Empathy and Leadership: A Motivational Perspective

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Taylor J. Buchness, McNair Scholar, The Pennsylvania State University

McNair Faculty Research Adviser: C. Daryl Cameron, Ph. D
Assistant Professor of Psychology
Department of Psychology
College of Liberal Arts
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

Some think that empathy makes for a good leader while others think that empathy gets in the way of effective leadership. To better understand this relationship, I test how people in imagined leadership positions choose to feel empathy for hypothetical employees. Transformational leaders, defined as charismatic leaders who stimulate employees intellectually and emotionally, tend to exhibit more empathy. Using a novel measure of empathic decision-making, I examine how transformational leadership relates to choices to engage in or avoid empathy when faced with hypothetical workplace violations. The results suggest no relationship between transformational leadership and empathy choice, however, there was a relationship between transformational leadership and helping preferences. As expected, cognitive costs associated with empathy were also associated with empathy avoidance, however, there was no relationship with transformational leadership and cognitive costs. The results of this study provide implications for the workplace regarding transformational leadership, prosocial behaviors, and empathy.

Introduction

Imagine an employee of a call center has been late to work every morning for the past week. A manager of the call center has a responsibility to speak with the employee about this constant tardiness. One manager in the call center would loosely be classified as a transformational leader, or a charismatic leader who meets emotional and intellectual needs of employees (Bass, 1990). This manager empathizes with the employee by trying to understand why they are coming in late. For example, the employee might be arriving late because of unavoidable construction on the way to work. If the manager empathizes with the employee's situation, the punishment could be reduced that the manager relates to the situation. In this example, empathy enhances workplace relationships and culture. On the other hand, a second manager, who values fairness and follows protocol over empathizing and who may be categorized as transactional, may oppose empathizing with the employee. Instead, this manager, out of concern for employee fairness, may punish the employee regardless of the situation. The decision to empathize as a leader is therefore an important topic to examine.

It is also important to explore differences in the choice to empathize between different leadership types, such as transformational and transactional leadership. Exploring this difference will aid in understanding how the two types of leadership can interact with employee behavior and potentially lead to more desirable workplace outcomes.

It is important to first understand the definition of empathy to better understand the relationship between empathy and transformational leadership. Empathy is a multidimensional construct that is comprised of emotional sharing, empathic concern, and perspective taking (Decety & Cowell, 2014). Emotional sharing is the ability to understand and share in the emotions of others. Empathic concern is the ability to care for others. Finally, perspective taking is the ability to view situations through the eyes of another individual (Decety & Cowell, 2014). This study will be focusing on experience sharing, specifically with leaders viewing the emotions of employees during a workplace violation. When deciding whether to approach empathy, there are several factors that either motivate or decrease motivation to empathize. These factors include suffering, material costs, interference with competition, positive affect, affiliation, and social desirability (Zaki, 2014). It is then possible that managers too may be weighing these costs and benefits when they consider empathizing.

Prior work has suggested that empathy is not often labeled as an important leadership skill because people think that it is inappropriate in a business setting (Holt & Marques, 2012). In this study, students were asked to rate which leadership traits (ex. Intelligence, charisma, vision) they thought were most important. Empathy was consistently rated as the least important leadership trait. In contrast, in a study by Kellet, Humphry, and Sleeth (2002), participants in groups rated their peers who performed a complex task as higher in empathy and also having higher perceived leadership. When controlling for complex task performance in a similar study, empathy is still found to be related to perceived leadership (Kellet, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006). Empathy has been found to be related to Leadership-Member Exchange quality (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010), and the Leadership-Member Exchange has been found to be related to higher job performance, satisfaction with supervision, and many other positive workplace outcomes (Gerstner, & Day, 1997). The Leader-Member Exchange Theory focuses on the two-way dyadic relationship between leaders and their followers and how the quality of the relationships is predictive of individual, group, and organizational outcomes (Gerstner, & Day, 1997). It then becomes plausible that when empathy becomes explicit, it seems to be avoided in a business setting. If that's the case, people in leadership positions may be choosing to avoid empathy.

The purpose of this study is therefore, to examine the relationship between empathy and different leadership styles. Different types of leadership may relate differently to the expression of empathy. This study aims to focus on transformational leadership, specifically. According to Bass (1990) transformational leaders are often defined as charismatic leaders who both intellectually stimulate and meet emotional needs of employees, perhaps with tools such as empathy. These leaders are often seen as more effective leaders compared to their more transactional-styled peers (Bass, 1990). Charismatic leaders, who are defined as envisioning, empathic, and empowering leaders, improve their employee's job satisfaction, task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and other positive impacts like these (Choi, 2006). Transformational leadership was also found to be more related to a "feeling type" of person, who displays emotions more often in contrast to other leadership types (Roush & Atwater, 1992).

