent does the average fish have free will?" and "To what extent does the average robot have consciousness?" on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale ($\alpha = 0.92$). One advantage of using this individual difference measure is that this measure is not specific to organizations, which makes it a stronger test of our anthropomorphization mechanism hypothesis.

Participants then read about two co-operatives that produced widget tools, Alpha and Beta, located in Albany and Burlington, respectively. Each co-operative was comprised of 20 workers who together form, own, and operate it. They further read that each organization—because of chance—happened to rebound differently from the economic downturn, and that one co-op now earned more than the other despite producing the same output.

To manipulate framing, we either made the organization or its members salient. For example, in the organization frame, participants read: "Alpha (a co-operative formed by, owned by and consisting of 20 workers) in Albany, NY is an organization that sells widget tools." In contrast, in the constituent members framing, participants read: "There are 20 workers in Albany, NY who sell widget tools. Together, they all formed, own, and operate the co-operative, Alpha" (see SOM for complete materials). Importantly, in both conditions, the information conveyed about the organization name and structure and the total number of members were the same. We subsequently referred to the target as the organization (it) or as its members (they).

After reading the scenario, participants responded to questions about what they read, each answered on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale.

8.1.3. Empathy

The three empathy items from Studies 1 and 2 were adapted to ask about the organization or its members (e.g., "I empathize with [Alpha (in Albany) / the 20 Albany workers]", $\alpha = 0.92$).

8.1.4. Unfairness of outcome and cause of misfortune

Eight items measured perceptions of unfairness of the organizations financial outcomes adapted from Studies 1 and 2 (e.g., "The difference in financial outcome between [Alpha in Albany and Beta in Burlington / 20 Albany workers and 20 Burlington workers] after the economic downturn feels unfair"; $\alpha = 0.91$), and eight items measured the unfairness of

¹ The main effects remain $p < .001$, and the interactions become $p = .026$ for empathy, $p = .113$ for unfairness of outcome, and $p = .461$ for unfairness of cause when including these participants.

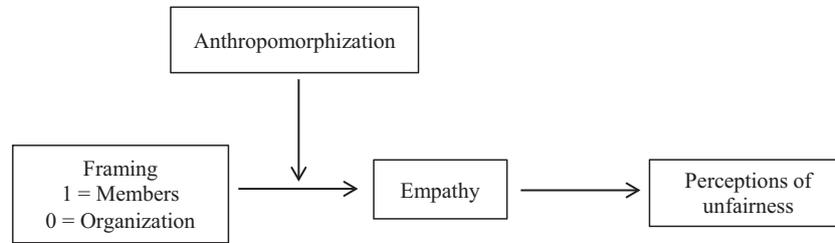


Fig. 4. Organizations elicit less empathy unless people tend to anthropomorphize.

the misfortune adapted from Studies 1 and 2 (e.g., “The fact that the difference in growth of the economy after the recession between Albany and Burlington affected [Alpha in Albany and Beta in Burlington / 20 Albany workers and 20 Burlington workers] differently feels unfair”, $\alpha = 0.93$).

8.1.5. Post-test of manipulation

Because Study 3 included a comparison group (thus perhaps making the study stimuli more cognitively taxing for participants), we did another post-test of our manipulation of framing. We recruited a separate group of participants on Mechanical Turk and randomly assigned them to either the organization frame or the members frame. After reading their respective scenarios, we gauged the extent to which they perceived the entity as an organization or a set of individual members using two items: “Previously, you read about two groups. To what extent do you view them as individuals?” and “To what extent do you view them as organizations?” Our manipulation was successful. Participants in the members condition viewed the groups as more similar to individuals ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.67$) than organizations ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.77$), $F(1,199) = 6.77$, $p = .010$, whereas those in the organization condition viewed the groups as more similar to organizations ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.26$) than individual members ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1,199) = 9.66$, $p = .002$.

Within the study, we also asked participants at the end of the survey the total number of people in Alpha. 96% of participants answered “20,” indicating that participants overwhelmingly understood that the company in its entirety consisted of 20 people.

8.2. Results

8.2.1. Empathy

We entered frame (coded 0 = members, 1 = organization) and IDAQ as the IVs, with empathy as the DV. As predicted, participants felt more empathy for the members frame ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.26$) than with the organization frame ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.70$), $F(1,313) = 28.63$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.60$. There was no main effect of anthropomorphization, $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.07$, $t = 1.27$, $p = .204$.

These results were qualified by an interaction, $B = 0.27$, $SE = 0.13$, $\beta = 0.16$, $t = 2.08$, $p = .038$ (Fig. 5). Using a spotlight analyses at plus and minus 1 SD (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch Jr, & McClelland, 2013), we found that when participants have a high tendency to anthropomorphize, the empathy gap between the organization frame and the members frame was smaller ($B = -0.57$, $SE = 0.24$, $\beta = -0.18$, $t = -2.44$, $p = .015$) than when participants have a low tendency to anthropomorphize, $B = -1.27$, $SE = 0.24$, $\beta = -0.41$, $t = -5.31$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, anthropomorphization was positively associated with empathy for the organization frame ($t = 2.09$, $p = .039$) but not for the members frame, $t = -0.70$, $p = .487$.

8.2.2. Unfairness of outcome and cause of misfortune

Replicating our previous findings, participants perceived the outcome as more unfair in the members frame ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.50$) than in the organization frame ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.5052$), $F(1,313) = 8.77$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.35$. In addition, participants with a high tendency to

anthropomorphize were more likely to perceive the different outcomes as unfair ($B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.29$, $t = 5.31$, $p < .001$). There was no significant interaction between framing and anthropomorphization for perceived unfairness of outcome ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.13$, $\beta = 0.09$, $t = 1.21$, $p = .227$).

