



Empathizing with others: Social Norms and Membership in Self-Reported Empathy

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Abstract

In this paper we focus on "empathy" from a psycho-social view-point, dealing with the role of cognitive and social processes in empathizing. A study was conducted (N=66) in order to analyze the role of Target's Membership on self-reported empathy, and its relations with the empathizers' inferences about the person-in-need in terms of credibility, emotional impact of the story, and by the perceived social desirability of empathic response. Results confirmed that 1) empathy is affected by cognitive factors and social norms; 2) social desirability is a prominent factor in predicting empathy; 3) Target's Membership plays a role in empathizing, leading to different evaluation of the story in terms of desirability and credibility. Implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: Empathy; Social Categorization; social norms; attributions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Empathy from a historical perspective

Empathy is an extraordinary and mysterious phenomenon. Several authors tried to provide a good definition of this concept which still appears, however, as being somehow obscure and puzzling [4,12,24,33].

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Centuries ago Smith [36] identified two broad classes of responses: *a cognitive, intellectual reaction* on the one hand (an ability to understand the other person's perspective), and a more *instinctive, emotional reaction* on the other. In various forms, this fundamental distinction has been maintained during the years: psychological research on empathy in fact, has typically been based on one or the other of these general definitions, and in the past decades the psychological nature of empathy became one of the central topics, also for social psychologists.

From a historical perspective, for example, already in the first half of the past century psychoanalysts and psychologists had highlighted the role of affective dimensions of empathy in interpersonal relations, considering such a construct as a process of emotional activation, more or less voluntary, in some cases innate, involved in the sharing of the other's experiences. Following this approach empathy has been considered for long time as a kind of emotional sharing, that is an «affective phenomenon» [27,37] referring to the experience of «being in the other person's shoes», an «affective response» more appropriate to another's situation than to one's own [20] as «feeling a vicarious emotion» that is congruent with (but not necessarily identical to) the emotion of another, and so forth.

On the other side Kohler who was one of the first that faced this topic in a more cognitive vein, rather than continuing to focus on «feeling into» the experiences of another he held that empathy was more the *understanding* of the other's feelings than a *sharing* of them. Following this interpretation, from the Sixties researchers focused their attention on the role of *cognition* in generating empathic reactions. Within this approach, many theoretical approaches identified empathy with the ability to understand adequately the others' way to evaluate and experience a certain situation. According to the cognitive perspective, the act of empathizing was defined as the *cognitive ability* to see things from another's perspective by improving our knowledge about him/her [1,2,8,14,21,22,30], referring to the intellectual understanding of another's experience, and to the recognition of emotions experienced by the other [8].

1.2 Empathy within social relations

In the last decades most researchers who have studied empathy are in agreement that it is a multifaceted concept consisting of both *cognitive and affective* components [15,17,19,25,38,39], and consider empathy as a set of related constructs encompassing both cognitive and affective reactions [11,13]. Instead of defining empathy «solely as affective responses or cognitive reactions, the multidimensional approach recognizes that affect and cognition are intertwined in empathy» [23] thus articulating a conception of empathy that speaks across the various disciplines in which it plays a role and embraces a range of components ascribed to empathy itself.

Within the field of social-psychological literature, for example, it has been shown that the extent to which one can empathize with others is a key component of a successful social interaction [31]. Literature on empathy in fact supports its social functioning in relation with various prosocial behaviors such as helping [5], cooperation [15] and stereotype reduction [29,10,12].

In this theoretical frame, although literature has greatly contributed to our understanding of the relationship between empathy and social relations [7], what still remains a matter of some controversy for this *modern*

approach in which affect and cognition are intertwined is *how* cognitive inferences underlying the empathic response are interrelated with people's affective responses to other's need, and what reasons cause this relation. Although the idea that people's affective responses to a person are shaped by the *attributions* they make regarding the person's plight found great empirical support [5,29], in which direction, for example, this relationship develops it still has to be clearly defined.

According to Cameron's dynamic model [9] we might fill this gap by considering empathy as constructed, negotiated and resisted through *discourse*, that is assuming it as a «place» where the gap between *self* and *other* can be bridged by what people know about and say to each other. Empathy, for example, may represent (or not) a response to a *story*, and empathic reactions may depend on the kind of inferences this story can elicit [24,9].

In most studies empathy, in fact, is elicited by means of *narratives* or victim's «interviews». As a consequence, a concrete and «personalized» story seems to be a necessary ingredient of empathizing [33,24]. This seems to be true even when empathy has to be conveyed toward whole communities and “collective” victims [34].

