

Distinguishing between Three Different Aspects of Empathy
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ABSTRACT

Vitaglione and Barnett (2003) define Empathy as “(a) emotional reaction that is congruent with another person’s feelings, and (b) concern for the welfare of that person” (p. 302). Consistent with this two-part definition, previous research has shown that empathy is multidimensional (Davis, 1980, 1983). However, the number of dimensions is unknown. Vitaglione and Barnett’s definition implies two factors, but Davis has found four. As well, emotional reactions that are “congruent with another person’s feelings” might be positive or negative in valence, and therefore we can logically distinguish between feeling Empathy for the positive emotions of others and feeling Empathy for the negative emotions of others. Research is needed to determine empirically how many dimensions of Empathy can be distinguished. Consistent with Vitaglione and Barnett (2003), but distinguishing between positive and negative emotions, we hypothesized three dimensions: Responsive Distress, Responsive Joy, and Empathic Concern.

We administered 10-item scales of each of the above three concepts to 218 undergraduate students. We conducted a factor analysis using Unweighted Least Squares with Direct Oblimin rotation. Three factors emerged, and they closely resembled the hypothesized factors. Factor 1 consisted of items related to feeling joyful and happy when nearby people felt the same, and was labeled Responsive Joy. Factor 2 consisted of items related to feelings of sympathy and sorrow for those less fortunate than oneself and was labeled Empathic Concern. Factor 3 consisted of items related to feeling disturbed and bothered when others are having problems and was called Responsive Distress. Future research is needed to determine if other subcomponents of Empathy can be distinguished from these three (for example, Davis (1980, 1983) proposed a dimension related to the tendency to imagine oneself in the shoes of fictitious characters), and to determine whether these different aspects of Empathy have differential relationships with external criteria.

INTRODUCTION

The word “empathy” was invented by Titchner as a translation of the German word “Einfühlung,” a term from aesthetics meaning to “project yourself into what you observe” (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Eisenberg, Wentzel, & Harris (1998) more specifically defines Empathy as follows: “Empathy is an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, and that is identical or very similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel” (p.1). These definitions imply that Empathy is unidimensional.

Vitaglione and Barnett (2003), in contrast, distinguish between two different aspects of Empathy: “(a) emotional reaction that is congruent with another person’s feelings, and (b) concern for the welfare of that person” (p.302). Consistent with this two-part definition, previous research has shown that Empathy is multidimensional (Davis, 1980, 1983). However, the number of dimensions is unknown. Vitaglione and Barnett’s definition implies two factors, but Davis has found four. As well, emotional reactions that are “congruent with another person’s feelings” might be positive or negative in valence, and therefore we can logically distinguish between feeling Empathy for the positive emotions of others and feeling Empathy for the negative emotions of others. Research is needed to determine empirically how many dimensions of Empathy can be distinguished. Building upon Vitaglione and Barnett’s (2003) distinction between feeling the emotions of others and feeling concern for others, but also distinguishing between positive and negative emotions, we hypothesize that Empathy has three dimensions: Responsive Distress, Responsive Joy, and Empathic Concern. The purpose of this research is to determine if these three aspects of Empathy can be distinguished empirically.

METHOD

Participants

This study included 218 undergraduates (138 female, 80 male) who received course credits in return for their participation. Ages ranged from 18 to 73 with a mean of 20.21 and a standard deviation of 5.41. The majority of the participants were Caucasian 48.6%, followed by 14.2% Asians, 14.2% Hispanics, 8.3% African Americans, 6.9% Pacific Islanders, .9% Native American, and 6.9% other.

Measures

Responsive Distress is feeling distress or negative emotions when around people who are feeling distress. The Responsive Distress Scale (Barchard, 20001) has ten items (5 negatively keyed), which use a 5-point scale, ranging from Very Inaccurate (1) to Very Accurate (5).

Responsive Joy is feeling positive when around others who are feeling positive. The Responsive Joy Scale (Barchard, 2001) consists of ten items (4 negatively keyed), which use a 5-point scale, ranging from Very Inaccurate (1) to Very Accurate (5).

Empathic Concern is feeling concern and sympathy for those who are suffering or who are less fortunate than oneself. Unlike Responsive Distress, with Empathic Concern, the focus remains on the other person: one feels sympathy for the other person but does not feel sad oneself. The Empathy Concern Scale (Barchard, 2001) consists of ten items (5 negatively keyed), which use a 5-point scale, ranging from Very Inaccurate (1) to Very Accurate (5).