It is then possible that having a higher capacity to express emotions may also support a higher capacity for emotion sharing capabilities. In a study by Skinner and Spurgeon (2005), self-reported measures of empathy of managers and subordinate-reported levels of transformational leadership have also been found to be related to each other, specifically the dimensions of empathic concern, perspective taking, and empathic matching. Emotional intelligence, of which empathy has been described to be a component (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), has also been shown to be related to transformational leadership (Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000) and has an important role in effective leadership in general (George, 2000).

While there has been previous work on the relationship between transformational leadership and empathy (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005), this study specifically aims to examine how transformational leadership relates to the decision-making processes of work leaders in the moment, when faced with a work-related problem. It could be useful to look at leader empathy moment-by-moment to understand why empathy is being avoided or engaged with. Using the Empathy Selection Task developed by Cameron, et al (under review) in this study, it is possible to look at work scenarios and decide whether to empathize with the employee or not in the moment. The Empathy Selection Task is a novel behavioral measure that will present these case-by-case scenarios over 40 trials giving participants a free choice between empathy and an alternative plan of action. Previous research with this task also suggests that people avoid empathizing with others because of the cognitive costs associated with empathy, such as difficulty or aversiveness (Cameron, Hutcherson, Ferguson, Scheffer, Hadjiandreou, & Inzlicht, under review). In this study, participants were asked to rate each deck on perceived effort and difficulty using the NASA Task-Load Index and the results found that participants found the empathy deck more effortful and difficult. These perceived costs were also associated with reduced empathy choice in the Empathy Selection Task. Using this measure in relation to leadership may be advantageous because most of the previous work discussed here used self-report measures, while this task allows for behavioral measures.

Based on Skinner and Spurgeon findings (2005), we hypothesize that high ratings of transformational leadership will correlate with choosing to express empathy when faced with a hypothetical workplace problem over a series of trials. We also hypothesize that costs associated with empathy will be related to empathy avoidance, as found in previous work (Cameron, et al, under review). We will address this hypothesis by asking participants to rate how difficult and challenging the empathy deck was to complete. It is possible, for example, that transformational leaders view cognitive costs associated with empathy differently than other leadership types, which may explain why they avoid it less.

Method

Participants

A total of 380 MTurk participants were recruited (60 female, 104 male, 1 other, M_{age} = 34.17, SD_{age} = 10.19). Of the 380 recruited, 180 dropped out before finishing the survey, 1 was a repeat and was therefore excluded, and 34 were excluded for providing nonsense responses to the task. The proportion of participants that were white/Caucasian was 73.3%, for Black/African-American it was 17.6%, Hispanic/Latino was 7.3%, for Asian/Pacific Islander it was 5.5%, for Native American 1.8%, and other .6%.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were first tested on their leadership style with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) with questions about transformational leadership such as, "I enable others to think about old problems in new ways," or "I am content to let others continue working in the same ways always" (Howell & Avolio, 1993). The participant's behavioral choices to avoid or express empathy were then measured using a modified version of the Empathy Selection Task (EST) with 40 trials (Cameron, Hutcherson, Ferguson, Scheffer, Hadjiandreou, & Inzlicht, under review). The instructions given to the participants for the EST included:

Imagine that you are a leader of a successful company.

In this task, you will complete a series of trials. On each trial, you will see a workplace problem vignette and two decks of cards (a FEEL deck and a DESCRIBE deck). Each of the vignettes describe a workplace violation. You should choose (between these decks) a pathway to solve the problem. Each deck has specific instructions. Depending on which deck you have chosen, you will then be given one of two possible sets of instructions.

When you choose the FEEL deck, you will be told to have empathy and share in the emotional experience of the person in the vignette. The goal for this kind of trial is to feel empathy and share in the internal emotional experience of the person. On these trials, please provide three keywords to describe the emotional experience of this person (Example: "sad, hurt, confused" or "happy, pleased, interested"). It is okay to use the same keyword for different trials, just make sure you are describing the feelings and experiences of the person in the vignette (e.g. mood, emotion, etc.)

When you choose the DESCRIBE deck, the goal is to be objective and focus on the behavior and quality of the person in the vignette. To be objective in this trial, try to focus only on the person's behavior. On these trials, please provide three keywords to describe the behavior of this person (Example: "forgetful, indecisive, careless" or "thoughtful, polite, innovative"). It is okay to use the same keyword for different trials, just make sure you are describing the behavior of the person in the vignette (e.g. conscientious, responsible, etc.)