Participants also perceived the cause of misfortune as more unfair in the members frame ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.62$) than in the organization frame ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.58$), $F(1,313) = 7.46$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.32$. In addition, participants with a high tendency to anthropomorphize were more likely to perceive the cause of misfortune as unfair, $B = 0.37$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.29$, $t = 5.36$, $p < .001$. There was no significant interaction between framing and anthropomorphization for perceived unfairness of cause of misfortune, $B = 0.07$, $SE = 0.14$, $\beta = 0.04$, $t = 0.53$, $p = .597$.

8.2.3. Moderated mediation analyses

To capture the full model, we entered target as the IV, empathy as the mediator, anthropomorphization as the moderator, and unfairness (of outcome and cause of misfortune, separately) as the DVs. Using a bootstrap model in the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 7; Hayes, 2013) with 5000 samples, results revealed that when participants have a high (vs. low) tendency to anthropomorphize, the empathy gap between the organization frame and the members frame was smaller (above). Additionally, the more participants empathized with the target, the more they perceived unfairness in the outcome, $B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 9.96$, $p < .001$, and the cause of misfortune, $B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 9.41$, $p < .001$.

For the indirect pathways at $\pm 1SD$ of the moderator, results revealed that the indirect effect was larger at lower levels of anthropomorphization, $b = 0.61$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI = [0.3347, 0.9194], than at higher levels of anthropomorphization, $b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.0909, 0.4468] for outcome unfairness. This pattern also emerged for cause of misfortune unfairness, in which the indirect effect was larger at lower levels of anthropomorphization, $b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI = [0.3416, 0.9262], than at higher levels of anthropomorphization, $b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.0944, 0.4563]. The overall moderated mediation model was supported for both outcome, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.0181, 0.2617] and cause of misfortune, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.0229, 0.2682].

8.3. Discussion

Study 3 conceptually replicated the core findings from previous studies. Participants empathized more with the members frame than with the organization frame, and a higher tendency to anthropomorphize non-human entities increased empathy and perceived unfairness. Supporting our reasoning that anthropomorphizing the organization underlies the framing effect on empathy, the interaction results further showed that the framing effect on empathy was smaller among those high in the tendency to anthropomorphize. This means that organizations need not always face a lack of empathy from others when it suffers, and that individual differences matter. Furthermore, as empathy increased, perceived unfairness also increased. We conducted a replication of Study 3 using a similar design (Supplementary study S1), and the results mirrored those of the original.

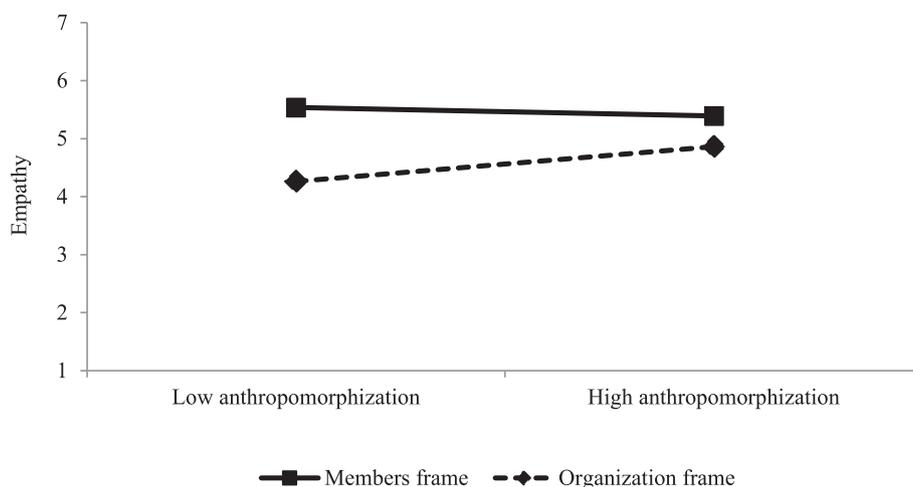


Fig. 5. Organization (vs. members) frame elicits less empathy, but this difference attenuates for those high on anthropomorphization. Y-axis runs from 1 to 7; expanded for clarity. Error bars $\pm 1SE$.

Despite the main effects of framing and anthropomorphization on perceived unfairness being statistically significant and the overall moderated mediation model supported, the interaction effects were not. One possible explanation is that anthropomorphization has a very strong influence on fairness appraisal, from everyday consumer decisions to exigent intergroup judgments (Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, & Castano, 2012; Kwak, Puzakova, & Rocereto, 2015; Opatow, 1990). Consequently, it had an additive effect with the members frame on unfairness, which is why there are two main effects but no significant interaction.

Overall, these results support our theorizing that framing influences empathy through anthropomorphization, and to the extent that anthropomorphization and empathy increase, so does perceived unfairness. These results also help elucidate an important societal phenomenon: why organizational inequality receives less attention and concern compared to inequality between individuals, despite the larger social and economic costs on society and its citizens (e.g., Furman & Orszag, 2015; Song et al., 2015; Sutton & Callahan, 1987). By structuring the stimuli such that the suffering target is compared to another one, we reveal that perhaps people care less about organizational inequality than individual inequality because people imbue organizations with fewer human characteristics. Given the importance of organizational inequality and the havoc that it can wreak on society, in Study 4, we investigate how we can increase the anthropomorphization of organizational entities.

9. Study 4: restoring the human component to organizations

Studies 1–3 demonstrated that the members (vs. organization) frame increased the salience of the humanness of the target, empathy, and perceptions of unfairness. Study 4 examined whether making salient the members in the *organization* frame would lead to an increase in empathy. That is, despite presenting a suffering target using the organization frame, if we reminded participants of the individuals that comprise the organization, they would feel more empathy for it than if we did not. Doing so provides further evidence that anthropomorphization is driving the effect of framing on empathy, thus showing a possible road to increasing empathy for an organization even when it is not normally humanized.

