



The effects of perspective taking on empathy-related responses for college students higher in callous traits



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 December 2016

Received in revised form 14 April 2017

Accepted 4 July 2017

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Psychopathy

Callous affect

Perspective taking

Empathy

Empathy-related responses

College students

ABSTRACT

Although it has been established that utilizing perspective taking leads to increases in empathy-related responses, it remains unknown how these techniques affect individuals who experience deficits in empathy (e.g., those higher in callousness). The purpose of this study was to investigate the utility of perspective taking in increasing empathy-related responses (e.g., congruent affective reactions, empathic concern, perceived closeness with the target, and prosocial helping behaviors) for individuals lower and higher in the callous affect (CA) traits of psychopathy. In this study, 296 college students listened to a radio broadcast about a target in need with specific perspective taking instructions (e.g., “feel with target” or “imagine-self as target”) and completed measures assessing empathy-related responses. Results indicate individuals higher in CA are lower in empathy-related responses, but this deficit may be tempered by asking these individuals to imagine themselves as the target compared to asking them to feel the emotions of the target. These findings increase our understanding of the relationship between CA, perspective taking, and empathy-related responses and imply that perspective taking techniques may have differential effects among those higher in CA traits.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a multifaceted construct encompassing interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits (Hare, 2003) with links to violent and general recidivism and instrumental and reactive aggression (Frick & White, 2008; Leistico, Salekin, DeCoster, & Rogers, 2008). Callous affect (CA), a core trait of psychopathy, includes lack of remorse, shallow emotions, and callous use of others for one's own gain (Neumann, Vitacco, Hare, & Wupperman, 2005). The presence of CA interferes with an individual's ability to understand and empathize with the emotions of others. There are two primary types of empathy: cognitive empathy involves the ability to adopt another's perspective in order to *understand and identify with* their affective and cognitive mental states (Shamay-Tsoory, 2011), while affective empathy involves the capacity to *feel or experience* the emotions of others (Batson, 2009). This study evaluates the complex relationship between psychopathic traits and empathy using an experimental design.

1.1. Psychopathy and empathy

Studies have shown psychopathy does not interfere with cognitive empathy (e.g., Anastassiou-Hadjicharalambous & Warden, 2008; Lockwood, Bird, Bridge, & Viding, 2013; Oliver, Neufeld, Dziobek, & Mitchell, 2016). In contrast, research supports the association between psychopathy and impairments in affective empathy, suggesting individuals higher in psychopathy have difficulties experiencing vicarious emotional responses (e.g., Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Blair, 2007; Decety, Chen, Harenski, & Kiehl, 2013; Lishner, Hong, Jiang, Vitacco, & Neumann, 2015; Oliver et al., 2016; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). In other words, individuals higher in psychopathy cannot accurately link the emotions of a target to their own emotional experiences, leading to diminished concern for others.

Lishner et al. (2015) tested the relationship between affective empathy and psychopathy in college students and found that CA was negatively associated with feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and empathic concern. Research suggests that empathic responses are automatic, but can be influenced by conscious control as a function of motivation (Zaki, 2014). Research utilizing imaging techniques has indicated that empathy-related responses may be elicited by directly asking individuals to empathize with the target (e.g., Arbuckle & Shane, 2016; Meffert, Gazzola, den Boer, Bartels, & Keysers, 2013). When exposed to emotionally-charged situations, individuals higher in psychopathy showed reduced spontaneous activity in brain regions associated with

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empathy. However, when given specific instructions to empathize, activation within these brain regions increased. These studies provide support that individuals high in psychopathy can normalize affective responses through conscious effort.

Consistent with the aforementioned research, individuals higher in psychopathy have diminished empathic responses and are less likely to help a target. However, White (2013) found that CA was positively associated with helping, but only when performed in front of others, suggesting individuals higher in CA are motivated by self-serving desires. In addition, analyses revealed that empathy mediated the relationships between CA and type of prosocial behavior (i.e., altruistic, anonymous, and public). Therefore, the presence of CA may be partially responsible for the decreased likelihood to participate in altruistic behaviors.