Dealing with a meaningful story involves both emotional and cognitive processes. As a matter of fact, empathizers may make inferences about the actor's emotions, and about the norms and values of reacting in empathic ways toward *that* specific person. In other words, the empathic response could be affected by the observer's judgments about the credibility of the story [24,28] about the victim's perceived responsibility [3], and about the (perceived) social desirability of empathizers' emotional reactions. This is clearly apparent at least when considering self-reported empathy, which is just one aspect of empathizing but which describes an important moderating variable affecting the empathizers' response and the empathy-helping relationship. Finlay & Stephan [17] for instance, suggested that empathy experienced towards others may vary as a function of her or his social group membership: an out-group member can give rise to guilty feelings, as well as resentment and anger may rise towards the in-group (perceived as being responsible for the out-groupers' plight). Defensive reactions and social discrimination then can be observed also toward in groupers, showing a counterintuitive picture comparing to the classic theoretical frame about empathy in the social domain.

2. Purpose and predictions

The purpose of this study was to determine if self-reported empathy is affected by victims' group membership, and by the perceived normative meaning of the empathic response.

This study centered on two research questions. The first research question was: *What effect does the victim's categorization (that is whether she is an in-group member or an out-group member) have on self-reported empathy, credibility, emotional impact of the story, and perceived social desirability of empathic response?* Based on past research it was predicted that a difference would be found between the two experimental groups, with more self-reported empathy toward out groupers. It was also predicted that participants in the outgroup condition would consider the empathic response as more socially desirable. No differences were expected in terms of credibility and emotional impact of the story.

The second research question was: *What effect do the empathizers' inferences about the person in need have on their self-reported empathy?* Following our previous considerations, it was expected that self-reported empathy was predicted credibility, emotional impact, and perceived social desirability.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Participants and Design

A One-way factor design was adopted, with Target's Membership as between subject variable (Ingroup vs Outgroup). Dependent variables were Self-Reported Empathy, Social Desirability, Credibility, and Emotional Impact. Participants were 66 female students of an Introductory Psychology course at the *University of Bari* (Italy) receiving credit toward a course requirement. Participants were randomized between the 2 conditions.

3.2 Procedure

Participation was by individual appointment. On arrival, participants were greeted by a female experimenter and escorted into a small research room. Then, they were given the instructions that presented the experiment as a pilot study of further researches and asked to carefully read and fill the questionnaire.

Target's Membership manipulation. The stimulus person was presented as being either a *southern Italian* girl (Ingroup condition) or a girl from an *African Country* (Outgroup condition) interviewed in an Italian city.

The story. After giving the Target's Membership information, the experimenter left the room while participants read the fictitious interview (all participants read exactly the same story). The interview was previously pretested and evaluated by means of focus group discussions conducted with participants omogeneous for gender and age. In the text, the interviewed person described her life since she had moved to the new place, her sorrow due to her distance from her family, her own feelings and memories, and her difficulties in finding a job, making friends, and feeling more integrated into the new, unfamiliar reality.

3.3 Measures

Batson's Empathy Scales (1991). Participants completed the Batson's Empathy Scales, consisting of a list of 24 adjectives describing different emotional states. For each item, participants rated how much (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) they were being feeling that emotion after reading the story. The list included six adjectives used in much previous research to assess empathy (i.e.: *sympathetic, compassionate, soft-hearted, warm, tender, and moved*, Batson, 1991). In order to get the Empathy Index, these item scores were averaged (Cronbach's alpha=.88).

Social Desirability. The Social Desirability of different emotional reactions to the story was assessed by means of 5 items (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). Participants had to consider to what extent it was "proper" a) feeling concerned with the girl's situation, b) helping her, c) being touched by her story, d) showing her sympathy, and e) keeping detached. In order to get the Social Desirability Index, these item scores were averaged (Cronbach's

alpha=.89).

Credibility. Participants had also to judge to what extent the stimulus-story was *credible* (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Emotional Impact. A 9 items questionnaire was also filled in by participants, in order to rate (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) how much a) alarming, b) interesting, c) worrying, d) touching, e) irritating, f) depressing, g) annoying, h) involving and i) extreme, was the story they had just read. In order to get the Emotional Impact Index, these item scores were averaged (Cronbach's alpha=.94).