To test this possibility, we told all participants about two organizations and their respective owners using either the organization or members frame. We then asked participants in the organization frame to write about the target as the organization and those in the members frame to write about the target as the constituent members. Crucially, a third set of participants were assigned to the organization frame, but we asked them to write about the target as the members (Fig. 6). We

predicted that people would feel less empathy when they describe the target as the organization (“*organization-organization prompt*”) rather than as its members (“*member-members prompt*”). However, if bringing the humanness to the forefront increases empathy, then the difference in empathy between the two conditions should minimize when participants describe the organization as its members (“*organization-members prompt*”).

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants

We aimed to recruit at least 50 participants in each cell (Simmons, 2014; this study was run before Studies 1 and 2). In total, we recruited 249 participants on Mechanical Turk (45% female, age $M = 34.61$, $SD = 12.00$). Because focus on the writing was important to the manipulation, we excluded participants who did not complete the study in one uninterrupted session, who did not follow instructions, or did not pay attention (Bai et al., 2017; Friesen et al., 2014; Friesen et al., 2015). Three participants were excluded for admitting to not paying attention (one participant reported completing the study while in a sports bar drinking and watching soccer, one reported taking multiple breaks from the study, one copied and pasted our scenario into the writing manipulation), leaving 246 participants.² A sensitivity analysis using G*Power showed that, with power of $B = 0.80$, we would have sufficiently detected an effect size of $d = 0.25$.

9.1.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned into one of three conditions (Fig. 6). They first read a similar scenario from Study 3 about two organizations and their owners: Aaron who owned Alpha and Brian who owned Beta. Both organizations and their owners used to sell the same number of widgets and make the same amount per day. However, an economic downturn affected them differently, and now Aaron and Alpha sell less and make less money than Brian and Beta (see SOM for full scenario).

9.1.3. Organization-organization prompt condition

In the first condition, all participants read about the target in the organization frame (“Alpha and Beta are two different organizations that both sell widget tools. The owners are Aaron and Brian, respectively.”). After reading the scenario, we induced participants to continue

² The results continue to be statistically significant in the same direction even after including these participants.

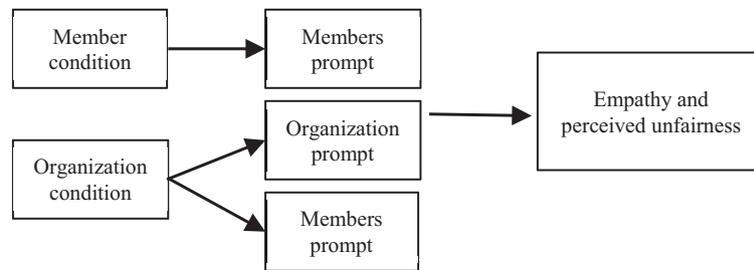


Fig. 6. Flow of Study 4.

thinking of the target in the organization frame by asking participants to “use your imagination and generate three words to describe Alpha’s outcome.”

9.1.4. Member-members prompt condition

In the second condition, all participants read about the target in the members frame (“Aaron and Brian are the owners of the organizations, Alpha and Beta, respectively. They both sell widget tools.”). After reading the scenario, we induced participants to continue thinking of the target in the members frame by asking participants to “use your imagination and generate three words to describe Aaron’s and his employees’ outcome.”

9.1.5. Organization-members prompt condition

In the third condition, participants read the same scenario as the organization frame condition. However, after reading the scenario, rather than inducing participants to continue thinking of the target in the organization frame, we reminded participants that the target consists of its constituent members by asking participants to “use your imagination and generate three words to describe Aaron’s and his employees’ outcome.”

9.2. Measures

Participants subsequently answered the same questions from Study 3 assessing empathy ($\alpha = 0.90$) and unfairness of outcome ($\alpha = 0.91$) and unfairness of cause of misfortune ($\alpha = 0.92$) regarding either Alpha or Aaron.³

9.3. Results

9.3.1. Manipulation check

We first examined whether our manipulation was effective. An RA blind to our hypothesis coded the written responses using a point system. Words that described human beings, such as “doubtful” were assigned 3 points, and words that did not describe human beings, such as “bankruptcy” were assigned 1 point. Words that could be reasonably be used to describe both human beings and non-human beings, such as “slow” were assigned 2 points. The results supported its efficacy, $F(2, 243) = 43.63, p < .001, d = 1.38$. Participants in the organization-organization prompt condition ($M = 1.90, SD = 0.64$) was least likely to use human terms to describe the target, which differed significantly from the members-members prompt ($M = 2.49, SD = 0.46, t(243) = 7.00, p < .001, d = 1.09$, and the organization-members prompt ($M = 2.64, SD = 0.51, t(243) = 6.81, p < .001, d = 1.06$).

9.3.2. Empathy

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on empathy, $F(2, 243) = 6.39, p = .002, d = 0.46$ (Fig. 7). Supporting our prediction, a

contrast test revealed that participants felt similar empathy in the members-members prompt condition ($M = 5.43, SD = 1.43$) as in the organization-members prompt condition ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.15, t(243) = 0.29, p = .769$). As expected, participants felt less empathy in the organization-organization prompt ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.42$) condition compared to the members-members prompt condition, $t(243) = -2.93, p = .004$, and to the organization-members prompt, $t(243) = -3.25, p = .001$.

9.3.3. Unfairness of outcome

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of framing on how unfair people perceived the outcome to be, $F(2, 243) = 3.88, p = .022, d = 0.39$ (Fig. 7). A contrast test revealed that participants rated the outcome in the members-members ($M = 4.01, SD = 1.44$) and the organization-members ($M = 3.98, SD = 1.36$) conditions as similarly unfair, $t(237) = 0.14, p = .890$. However, they were less likely to find the outcome unfair in the organization-organization prompt condition ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.40$) compared to both the members-members prompt, $t(243) = -2.48, p = .014$, and the organization-members prompt conditions, $t(243) = -2.36, p = .019$.

