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Empathic concern and prosocial behaviors: A test of experimental results using survey data [☆]

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Abstract

This study uses survey data to test the correlation between empathic concern and 14 different prosocial behaviors, including informal help to individuals and formal helping through institutions. Statistically significant correlations were found for 10 behaviors, but substantively meaningful correlations were only found for three, all of which were spontaneous, informal helping behaviors, where the individual needing help was directly present. The findings indicate that empathic concern may not be an important motivator for planned helping decisions and decisions to help others who are not immediately present, such as volunteering, charitable giving, and blood donation. The weak correlation between empathic concern and most helping behaviors indicates that individual differences in empathic concern may not play much a role in helping decisions.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen tremendous growth in the study of empathy as an explanation for prosocial behavior. Developmental psychologists have traced how feelings of empathy play a key role in the moral development of children (Eisenberg, 2002; Hoffman, 2000). Experimental psychologists have studied how emotional and cognitive states of empathy, sympathy, and personal distress correlate with helping behaviors in laboratory settings (Batson, 1991, 2002). Neurobiologists have mapped the brain centers that are activated when feelings of empathy take place, and have studied how empathy is impaired when certain regions of the brain are damaged (Damasio, 2002a,b). All of this research holds that empathy is an important component of moral thought and behavior in general, and is an essential component of motivation to perform prosocial or helping behaviors in particular.

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Despite the considerable research into empathy in these fields, there has been very little research into whether and how empathic reactions and personal predispositions to empathy predict helping behaviors in non-experimental settings. Most research that does explore this issue has used pseudo-experimental research or retrospective narrative accounts, and has studied small, non-representative samples. Only three studies to date have used large-scale survey research to study the relationship between empathic concern and helping behaviors, and none of these studies has examined how empathic concern may differ in its relationship to a range of helping behaviors.

In this article, I present findings from the altruism module of the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS), which show how individual differences in empathic concern correlate with a range of real-life helping behaviors reported on a survey research instrument. Empathic concern had no significant relationship with some helping behaviors, and a statistically significant but substantively weak (Pearson's $r < .10$) relationship with most helping behaviors. Only in informal, spontaneous helping decisions directed towards non-relatives, such as giving money to a homeless person on the street, or allowing a stranger to cut ahead of you in line, was there a statistically significant relationship with a Pearson's correlation greater than .15. These findings, combined with the findings of other studies of empathic concern and real-life prosocial behaviors, suggest that a reevaluation of the relationship between individual predispositions to empathy and helping behaviors may be in order.

2. Review of the literature

Most psychological research treats empathy as a mental state, having both an emotional and a cognitive component. Scientists doing this sort of research manipulate experimental conditions to generate thoughts and feelings of empathy in a subject, and see whether high-empathy conditions are more likely to induce helping. The work of Batson (1991, 2002) follows this strategy, as well as much of the work of Eisenberg (Eisenberg, 2002; Eisenberg et al., 1989; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg and Miller, 1987).

While the majority of social scientists study empathy as a mental state, some study empathic concern as a stable personality trait or disposition. In experimental studies and a few studies of real-world volunteering, they have found that dispositional empathy correlates with prosocial behaviors. The current study expands this research by testing the degree to which empathic concern, a type of dispositional empathy, correlates with a wide range of prosocial behaviors, including volunteering, charitable giving, blood donation, and informal assistance to individuals.

Batson (1991) and Eisenberg and Fabes (1998) have studied the emotional and cognitive state of empathy most extensively, and while their use of the terms "empathy," "sympathy," and "personal distress" differs, the conceptual framework that they use is similar. Eisenberg and Fabes (1998) defines empathy as "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and that is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel." This initial emotion of empathy often leads to "sympathy," which Eisenberg defines as "feelings of sorrow or concern for the distressed or needy other." However, empathy can also lead to "personal distress," a "self-focused, aversive" reaction characterized by "discomfort, anxiety, or concern about one's own welfare." Sympathy motivates one to help, while personal distress motivates one to resolve feelings of distress by escaping or avoiding the suffering other. Eisenberg and Batson's research, as well as the research of many other psychologists, involves manipulating experimental conditions to examine what factors evoke mental states of empathy, sympathy, and personal distress, and to what degree these mental states motivate helping.

In contrast to the mental state approach described above, some researchers conceptualize empathy and empathy-related reactions as a predisposition or personality trait, and study how individual differences in levels of dispositional empathy affect helping behaviors. Davis (1980, 1983, 1994) developed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), a scale that measures four aspects of dispositional empathy: empathic concern, personal distress, fantasy, and perspective-taking. Davis defines empathic concern as "the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for others in need," and personal distress as "the tendency to experience distress and discomfort in response to extreme distress in others" (Davis, 1994, p. 57). Perspective-taking measures "the degree to which an individual spontaneously takes the point of view of other people in everyday life," and fantasy measures "the tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into fictional situations" (Davis, 1994, p. 57). The General Social Survey module on altruism studied in this paper used only the empathic

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