1.2. Increasing empathy-related responses through perspective taking

Research manipulating perspective taking techniques has provided avenues for increasing empathy-related responses (e.g., Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997a; Batson et al., 1997b; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Myers, Laurent, & Hodges, 2014). Batson et al. (1997a) utilized various types of perspective taking to experimentally manipulate empathy. In this research, participants were asked to imagine how the target is feeling, to imagine how they would feel if they were in the same situation as the target, or to remain objective while listening to a radio broadcast about a target in need. Participants in both perspective taking conditions reported greater empathic concern for the target. Replicating this study, Myers et al. (2014) examined the effects of perspective taking on prosocial behaviors by allowing participants the chance to indirectly help the target. Results indicated participants in both perspective taking conditions exhibited increased empathic responses.

1.3. Current study

Using a sophisticated research design, the current study investigated the relationship between CA, perspective taking, and empathy-related responses by asking participants to follow instructions (i.e., “feel with target”, “imagine-self as target”, or no specific instructions) while listening to a story of a target in need and examining their effects on empathy-related responses. Two main hypotheses were tested. First, it was hypothesized that individuals receiving specific perspective taking instructions would report higher empathy-related responses than individuals not receiving instructions. Second, it was hypothesized that individuals higher in CA receiving specific perspective taking instructions would report higher empathy-related responses than individuals higher in CA not receiving instructions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 327 participants were recruited from a medium-sized university in the southeastern United States and were entered to win one of six \$25.00 Amazon gift cards for completing the study. Catch questions were utilized to assess attention. Participants who did not adequately answer all catch questions ($n = 13$), who reported being skeptical of the broadcast ($n = 13$), or who did not complete the study due to technical difficulties ($n = 5$) were excluded. The final sample consisted of 296 undergraduate students (63.5% female, $n = 188$). Participants were between the ages of 18 and 37 years old ($M = 19.49$, $SD = 1.89$). The majority of participants self-identified as Caucasian (58.1%, $n = 172$), while 33.1% identified as African American ($n = 98$), and 3.7% as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 11$).

2.2. Procedure

Procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and all participants gave written consent. At the beginning of the session, participants were escorted into individual rooms and left to complete the study on a computer. Following established procedures (e.g., Batson et al., 1997b; Myers et al., 2014), participants were told they would be evaluating a radio broadcast and that they would be answering personal questions to assess how their personality influences their evaluation. After reading this cover story, participants completed the psychopathy measure and were randomly assigned to a condition (“feel with target”, “imagine-self as target”, or no instruction control). Participants read instructions based on their condition and listened to the radio broadcast. Participants in the “feel with target” condition received the following instructions:

“While you are listening to this broadcast, try to feel what the woman being interviewed feels in regards to what has happened and how it has affected her life. Try not to concern yourself with attending to all the information presented. Just concentrate on trying to feel how the woman interviewed in the broadcast feels.”

Participants in the “imagine-self as target” condition received the following instructions:

“While you are listening to this broadcast, try to put yourself in the situation of the woman being interviewed. Imagine how you would feel if you were experiencing what has happened to her and how this experience would affect your life. Try not to concern yourself with attending to all the information presented. Just concentrate on putting yourself in the woman's situation.”

Participants then completed the emotional reaction and perceived closeness measures in a counterbalanced order and completed a broadcast evaluation. For the prosocial helping task, participants were presented with a sealed envelope and asked to open the envelope in their individual rooms. After completing all procedures, participants were thanked and dismissed. Full debriefing was delayed to ensure study procedures remained confidential.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Psychopathy

The Self-Report Psychopathy Scale - Version III (SRP-III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2015) was used to assess psychopathy. The SRP-III includes 64 items, divided into four 16-item subscales corresponding to Hare's (2003) model of psychopathy: interpersonal manipulation (IPM), callous affect (CA), erratic lifestyle (ELS), and criminal tendencies (CT). Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the presented statements (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly). The scale has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity among college student samples. The CA facet was analyzed for the present study and demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.73$).

2.3.2. Radio broadcast

The broadcast was adapted from Batson and colleagues who give the following description: “... a male announcer interviewed Katie Banks, a senior at the university. Katie's parents and a sister had recently been killed in an automobile crash. Katie explained that she was desperately trying to take care of her surviving younger brother and sister while she finished her last year of college. If she did not finish, she would not be able to earn enough money to support her brother and sister and would have to put them up for adoption” (Batson et al., 1997a, p. 753).

A new recording, made by advanced graduate students, was utilized to improve sound quality and incorporate minor changes aimed at minimizing out-group biases. Based on research suggesting undergraduates

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