9.3.4. Unfairness of cause of misfortune

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of framing on how unfair people perceived the cause of the misfortune to be, $F(2, 243) = 4.26, p = .015, d = 0.41$ (Fig. 7). A contrast test revealed that participants rated the cause of the misfortune as similarly unfair in the members-members prompt ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.60$) and the organization-members ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.44$) conditions, $t(243) = 0.21, p = .834$. However, they perceived the cause of the misfortune as less unfair in the organization-organization prompt condition ($M = 3.30, SD = 1.44$) compared to both the members-members prompt condition, $t(243) = -2.63, p = .009$, and the organization-members prompt condition, $t(243) = -2.43, p = .016$.

9.4. Discussion

Replicating previous findings, we found that the members frame elicited more empathy than the organization frame. Additionally, the intervention method continues to support our anthropomorphization as mechanism narrative. Although people feel less empathy in the organization frame than the members frame, encouraging participants to anthropomorphize it by making the members salient restored empathy. Furthermore, organizational inequality is a pervasive issue, and this study builds on our previous ones by demonstrating how people may be induced to care more about inequality between organizations when there is inequality. By giving reminders of the organization’s members—forcing participants to think back to how organizations are composed of its individual members—people feel as much empathy for it as they do for the members frame.

10. Study 5: the causal role of empathy on perceived unfairness

So far, we have shown that a members (vs. organization) frame

³ As exploratory items, we also measured perceptions of negative emotions experienced. We have placed these measures and analyses in the SOM.

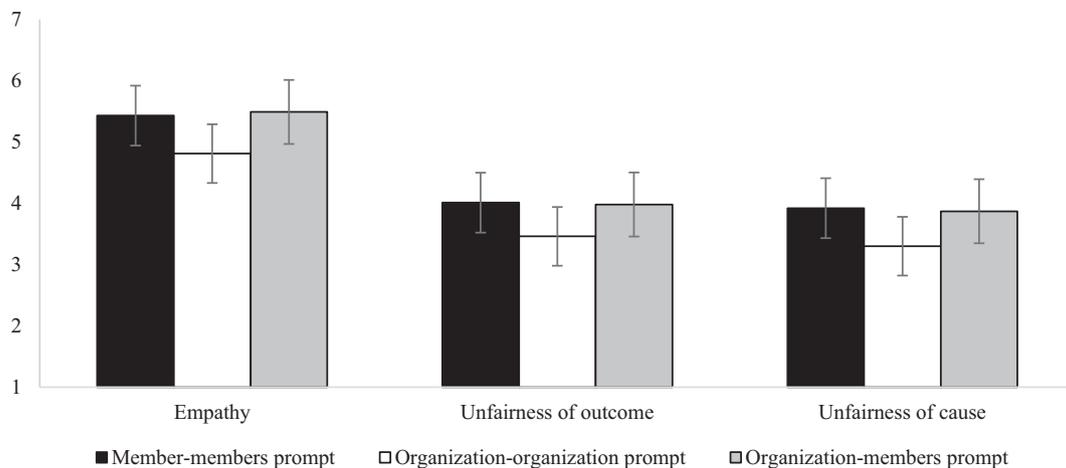


Fig. 7. When participants are reminded of members that make up the organization, empathy and judgments of unfairness increase in the organization frame. Error bars $\pm 1SE$.

causally increases empathy, which subsequently impacts perceived unfairness. However, we have yet to test the proposed causal link from empathy to unfairness. Given that perceived unfairness can cause increased outrage (e.g., Pillutla & Murnighan, 1996) and perceived fairness can reduce anger (e.g., Dalbert, 2002), Study 5 directly examines the causal path from empathy to perceived unfairness using the blockage design (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). We used a timely event: the impact of the coronavirus on the restaurant industry.

In a blockage design, if a psychological process (empathy) is blocked in a third condition and this blockage attenuates the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (frame and unfairness), there is evidence that the proposed psychological process is driving the relationship. Thus, following this prescription, we had three conditions in this study: the members frame in which we encouraged empathy, and the organization frame and the members-blockage condition in which we encouraged participants to suppress empathy. We predicted that, while there would be differences in empathy and perceived unfairness in the first and second frames, the differences would attenuate between the second and third frames. We preregistered this study at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=7ua2s3>.

10.1. Method

10.1.1. Participants

A power analysis using G*Power revealed that at least 576 participants were needed to detect a small to medium effect size with three conditions. In total, 554 Prolific Academic participants completed the study online. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power showed that with power of $B = 0.80$, we would have sufficiently detected an effect size of $f = 0.13$ or $d = 0.26$.

10.1.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the members frame, organization frame, or members-blockage condition. We manipulated empathy based on Cameron et al. (2019). In the members frame condition, participants were encouraged to be empathetic. Specifically, they were instructed to, as they are reading, “try and feel compassion for the people in the story. Be sensitive to what they are going through. Focus on how they would feel and what you can do to help.” In the organization frame and members-blockage conditions, participants were encouraged to suppress their empathy. Specifically, they were instructed to, as they are reading “to be objective and not to get caught up in any emotions you may feel. Treat this as a case study. Distance yourself and simply take note of the factual information in the

story.” We predicted that, while the difference in empathy and unfairness would surface between the members and organization frame (as in previous studies), this difference would attenuate or disappear when comparing the organization frame and the members-blockage conditions.