You are free to choose from either deck on any trial. Feel free to move from one deck to the other whenever you choose. If one deck begins to seem preferable, feel free to choose that deck more often. Overall, this task will take the same amount of time regardless of which deck you choose.

For each trial, the participants were given a workplace problem vignette modeled after business case studies from the MIT Management Sloan School and the Western Michigan Employee Code of Conduct such as, A) "A call center employee of yours has been late every day for the past week. You must speak with this employee," B) "A contractor under your supervision has been inflating the damage cost estimates in houses that they are working on for personal gain. You must speak with this employee," and C) "A toll-operator under your supervision has been giving back too much change at tolls. You must speak with this employee" (Case Studies, Employee conduct and disciplinary action, 2018). Participants were then told to select one of two pathways, presented as decks of cards, to create a solution to the workplace problem. The choice is to either feel what the employee is feeling during the experience (empathic pathway) or describe the quality of the employee during this experience (non-empathic pathway).

When the feel deck is chosen, participants were told:
Read the vignette and try to feel what this person is feeling. Empathically focus on the internal experiences and feelings of this person. Please write 3 keywords describing the experiences and feelings of this person.
When the describe deck is chosen, participants were told:
Read the vignette and try to notice the behavior of this person. Objectively focus on the behavior this person. Please provide 3 keywords describing the objective behavior of this person.

After a pathway was selected for each vignette, participants were asked "Please indicate how much you want to perform the following actions in relation to this employee:" and then indicate on a scale how much they would like to punish or help the employee ranging from "Do not prefer," to "Prefer a great deal".

Participants then completed the NASA Task-load index (Hart & Staveland, 1988). This measure has participants rate each deck on how effortful, aversive, and difficult they are to examine if people are avoiding empathy because of the cognitive costs associated. The index has items like "How mentally demanding was this deck?" and "How hard did you have to work to accomplish your level of performance with this deck?". To explore the relationship between social norms and the choice to empathize, participants completed a social norm measure with questions such as "How often do you think your employees would want you to show empathy?" "How useful do you think other people think empathy is for leadership?" and "How appropriate is empathy in a business setting?" Lastly, participants completed individual difference measures of trait empathy using the Empathy Index and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index as well as demographic measures (e.g., race, age, socioeconomic status, political orientation) (Bloom, 2017, Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996).

Results

Empathy choice and preferences to help and punish. Replicating previous studies that have developed the Empathy Selection Task (Cameron et al., 2018), participants showed a preference to avoid empathy, choosing empathy on average 42.27% of the time ($SD = 29.89\%$), which deviated from chance, $t(164) = -3.32$, $p = .001$. Across trials, participants showed a moderate preference to help the employees ($M = 2.85$, $SD = .84$), and a moderate preference to punish the employees ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .70$), and the desire to punish was stronger than the desire to help, $F(1, 164) = 37.35$, $p < .001$. Empathy choices correlated with preferences for helping, $r = .30$, $p < .001$, but there was no relationship with preferences for punishing, $r = -.03$, $p = .665$.

Empathy choice and transformational leadership. The transformational leadership measure showed good reliability (Cronbach alpha = .89, $M = 3.55$, $SD = .55$). Transformational leadership was not correlated with empathy choice, $r = .06$, $p = .459$, contrary to our prediction. However, transformational leadership correlated positively with preferences for helping, $r = .31$, $p < .001$, and also with preferences for punishing, $r = .19$, $p = .014$.

Cognitive costs and empathy choice. Participants were marginally more likely to view empathy as effortful ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.11$) compared to objective detachment ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.06$), $F(1, 163) = 3.16$, $p = .077$, but did not view empathy as more aversive ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.41$) than objectivity ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.40$), $F(1, 163) = .01$, $p = .912$. Additionally, participants were less likely to feel successful at empathy ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.19$) than at objective detachment ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .90$), $F(1, 163) = 6.05$, $p = .015$. These results suggest that empathy is generally felt as more cognitively difficult, as in prior work (Cameron et al., 2018). We computed difference scores for effort, aversiveness, and efficacy. Empathy choice correlated with efficacy, $r = .35$, $p < .001$, but not with effort, $r = -.04$, $p = .631$, or with aversiveness, $r = -.09$, $p = .265$. Preferences to help also correlated with efficacy, $r = .27$, $p = .001$, but not with effort, $r = .01$, $p = .896$, or with aversiveness, $r = .06$, $p = .416$, and preferences to punish were not correlated with any of the difference scores ($p > .070$). These results replicate prior work showing that perceived efficacy at empathy associated with empathy choice (Cameron et al., under review). Finally, leadership did not correlate with any of the cognitive cost difference scores ($p > .380$). It appears that any prosocial impact of transformational leadership in the current study may not be due to cognitive costs, according to these results.