Procedure

Participants completed this study in a computer lab, under the supervision of trained research assistants. Measures were administered over the Internet, as part of a larger study.

Statistical Analysis

We conducted a factor analysis of the 30 Empathy items, using Unweighted Least Squares extraction. The scree plot very clearly indicated that there were three factors. Next, we examined many different rotations, and selected the one that came closest to the ideal of simple structure, based upon the number of hyperplanar values, the number of complex variables, and the inter-factor correlations. This led us to select one of the Direct Oblimin rotations.

RESULTS

The 30 Empathy items resulted in three factors. See Table 1 for the factor pattern matrix and matrix of factor intercorrelations. Factor 1 was labeled Responsive Joy, given that most of items whose highest factor pattern matrix coefficients were on this factor were originally designed to measure this construct. However, some items from both the Responsive Distress and the Empathic Concern scales also had their highest coefficients on this factor. Factor 2 was labeled Empathic Concern, given that most of the items with their highest coefficients on this factor were written to measure this concept originally. However, once again, some additional items were found here. In particular, some items

that involved feeling upset about others' sorrows or suffering (which were originally written to measure Responsive Distress) had their highest loadings here. However, given that these items also included mention of others' suffering, the interpretation of Empathic Concern seemed appropriate even for them. Finally, Factor 3 was labeled Responsive Distress. All of the items that loaded on this factor were originally designed to measure this concept.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the factor structure of thirty items designed to measure different aspects of Empathy. Three factors were found: Responsive Joy, Empathic Concern, and Responsive Distress. Future research is needed to determine if other subcomponents of Empathy can be distinguished from these three. For example, Davis (1980, 1983) proposed two dimensions that are not captured by the three factors we found. One of these is Fantasy, the tendency to imagine oneself in the shoes of fictitious characters. The other is Perspective-Taking, the tendency to see something from someone else's perspective, which may be more cognitive than affective in nature. In addition, research is needed to determine whether different aspects of Empathy have differential relationships with external criteria.

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Table 1. *Factor Pattern Matrix and Matrix of Factor Inter-correlations for 30 Empathy Items*

Item	Factor			h ²
	1	2	3	
Usually end up laughing if the people around me are laughing	.72	-.11	.02	.52
Get caught up in the excitement when others are celebrating	.67	-.07	.01	.51
Rarely get caught up in the excitement	-.61	.13	-.18	.47
Am strongly influenced by good moods of others	.59	-.00	-.08	.45
Find it hard to stay in a bad mood if the people around me are happy	.57	-.00	-.26	.46
Dislike children's birthday parties	-.57	.05	-.05	.47
Feel other people's joy	.56	-.13	-.02	.53
Am unaffected by other people's happiness	-.52	-.13	.14	.39
Am concerned about others	.50	.30	.00	.56
Like to watch children open presents	.50	-.01	.09	.42
Would be upset if I saw an injured animal	.38	-.01	.15	.34
Dislike being around people when I am feeling sad	-.38	.02	-.02	.29
Look down on any weakness	-.31	-.26	.14	.32
Feel little concern for others	-.28	-.24	.05	.27
Sympathize with the homeless	.12	.65	-.06	.55
Believe that the poor deserve our sympathy	.09	.64	.08	.59
Have no sympathy for criminals	.14	-.60	.07	.45
Am upset by misfortunes of others	.07	.54	.32	.57
Suffer from other's sorrows	-.01	-.52	.30	.51
Believe that criminals should receive help rather than punishment	-.21	-.51	-.07	.40
Am unaffected by the suffering of others	-.37	-.43	-.05	.39
Am deeply moved by other's misfortunes	.03	.43	.17	.36
Feel sympathy for those who are worst off than myself	.37	-.43	-.02	.53
Have little sympathy for unemployment	-.29	-.35	-.11	.45
Don't like to get involved in other people's problems	-.09	-.33	-.15	.30
Am calm even in tense situations	.13	.10	-.71	.55
Remain calm during emergencies	.16	-.05	-.51	.45
Am easily moved to tears	.22	.21	.50	.56
Rarely cry during sad movies	-.22	-.20	-.43	.50
Am not easily disturbed by events	-.21	-.02	-.38	.33
Factor Intercorrelations	1	2	3	
Factor 1	1.00			
Factor 2	-.32	1.00		
Factor 3	-.11	.14	1.00	

Note. h² = communality. Salient factor pattern matrix coefficients are in boldface. Factor 1 = Responsive Joy. Factor 2 = Empathic Concern. Factor 3 = Responsive Distress.