After receiving these instructions, participants read about the three owner-operators that comprised an organization called The Spotted Garden. In the organization frame, participants read that it is “a restaurant that services local fare like burgers, salads, and soups, owned and operated by Ben, Michelle, and Will. Everyone plans the future of the café, cooks, and serves the customers.” In the members frame, participants read that, “Ben, Michelle, and Will own and operate The Spotted Garden, a restaurant which serves local fare like burgers, salads, and soups. They all plan the future of the café, cook, and serve the customers.”

Next, participants read that because of recent coronavirus events, the target reduced the hours of operation and that it only does take out now, making it difficult to pay the bills, and it may have to go into debt before things get better (see SOM for complete materials). Finally, participants answered the empathy and perceived unfairness items from Study 2.

10.2. Results

10.2.1. Empathy

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on empathy, $F(2,551) = 16.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$ (Fig. 8). Planned contrast tests revealed that the members frame ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.32$) elicited more empathy than the organization frame ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(551) = 5.62$, $p < .001$, replicating previous studies. Importantly, this difference remained when comparing the members frame to the members-blockage condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(551) = 3.42$, $p = .001$. Participants also felt more empathy in the members-blockage than in the organization frame condition, $t(551) = 2.23$, $p = .026$.

10.2.2. Perceived unfairness

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on unfairness, $F(2,551) = 15.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$ (Fig. 8). Planned contrast tests revealed that participants perceived more unfairness in the members frame ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 0.92$) than the organization frame ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(551) = 4.77$, $p < .001$, replicating previous studies. Importantly, this difference remained when comparing the members frame to the members-blockage ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(551) = 4.70$, $p < .001$. There was no difference in unfairness between the organization frame and the members-blockage condition, $t(551) = 0.109$, $p = .913$.

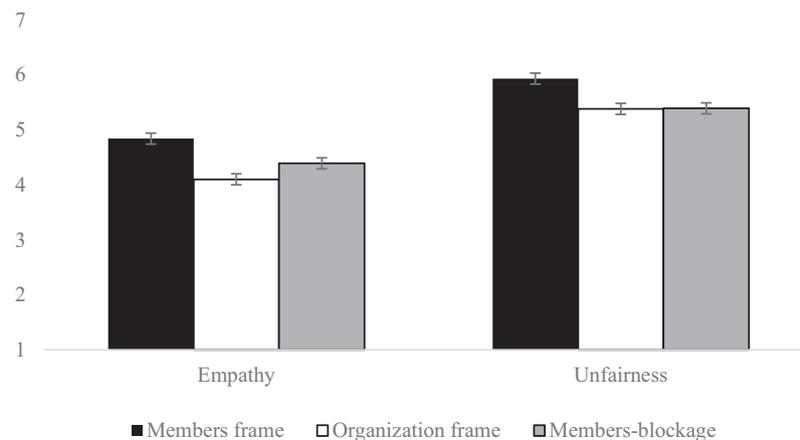


Fig. 8. When participants are induced to suppress empathy in the members frame, they feel the same amount of empathy and perceive the same unfairness as the organization frame. Error bars $\pm 1SE$.

10.3. Discussion

Our results provided causal support for the part of our proposed model that framing influences empathy, which subsequently influences perceived unfairness. These results further build on past research by showing that empathy can influence perceptions of identical suffering. Additionally, given the timeliness and salience of our context in which people generally feel sorry for small businesses, our test is conservative in elucidating circumstances under which people perceive unfair treatment of small businesses during social and economic upheaval. In our last study, we examined an important consequence of anthropomorphization and empathy: helping behavior.

11. Study 6: downstream consequences—helping behavior

Restaurants have been hit especially hard during the crisis, and concerns for them have been uneven, from receiving much empathy (e.g., [Severson & Yaffe-Bellany, 2020](#)) to being viewed as merely a vehicle for its host city's economy (e.g., [Steinhauer & Wells, 2020](#)). We thus continued to examine the influence of framing directly in the context of the coronavirus pandemic in Study 6. Beyond placing it in a timely context, Study 5 extended our previous studies in three theoretical respects. First, to further test the robustness of our proposed mechanism, we use a different measure of anthropomorphization. Instead of using a scale which captures anthropomorphization from a cognitively oriented perspective ([Waytz, Morewedge, et al., 2010](#); e.g., having a set of beliefs), we used a scale which captures it by measuring traits that animals and machines lack ([Bastian & Haslam, 2010](#)).

Second, we further address other potential alternative explanations. Groups can vary in entitativity (how close-knit a group is; [Campbell, 1958](#)), competence, likeability, and abundance of resources. Entitativity of a group ([Smith, Faro, & Burson, 2012](#)) and likeability of an organization ([Au & Ng, 2020](#); [Burson-Marsteller, 2014](#)) can increase empathy, whereas group competence (e.g., [Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011](#)) and organizational abundance of resource could reduce empathy ([Brief & Smith-Crowe, 2016](#)). We thus include these four other factors as potential mediators in this study.

Lastly, we investigated a behavioral consequence of framing: helping

behavior. Specifically, we tested whether, as the members frame increases anthropomorphization and empathy, people would subsequently expend more effort to help it. To investigate this question, we asked participants to write a call for help for a struggling target framed either as the organization or its members.⁴ We predicted that framing would influence anthropomorphization, which would increase empathy and subsequently spend more effort on a task intended to help the target ([Fig. 10](#)). We preregistered this study at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=my988e>.

11.1. Method

11.1.1. Participants

A power analysis using G*Power with $B = 0.80$ and effect size of $d = 0.28$ from Study 2 in which we measured anthropomorphization showed that 404 participants would be needed to detect an effect. In total, 403 participants on Prolific Academic completed this study (51% female, 1% non-binary, age $M = 28.91$, $SD = 9.83$). By the time we ran Study 6, an article with a similar manipulation had been published ([Tang et al., 2020](#)). We thus excluded participants who believed that they have done a similar study before. Based on our preregistration, we excluded four participants who reported that they have done “this exact same study before” or a “very similar study before,” leaving 399 participants. Including all participants did not change the statistical significance of the results.⁵ A sensitivity analysis using G*Power showed that, with power of $B = 0.80$, we would have sufficiently detected an effect size of $d = 0.28$.

