

## Special Issue: Hidden Gems in Media Studies

## The Benefits of Bad Events for Narrative Characters: *Limits of Symhedonia* as a Hidden Gem

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay proposes that Royzman and Rozin's (2006) article on the differential role of prior emotional attachment in sympathy and sympathetic joy is a hidden gem for Communication scholars. Royzman and Rozin's studies demonstrate that individuals feel sympathy for negative events that happen to both close others and strangers, but symhedonia (sympathetic joy, or happiness for the good fortune of others) depends more strongly on a prior positive relationship with the person. These findings have implications for understanding empathy and identification with narrative characters, and are relevant to studies of emotional flow and narrative structure.

**KEYWORDS**

sympathy, empathy, narrative, identification, relational closeness

There is a great deal of wonderful work in the field of communication and the area of media studies. However, the paper that I consider to be a hidden gem was one from outside of our field. It is an article by Edward B. Royzman and Paul Rozin entitled, *Limits of Symhedonia: The Differential Role of Prior Emotional Attachment in Sympathy and Sympathetic Joy* (published in the journal *Emotion* in 2006). This work addresses a more specific topic than some of the broader theoretical and methodological papers that have been highlighted in the Hidden Gems series, but it is a paper that I have repeatedly recommended to people interested in the psychology of narratives and character identification.<sup>1</sup>

The paper focuses on the distinctions between sympathy, described by Royzman and Rozin as an emotional state evoked by the misfortune of another, and symhedonia (or sympathetic joy), feelings of happiness evoked by another's good fortune. As noted in the article, sympathy is often treated as a neutral term, but its dominant meaning is for sympathy with negative events; in everyday conversation, it would be unusual

or even offensive to say that one sympathizes with a friend who has experienced a positive life event such as falling in love or receiving a desired promotion at work. The authors propose and find support for the idea that people easily sympathize with others regardless of whether we know them personally, but that symhedonia depends on the existence of a prior positive relationship with the person. That is, we immediately sympathize with a stranger on the evening news whose house has burned down, but we are less likely to be delighted by hearing about a stranger winning a prize, for example. Instead, we are more likely to feel sympathetic joy when the person is close to us (a person who we evaluate positively and consider to be important in our life), such as a friend or family member.<sup>2</sup> They call this effect the *attachment-contingency hypothesis*.

The authors demonstrated the greater importance of a prior relationship for the experience of sympathetic joy in a series of seven studies which asked participants either to recall instances of sympathy or symhedonia, or to imagine their reactions to positive or negative events befalling close others or strangers. For example, in Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to think of the most recent time they felt 1) happy for another person or 2) sad for another person. They then reported whether they knew the person personally, and rated their prior emotional attachment to the person. Results revealed that prior attachment ratings were significantly higher for symhedonia than for sympathy; that is, people who experienced sympathetic joy were doing so for individuals to whom they were

more emotionally attached. Furthermore, when considering the relative frequency of events involving total strangers, there were almost six times as many reported incidences of sympathy compared to symhedonia.

These findings replicated results from Study 1, a smaller scale study in which participants reported on the most recent time they had felt either happy or sad for someone else, and they were further confirmed in Study 3, a replication with a non-student adult sample. Across studies, people were more likely to feel sympathetic joy for close others, whereas sympathy did not appear to depend as strongly on prior attachment. Studies 1 and 2 also included a measure of social desirability, which did not affect the results.

The subsequent studies ruled out a variety of alternative possibilities (for example, that sympathy might be more prevalent simply because there are more negative events in the world or those events receive more attention, or that individuals can better understand the meaning of positive occurrences when they are more familiar with the person involved). Each individual study may have its limitations (for example, some of the studies have a smaller number of participants than might be ideal for statistical power), but together they provide consistent demonstrations of this phenomenon.

The studies focus on feelings about real people, but as Royzman and Rozin note in their General Discussion, these findings are also relevant to narratives. Characters are an essential component of narratives, and narrative scholars have long been interested in how individuals form connections

<sup>1</sup> On an entirely different topic, another article that I would recommend to communication scholars is Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) paper on the limits of introspection. This paper is hardly a hidden gem, with over 17,000 citations and status as a core reading on many social psychology or persuasion graduate seminar syllabi, but it provides important insights into what kinds of questions participants can reasonably answer and which ones they cannot.

