Relational Goes Beyond Interpersonal: The Development of Empathy in the Context of Culture

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Abstract

It is clear a relational approach to the study of empathy is gaining traction across multiple disciplines. Both commentaries on "A Relational Framework for Integrating the Study of Empathy in Children and Adults" underscored the need to expand the relational framework of empathy to incorporate the broader social and cultural context in which children and adults live. In the present reply we outline some specific ways that culture can inform the study of empathy in interpersonal contexts. We focus on how culture and context shape the meaning of empathy and its expression and highlight how a within-culture approach to the study of empathy will advance our understanding of this nebulous construct.

Keywords

culture, empathy, relational

It is exciting that leading scholars in the field of empathy research across multiple disciplines agree that a relational approach to the study of empathy is needed. Both Hollan (2020) and Kupetz (2020) highlight that empathy is a dynamic construct that can be manifested in diverse ways depending on the context in which it occurs. In particular, we wholeheartedly agree with Hollan's contention that the larger sociocultural context in which individuals develop plays a central role in what kinds of empathic behaviors are expressed and in the meaning of such behaviors.

We have argued in our previous work that empathy is inherently a culturally situated construct (Main, Walle, Kho, & Halpern, 2017). Going beyond display rules (Matsumoto, 2007), the meaning of specific empathic behaviors varies across cultural contexts (see Hollan & Throop, 2011). Even expressions of curiosity, which both Hollan (2020) and Kupetz (2020) underscore as central to the empathic process, may be viewed as inappropriate from the point of view of the person with whom an individual is empathizing depending on the interpersonal and cultural context. Kuptez highlights a "'repertoire' of empathic practices a person may draw on across the lifespan . . . [to] gain a better understanding of the multifaceted social and functional dimensions of empathy" (2020, p. 294). In our view, this contention is central to appreciating the diverse ways empathy may

be expressed across cultures and how the unfolding process of empathy changes over the course of development.

Most of the research on the development of empathy has focused on Western cultures such as the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands. Studies that have examined the role of culture in the development of empathy in children have largely focused on cross-cultural differences by comparing performance on an empathy task or the tendency to experience empathy using questionnaires across cultural groups. For example, Trommsdorff and colleagues measured children's observed responses to a sad experimenter across Southeast Asian and German cultures and found that children from Southeast Asia displayed more personal distress and less prosocial behavior (constructs conceptually linked with empathy) than children from Germany (Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier, & Mayer, 2007). More recent research with adults finds that Chinese individuals report less sympathy, particularly toward strangers, than Americans (Goetz & Peng, 2018), and East Asians report greater empathic concern compared with British individuals (Atkins, Uskul, & Cooper, 2016). However, regardless of whether empathy is considered a trait (i.e., a stable personality characteristic) or a state (i.e., the tendency to experience empathy in a given moment), a single assessment of empathy is typically administered. The advantages of using dynamic methodologies, such as conversation analysis (Kuptez, 2020), ethnographic studies (Hollan, 2020), or quantitative analysis of time series data (e.g., Lougheed, Main, & Helm, 2020) is that these methodologies do not make the assumption that empathy is static (see Halpern, 2001; Main, Walle et al., 2017).

Not only does empathy change within an individual over time (e.g., van Lissa et al., 2014), but the sequencing of behaviors is important within a given interaction (Kupetz, 2014, 2019). For example, curiosity (often expressed in the form of questions) may be indicative of empathy early in an interaction when little information has been provided by the individual being empathized with, whereas validation may be more important later in the interaction. Hollan (2020) argues that we must take this a step further by examining how the cultural context may affect whether and how such temporal sequences of behavior are considered empathic. We have argued previously that a functionalist perspective may offer insight into what behaviors are empathic depending on their outcome (Main, Walle et al., 2017). In other words, the functional

consequences (e.g., a greater understanding between two individuals) define whether or not a behavior is empathic, which is likely to vary across cultural contexts (Hollan & Throop, 2011).

Recently, there has been a noticeable shift in the child development literature to focusing on within-culture differences (i.e., variations within a particular racial/ethnic group) in order to provide greater insight into the mechanisms that explain associations between specific aspects of culture (e.g., cultural values, practices) and empathy (see Carlo, Roesch, Knight, & Koller, 2001; Main, 2019). There has also been greater acknowledgment of heterogeneity within cultural groups that have historically been grouped together, such as East Asians and Latinxs. For example, cultural research on emotion socialization in East Asian families has suggested that Korean parents may rely more on modeling cultural values for their children, whereas Chinese parents rely more on explicitly teaching children about cultural values (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006). An approach that focuses on risk and protective factors within different cultural groups that promote or hinder the development of empathy would be fruitful for developing a deeper understanding of how empathy develops and its consequences as a function of cultural orientations and values (see Main, 2019; Main, Zhou, Liew, & Lee, 2017).

We have argued that a relational approach to the study of the development of empathy is needed, and increasingly researchers are acknowledging the importance of such an approach. We wholeheartedly agree with Hollan (2020) that empathy is a process whose success depends on the effect it has on the individual being empathized with. As we have argued in our previous work, an individual's initial attempts to empathize may be completely off the mark. For example, a physician may assume a patient is sad upon receiving a cancer diagnosis but fail to realize that the patient is in fact angry at herself for failing to follow previous medical advice to obtain cancer screenings. Such inaccuracies are common and not the fault of the empathizer. However, in order for successful empathy to occur, follow-up information about the individual's unique emotional situation is crucial (see Halpern, 2001). From a methodological standpoint, what needs to be assessed is (a) the process by which empathy is reached, and (b) whether such empathy has a helpful or harmful effect on the individual being empathized with. A focus on the experience of the empathizer alone fails to answer the crucial question: why should we bother to empathize and promote the development of empathy in our children? A full appreciation of the cultural and social contexts in which children develop is central to understanding how empathic attempts are appreciated and play out in social interaction, in addition to their causes and consequences across development.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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