11.1.2. Procedure

Participants read about the scenario from Study 5 on the Spotted Garden, which was owned and operated by Ben, Michelle, and William. They were randomly assigned to the organization or members frame condition (without any empathy manipulations as in Study 5).

11.1.3. Anthropomorphization

We captured anthropomorphization using the 12-item human nature and human uniqueness scale ([Bastian & Haslam, 2010](#)), which measures

⁴ We also considered measuring total time spent writing, but participants on online studies take breaks or experience distractions—which several participants in this study actually did, and thus we believed that the number of words would be a more ideal measure of effort. As part of our instructions, we told participants that the more they write the more likely their letter would engender help.

⁵ The p value for anthropomorphization remains at $p < .001$, the p value for empathy drops to $p = .028$, and the p value for effort increases to $p = .207$.

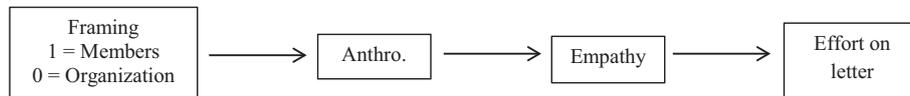


Fig. 10. Members frame will increase anthropomorphization of the target, increasing empathy and subsequently effort on letter.

the extent to which people attribute or deprive a target of human characteristics. These include attributes that distinguish humans from other animals, such as higher cognition, and those seen as features of humans that distinguish them from automatons, such as warmth. We coded the scores such that higher scores indicated stronger anthropomorphization of the target. We adapted the measures for this context (e.g., “In general, to what extent do you feel that [target is]:” “interpersonally warm,” “refined and cultured”). Although this scale has two dimensions, we averaged the 12 items to form one index of anthropomorphism, as both dimensions capture the extent to which an entity is attributed human characteristics, reliability for the combined scale was high ($\alpha = 0.81$), and past research (e.g., Ruttan & Lucas, 2018; Tang et al., 2020) has combined them due to high combined reliability.

11.1.4. Empathy

Participants also indicated how much empathy they felt for the target using the three items from Study 2 (e.g., “I empathize with the group”, $\alpha = 0.85$).

11.1.5. Letter effort

Lastly, to measure effortful behavior, we told participants that we “always like to know how best to frame a call for help in cases like these.” They were asked to “please write a call for help, like for volunteers or donations” for the target, which may include saying “a little bit about why people and governmental agencies should help.” We told participants that, although they could write as much as they wanted, the more they wrote and the more detailed the letter, the more likely the call would be to engender help (see SOM for full instructions). We measured effort through the length of the call for help by counting the total number of words that each participant wrote.

11.2. Alternative explanations

11.2.1. Entitativity

Following Tang et al. (2020), we used nine items to measure entitativity (that they took from past entitativity research by Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000; Waytz & Young, 2012). Example items include, “How diverse or not diverse would you say the group is?” and “To what extent do you think there would be a uniform identity within the group?” (see SOM for all items; $\alpha = 0.73$).

11.2.2. Competence

We measured competence by asking participants how “competent,” “capable,” and “coordinated” they would perceive the target to be ($\alpha = 0.87$).

11.2.3. Liking

We measured positive attitude towards the target using the items, “How much do you like” and “How positive do you feel towards” the target ($r = 0.82$, $p < .001$).

11.2.4. Resources

We measured perceived amount of resources available using the item, “In your opinion, how much resources do you think the group has?”

11.3. Results

11.3.1. Anthropomorphization

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of frame on anthropomorphization, in which the members frame ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 0.69$) was

anthropomorphized more than the organization frame ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.74$), $F(1,397) = 21.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.46$.⁶

11.3.2. Empathy

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of frame on empathy, in which participants felt more empathy for the members frame ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.04$) than for the organization frame ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.97$), $F(1, 397) = 3.85$, $p = .050$, $d = 0.20$.

11.3.3. Letter effort

Although participants in the member frame wrote a longer call for help ($M = 85.55$, $SD = 56.36$) than those in the organization frame ($M = 78.55$, $SD = 50.79$), difference was not statistically significant, $F(1, 397) = 1.69$, $p = .194$.

11.4. Alternative explanations

11.4.1. Entitativity, competence, liking

There was no main effect of frame on entitativity ($M_{members} = 4.80$, $SD_{members} = 0.74$, $M_{org} = 4.86$, $SD_{org} = 0.67$), $F(1, 397) = 0.61$, $p = .435$; on perceived competence, ($M_{members} = 5.07$, $SD_{members} = 1.01$, $M_{org} = 5.13$, $SD_{org} = 0.88$), $F(1,397) = 0.41$, $p = .522$; or on liking, ($M_{members} = 5.13$, $SD_{members} = 1.12$, $M_{org} = 5.25$, $SD_{org} = 1.07$), $F(1,397) = 1.30$, $p = .256$.

11.4.2. Resources

There was a main effect of frame on resources, in which the members frame ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.14$) was viewed as having less resources than the organization frame ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.12$), $F(1,397) = 10.07$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.32$.

11.4.3. Mediation for empathy

We first attempted to replicate our results from previous studies, in which the effect of framing on empathy was mediated by anthropomorphization. We also attempted to show that these results were not sufficiently explained by other alternative explanations we measured. We used a bootstrap model in the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) with 5000 samples. We ran three models.