<sup>2</sup> Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model adds nuance to understanding when we are likely to feel joy for the success of close others. This model states that when a close other (friend, family member) succeeds in a domain that is relevant to a person's self-concept, people are likely to feel bad about themselves and may be more likely to distance themselves from the person (e.g., for example, a student feeling envy that a classmate received an award). However, if a close other succeeds in an irrelevant domain (e.g., a non-athlete's friend winning a championship in a sport), then people will feel happiness for the other's success and even bask in their reflected glory.

with narrative characters. As Oatley (1999) notes, narratives create mental simulations and allow readers to feel emotions in response to narrative characters; the same mental processes that create empathy with real others can also create empathic responses to narrative characters. (Keith Oatley's articles and books [e.g., Oatley, 1999] on narratives, emotions, and the combinations of the two are also gems, but fortunately for the field, they are not hidden ones!) Therefore, a greater understanding of when and how we empathize with actual people can inform our understanding of when people will connect with narrative characters, and can provide a useful link between story structure and reactions to characters.

Previous theories have focused on liking for characters and identification with characters (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Klimmit, 2021). These concepts are not the same as empathizing, but they are related. For example, identification includes taking the perspective of the character, which is often theorized to include both cognitive perspective-taking and emotional responses. One primary line of research examining identification has focused on the role of similarity between the audience member and the character. While similarity does not always lead to higher identification (Cohen et al., 2018), meta-analyses have shown small positive relationships such that higher similarity is associated with greater identification (Chen et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2023). This idea is also used in studies of tailoring and targeting in health communication, in which a message is matched to some aspect of the audience (e.g., Huang & Shen, 2016).

Another classic theoretical perspective, affective disposition theory, has focused primarily on character morality, suggesting that readers like characters who are morally good, the heroes of the story (Grizzard et al., 2023; Zillmann, 1995), and enjoy narratives in which these characters triumph. Konijn and Hoorn (2005) proposed that additional dimensions such as aesthetics and realism also affect audience engagement with

characters. These approaches share a focus on the characteristics or traits of the character as a key factor in determining how audiences will relate to that character.

Royzman and Rozin's paper provides a complementary perspective: that connections to characters may derive not only from who a character is, but from what happens to that character. Showing a character encountering adversity may be a way of quickly sparking audience sympathy, which may extend into other forms of connection. Many commonly-used story arcs, such as the hero's journey (Campbell, 2008), involve characters encountering difficulties or trials. These challenges create suspense and interest, but may also help connect the reader or audience to the main character by evoking sympathy. (Of course, both character factors and story events may work together to determine audience response to a character.) Once the story progresses and the audience comes to feel a sense of closeness with the character, the audience can experience greater joy if a happy ending occurs or if good events happen over the course of the story.

These ideas can also inform research on the effects of emotional flow in stories. Nabi and Green (2015) suggested that the shift in emotions as a story progresses can be a way of maintaining engagement in a narrative. Because narrative characters are essentially strangers to audiences when a story begins, Royzman and Rozin's findings suggest that a structure that includes a negative event for the character early on in the story will be more effective at creating a connection with the character than other narrative forms.

Work in my own lab has extended this idea by showing that stories that begin with a negative event but move toward a positive trajectory, a story structure called restorative narrative, can be more effective than purely negative stories at prompting prosocial feelings (e.g., Fitzgerald, Green, et al., 2020; Fitzgerald, Paravati, et al., 2020). The initial negative event can prompt

sympathy with the character, and then the positive or hopeful trajectory can help audiences manage possible negative emotions without feeling the need to disengage from the story.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, I see Royzman and Rozin's work as a gem because it speaks to a topic that brings together emotions, interpersonal interactions, and narrative structure. Narrative researchers can benefit from a deeper understanding of human emotional responses, because these same responses and processes occur when we react to stories. I also appreciate other aspects of this work. The authors introduce the topic by linking it to pronouncements by philosophers, suggesting a deep interest across time in this question, and in testing their hypotheses, they both consider a variety of alternative hypotheses and consider how these effects are situated within an evolutionary framework. This thoughtful interdisciplinary approach adds depth to the work.