4. Results

4.1 Question 1: The Effect of Target's Membership

T-test analyses were run with Target's Membership (Ingroup vs. Outgroup) as the between subjects factor and the indexes of Self-Reported Empathy, Social Desirability, Credibility, and Emotional Impact as dependent variables. The effect of Target's Membership was found to be significant on all the considered variables, except for Emotional Impact, for which a significant tendency was however observed ($t = -1.88$, $p = .06$). More specifically, participants in the Outgroup condition showed higher scores of Self-Reported Empathy and perceived Social Desirability, and considered the stimulus-story as more credible (see Figure 1, $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$).

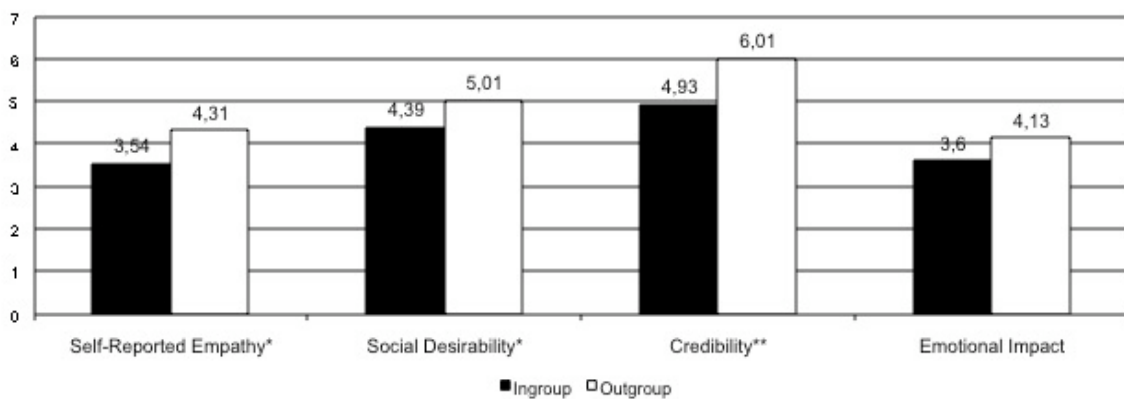


Figure 1: Mean scores of each Index (Self-Reported Empathy, Social Desirability, Credibility and Emotional Impact) as a function of Target's Membership (Ingroup vs Outgroup).

4.2 Question 2: The Role of Social Desirability, Credibility and Emotional Impact on Self-Reported Empathy

A block-hierarchical regression analysis was run in order to investigate which factors influenced Self-Reported Empathy. Indexes of Social Desirability, Credibility, and Emotional Impact were considered as independent variables. According to our results, the Empathy Index was predicted by Social Desirability: $R^2 = .42$, $F_{1,65} = 49.02$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .66$, $t = 7.00$, $p < .001$.

5. Conclusions

Taken together the present findings clearly point out the role of cognitive, affective, and social factors in self-reported empathy toward ingroup or outgroup members. In our study in fact, as expected empathy is more easily activated toward an outgroup member, and an empathic response seems to be more desirable when referred to someone that we consider somehow far or distinct from us (Question 1). In this sense, our study supports the concept about the normative character of the empathic response.

On the other side, the target's social category seem to play a role in empathizing also in that it may yield a different evaluation of the story, which takes a different meaning in terms of credibility: indeed, a meaningful (and personalized) story seems to be required, and makes the object of several inferences and evaluations, the ways of reacting to it may then depend on complex cognitive and attributional processes. In our study, in particular, the story was judged significantly more «credible» when the victim was an outgroup member, showing also that empathic reaction may also be considered as the outcome of «social constructions», modulated by values and beliefs shared in a certain culture and collectivity.

If in one sense empathy then seems to partially rely on more «emotional» interpretations made by the empathizer about the contextual social situation (for example, feeling sorry for the foreigner), on the other side a cognitive evaluation of the opportunity to react in an empathic manner also seems to be possible. Self-reported empathy in our study was in fact predicted by social desirability (Question 2) partially confirming our hypothesis, while no prediction effects were found for the emotional impact of the story and its credibility. According to our findings reacting in a socially desirable manner seems to be a prominent factor in predicting self-reported empathy, thus suggesting how empathic response for an outgroup member is strongly affected by the presence/absence of social and normative support.

These observations, beyond any methodological and theoretical consequences, underline how many complex processes are involved in the ability to “put into the other's shoes”, and how important these processes may be in a variety of contexts and situations related to social life: the empathic response, in fact, appears as the output of manifold and complex phenomena which requires innate capacities and social competences, the result of a complex *interlacing* of cognitive and affective factors, but also the outcome of «social constructions» modulated by values and beliefs shared in a certain culture and collectivity.

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