In the first model, we entered frame as the IV, anthropomorphization as the mediator, and empathy as the DV. We chose this particular model based on the same reasoning as Study 2 (attribution of human characteristics to a victim increases empathy). Results replicated those of previous studies, such that the members framing increased anthropomorphization (above), and anthropomorphization increased empathy, $b = 0.67$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 10.70$, $p < .001$. The indirect pathway was significant, 95% CI = [0.1255, 0.3320]. These results held in the second model, in which we entered the four alternative explanations as covariates, $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.0835, 0.2632]. Importantly, anthropomorphization continued to mediate the pathway from frame to empathy in the third model when we entered the alternative explanation

⁶ We conducted supplemental analyses on the two subscales, human uniqueness and human nature, separately. We find similar results. Framing had an effect on both subdimensions, although the effect size on human uniqueness ($F(1, 402) = 16.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.40$) had a stronger effect than the effect on human nature ($F(1, 397) = 8.09$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.28$). Both human uniqueness ($r = 0.468$) and between human nature ($r = 0.302$) were correlated with empathy, though the correlations were significantly different, $z = 3.63$, $p < .001$. We discuss further what this results may imply in the General Discussion.

variables as parallel mediators instead, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.0669, 0.2418]. None of the other four alternative explanation variables mediated the pathway: entitativity, $b = 0.001$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.0127, 0.0148]; competence, $b = -0.005$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.0305, 0.0135]; liking, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [-0.0790, 0.0205]; resources, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = [-0.0098, 0.0538].

11.4.4. Mediation for letter effort

We used a bootstrap model in the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 6; Hayes, 2013) with 5000 samples. We entered framing as the IV, anthropomorphization as the first mediator (M1), empathy as the second mediator (M2), and letter effort as the DV. By manipulating target framing, IV necessarily causes M. However, another model swapping the positions of M1 and M2 is also possible. We chose this particular model as past research has shown that attributing human characteristics to a victim increases empathy for them (e.g., Opatow, 1990; Waytz, Morwedge, et al., 2010).

Results showed that although the pathway from frame to anthropomorphization to effort was significant, $b = 5.70$, $SE = 2.03$, 95% CI = [2.3713, 10.2212], and the correlation between empathy and effort was significant, $r = 0.12$, $p = .018$ (and the pathway from frame to empathy to effort was significant, $b = -1.51$, $SE = 0.93$, 95% CI = [-3.6660, -0.0925]), the overall serial mediation pathway was not significant, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.62$, 95% CI = [-1.2453, 1.2194] (Fig. 11). Instead, it appears that anthropomorphization mediated the effect of framing on empathy and letter effort separately (Fig. 12).

11.5. Discussion

Study 6 replicated our central findings: framing the target as its members (vs. organization) elicited more empathy due to increased target anthropomorphization. This effect does not appear to be sufficiently explained by other factors that may be associated with an organization frame. However, although trending in the predicted direction, the effect of frame on helping effort was not statistically significant. This may be because of the context—small businesses, especially those that depend heavily on human-to-human interaction, such as restaurants, hairdressers, and bed-and-breakfasts, have been pummeled, as people are keen to avoid situations in which contagion is likely (e.g., Badger & Parlapiano, 2020; Schenke, 2020). Given that the corresponding situation in real life is dire, people may have had a strong desire to help them stay afloat, and thus worked hard on letter writing across the two conditions.

Additionally, we did not find the expected serial mediation, even though one might have expected that, given that the significant correlations between each of the steps (framing to anthropomorphization, anthropomorphization to empathy, and empathy to effort), and past research suggesting anthropomorphization and empathy increasing helping behaviors (Andrighetto et al., 2014; Batson et al., 2009; Decety & Cowell, 2015; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016), serial mediation would obtain. Instead, anthropomorphization separately mediated empathy and effort.

Statistically, the lack of serial mediation implies that the shared variance between anthropomorphization and empathy and the shared

variance between anthropomorphization and effort do not overlap (MacKinnon & Fairchild, 2009). The dilution of the variance overlap can then lead to a nonsignificant serial mediation. This statistical outcome may have been driven by two possibilities. First, despite sharing the same proximal cause of anthropomorphization, emotion-based empathy has been driving perceptions (Study 1), whereas effort expenditure is based on calibrating how much help the victim actually needs. A second possibility may be contextual. At the time of this study, the U.S. and Canada, countries where these participants reside, was still in the midst of the pandemic. Given the recent news about large corporations taking loans intended for small and micro businesses (Silver-Greenberg, Enrich, Drucker, & Cowley, 2020), and the toll that the pandemic has wrecked on the dining industry (Severson & Yaffe-Bellany, 2020), people may have wanted to expend more effort on helping the target, framing aside. Overall, however, our results showed that the members frame increased target anthropomorphization, and to the extent that people attributed more humanness to the target, they also expended more effort to help it.

12. General discussion

Small businesses, such as local cafes, bookshops, co-operatives, and start-ups, are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of structural changes, like economic downturns, natural disasters, and pandemics. Despite their being collections of members, our experiments show that shifts in framing—the same information presented either as the organization or its members—change how people anthropomorphize and empathize with organizational entities. Six experiments with student and both national and international adult samples revealed that a target evoked more empathy when it was framed as its members rather than as the organization itself. Through moderation and mediation designs, we also showed that increased empathy was in turn due to increased anthropomorphization of the target. Furthermore, although participants were able to vicariously experience (affective empathy) and explicitly mentalize (cognitive empathy) what the organizational target is feeling in both frames, the effect was strongest for compassionate empathy—care and concern for others, and only compassionate empathy and affective empathy mediated the effect of framing on perceived unfairness, suggesting that felt reactions play a central role. Other alternative explanations—how identifiable the target was, expected effort of helping, anticipated stress, entitativity, competence, liking, resources—did not sufficiently explain the effect.