Royzman and Rozin's (2006) article does not provide a definitive theoretical basis for the relational asymmetry between sympathy and sympathetic joy, but this effect appears to be related to a larger theoretical point that negative emotions or events often carry more weight than positive ones, described in depth in Rozin and Royzman's (2001) paper entitled *Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion*. With apologies to Ed and Paul, though, I will note that these two papers have a similarity that may have contributed to this work being a hidden gem – and that is that the titles of the papers, while accurate, may not fully do justice to the contents. Specifically, when I enthusiastically tell people about this work, they are often tripped up by the term *symhedonia* – unfortunately, it has not been adopted into our scholarly lexicon the way that other new terms such as *eudaimonia* (happiness deriving from meaningfulness) have

been. Similarly, Rozin and Royzman's (2001) paper makes very similar points to another paper published the same year by Baumeister et al. (2001), but Baumeister's title, *Bad is Stronger than Good*, appears to have resonated more strongly with people, and has been cited approximately twice as many times, although both papers have been highly influential.<sup>4</sup>

In general, most communication researchers are probably not familiar with psychologist Paul Rozin's work, but it is well worth reading. Paul, who was a senior colleague at my first faculty position in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, has never been afraid to tackle big questions. His research focuses on activities that are important in the world and topics that were not necessarily part of the mainstream of social psychology, including the psychology of food and eating, and the psychology of religion and morality. He has provided novel and important insights in these areas.

At the time that I first started studying narratives and developing the ideas of transportation into narrative worlds (with my doctoral advisor, Timothy Brock, in the late 1990s; Green & Brock, 2000), there was some skepticism about whether stories were an appropriate topic for scientific study. An undercurrent of thinking in social psychology at the time was a concern with establishing or maintaining the discipline as a rigorous science (a feeling we jokingly referred to as “physics envy”). A side effect of this concern was that topics such as religion, love, and yes, narratives, were seen as insufficiently scientific to be appropriate for the field. (Of course, this position is silly, because the scientific method can be applied to a wide variety of topics!) In subsequent years, a number of these topics (the psychology of religion, positive psychology, and

<sup>3</sup> Restorative narratives also include a focus on character strengths, such as moral goodness or resilience. Thus, this approach combines narrative structure with character traits to create engagement with the story.

<sup>4</sup> As of this writing (December 31, 2023), Rozin and Royzman (2001) has been cited 5,020 times – an extremely impressive figure! However, Baumeister et al. (2001) has been cited 10,501 times, according to Google Scholar.

perhaps even narratives) gained widespread acceptance in the field, in part due to the leadership of Paul Rozin, Marty Seligman, and others. But in these early days, Paul Rozin's enthusiasm and support for this type of work was inspirational for me as a young scholar.

Thus, a broader lesson that we can take from this work is to choose topics for our work that address meaningful parts of human existence, to have the intellectual bravery to explore questions beyond what is popular in a discipline at a given moment, and to take an interdisciplinary lens to our work, considering what insights might be gained from the way that other disciplines have approached a particular question.

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### About the Author

Melanie C. Green is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication at the University at Buffalo. Her work has focused on how individuals become engaged in narratives, and how narratives affect real-world outcomes. In particular, Dr. Green's research examines how narratives can change the way individuals think and behave, including the effects of fictional stories on real-world attitudes and the persistence of belief change over time. Her theory of "transportation into a narrative world" focuses on immersion into a story as a mechanism of narrative influence. She has examined persuasion in a variety of contexts, from health communication to social issues. She has edited two books on these topics (*Narrative Impact* and *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives, Second Edition*), and has published numerous articles in leading psychology, communication, and interdisciplinary journals. Dr. Green is a Fellow of the International Communication Association and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and her work has received the Innovation in Theory award from the Mass Communication Division of the International Communication Association. Her research has been funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, NIH, and the Spencer Foundation.