Although ample past research has revealed empathy differences between two targets, such as a group and an individual (e.g., Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Loewenstein, 2003), our work reveals how people anthropomorphize and empathize with the *same* target when it is *framed* differently. We scrutinized and elucidated the mechanism of the framing effect, differentiated between types of empathy, and showed that organizations do *not* invariably receive little empathy as past research seems to suggest. Increased anthropomorphization and empathy subsequently influenced perceived unfairness and helping behavior. Our work thus substantially broadens the theoretical and empirical scope of the initial discoveries by Cooley et al. (2017), and answers a key set of unanswered questions regarding psychological process, behavioral outcomes, and real-world issues.

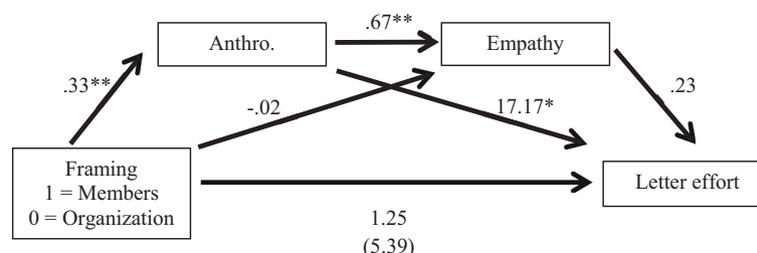


Fig. 11. Anthropomorphization mediates frame to effort, but the overall serial mediation pathway was not significant.

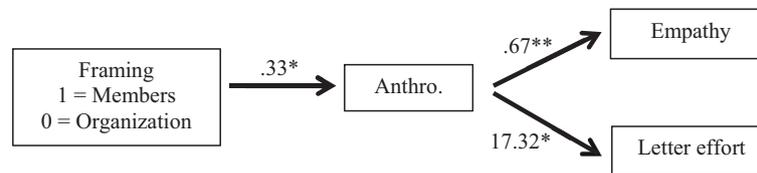


Fig. 12. Anthropomorphization mediates the effect of framing on empathy and letter effort.

12.1. Implications

Our findings on differences in empathy have important implications for inequality and understanding why people may care less about inequality between organizations than between individuals. Inequality has been called the “defining issue of our time” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2013; United Nations, 2016). Despite the significant role that institutional unfairness plays in establishing and perpetuating inequality (Barth, Bryson, Davis, & Freeman, 2014; Card et al., 2013; Furman & Orszag, 2015; Song et al., 2015), people dedicate more attention to unfairness between individuals than between organizations. Inequality has been stark during this pandemic, when small businesses have less access to funding than large corporations. When considering how to increase empathy for small businesses, outrage for this type of inequality, and actionable policies to help them, one possible pathway may be to portray the business not as the organization, but as its members.

Our supplemental analyses from Study 5 also speaks to the mind perception literature. Our results that perceived unfairness follows both anthropomorphization and empathy are also consistent with the theorizing within the mind perception literature, which suggests that moral judgments arise from both an experiential mind and empathic inclinations, and not simply the former (Schein & Gray, 2018). Indeed, when we experimentally suppressed empathy, perceptions of unfairness also dropped despite framing the target as its members. Additionally, though different from mind perception, there are similarities between human uniqueness and experiential mind (ability to feel), and human nature and agentic mind (ability to act). The supplemental results suggest that framing has a stronger effect on experiential mind than on agentic mind, such that the members frame increases humanization of the organization through perceived ability to emote. They also suggest that the experiential (vs. agentic) aspect of anthropomorphization plays a significantly stronger role in eliciting empathy for organizations. Past research has focused on the experiential mind as the seat of victimhood and suffering, but our results show that even an agentic mind may lend itself to care and concern (consistent with Cooley et al., 2017 showing that both agency and experience increase sympathy). This is reasonable, as agency is also a feature of living beings that allows people to perceive some form of life in an entity.

12.2. Limitations and future directions

Although our findings consistently point to increased anthropomorphization and empathy in the members (vs. organization) frame, we should also interpret our results in light of our limitations. First, our organizations were hypothetical. One advantage with using hypothetical organizations is that we can divorce our effects from participants’ preconceptions about an existing organization. However, field studies would provide richer evidence for our findings. In the real world, for example, how people respond to bailouts of organizations may depend on how the government describes the bailouts. If the government emphasizes the constituent members it is helping, the public may be more amenable to the bailouts than if it emphasizes the organizations it was helping.

Second, our research was primarily motivated by how people empathize with small businesses, and our organizations all had a small

number of members that could all be identified. It is unclear whether our results would hold for much larger organizations. It may be easier to elicit empathy in the members frame for small and micro organizations, such as start-ups with a few constituent members, because the individuals are naturally more salient, and because the facelessness of hyper-organizations may easily overshadow its constituent members. However, if the organization is entitative, organization size may matter less because of its singular identity (Smith et al., 2012; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). Future research may examine how size affects the effect.

Finally, future work may examine other ways in which people might humanize organizations, such as mascots. Mascots such as Geico’s gecko or Disney’s Mickey Mouse are especially human-like, and may therefore increase anthropomorphization, which may in turn increase empathy. Organizations for which people generally lack empathy (e.g., banking firms) could therefore engender more empathy if they use a mascot, although likely only if people do not see it as a gauche attempt to engender goodwill.

13. Conclusion

Do we feel worse for “an organization comprised of people” or “people who comprise an organization?” Although these frames are informationally equivalent, our experiments reveal that they are not psychologically so. Framing an organization through the members frame increases perceived humanness and empathic feelings after it suffers misfortune. Our research was originally motivated by the vulnerability of small businesses. Particularly during a pandemic, if we care about the survival of small businesses, we should think about how these organizations are framed. This finding not only provides practical implications for the suffering of organizations, but also reveals the flexibility with which the human mind understands organizations.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104147>.

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