Trait empathy. Replicating some prior work (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005), transformational leadership correlated with self-report trait empathy on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, with positive correlations with Empathic Concern ($r = .21$, $p = .007$), Perspective Taking ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), and Fantasy ($r = .20$, $p = .009$). However, there were not correlations with the Empathy Index measures of Empathy ($r = .10$, $p = .184$) and Behavioral Contagion ($r = .12$, $p = .115$). Table 1 displays correlations between the trait empathy measures and leadership, empathy choice, and preferences for helping and punishing.

Social norms. The three items about how others value empathy was averaged together, and the two items about how participants themselves value empathy were averaged together. Believing that others value empathy was not correlated with empathy choice, $r = -.06$, $p = .443$, nor with punishment preferences, $r = .15$, $p = .053$, but was positively correlated with helping preferences, $r = .21$, $p = .007$. Personal beliefs that empathy is valuable were not correlated with empathy choice, $r = .02$, $p = .810$, nor with punishment preferences, $r = -.08$, $p = .340$, but was positively correlated with helping preferences, $r = .27$, $p = .001$. Transformational leadership correlated positively with believing that others value empathy in business and leaders, $r = .28$, $p < .001$, and also with personal beliefs that empathy is valuable in these settings, $r = .18$, $p = .018$.

General Discussion

In this study, we tested the relationship between transformational leadership and empathy choice. While our hypothesis about the relationship between transformational leadership and choosing empathy was not supported, we did find that people, on average, chose to avoid empathy, consistent with previous work (Cameron, et al., under review). The choice to empathize also correlated with choosing to help the employee. Transformational leadership also correlated with choosing to help and with choosing to punish the employee. In general, participants showed a moderate preference to punish and help the employees, however, the desire to punish was stronger.

The second hypothesis focused on cognitive costs associated with empathy. We found that participants felt the empathy deck was more effortful than the objective deck, but not more aversive. The results also indicated that participants felt less successful at completing the Feel deck, replicating previous results (Cameron, et al, under review). There was no relationship between empathy choice and effort or aversiveness associated with the deck, but there was a positive relationship between empathy choice and how effective the participants thought they were at completing the empathy deck. The results suggest no relationship between transformational leadership and any cognitive costs associated with the empathy deck.

Transformational leadership correlated with self-reported empathy, specifically with the subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index of empathic concern, perspective taking, and fantasy similar to previous works (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005). There were no correlations with the self-reported Empathy Index measures and behavioral contagion (i.e. mirroring another's behaviors), however. This difference in results between the two scales could be due to the two scales measuring different facets of empathy. It might be possible that for transformational leadership, the emotion sharing aspect of empathy, measured by the Empathy Index, may be less important than the more prosocial aspects of empathy such as compassion and perspective-taking. The Empathy Selection Task used in this study also measures emotion sharing, so this could be another reason why no correlation was found between transformational leadership and empathy choice.

These results used a behavioral measure of the Empathy Selection Task and find no relationship between transformational leadership and empathy choice, contrasting with previous findings of a relationship using a self-report empathy measure (Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005). When the relationship between transformational leadership and the self-report empathy measure (IRI and EI) in this study is examined, however, the results of the previous work are supported. Transformational leadership also relates to choosing to help employees when given a choice in our task. It could be possible that self-report measures of empathy finding a relationship between empathy and transformational leadership are measuring past prosocial actions, such as helping employees, instead of empathy specifically. Participants rating their own empathy may be conflating empathy and prosocial actions.

The social norms measure used in this study focused on how oneself and others value empathy. We found that believing others valued empathy did not correlate with choosing empathy or choosing to punish the employee but did correlate with choosing to help the employee. Similar results were found for self-values of empathy; valuing empathy did not correlate with empathy choice or choosing to punish, but it did correlate with choosing to help. Transformational leadership was found to be correlated with believing that empathy is valuable, as well as believing others think empathy is valuable.

This study's findings that people are avoiding empathy replicate previous findings (Cameron, et al., under review). One factor of empathy avoidance could be that leaders feel like empathy is inappropriate in the workplace, and therefore empathy may be more effortful because the leader must overcome his or her predispositions towards the emotion. The results of the social norms measure show that empathy choice was not correlated with believing both self and others valued empathy, which may be some indication of the attitudes towards the appropriateness of empathy. However, the results also indicated that there wasn't a correlation between beliefs of empathy values and empathy choice, meaning that beliefs in empathy value do not translate into choosing empathy. Even if beliefs about empathy were not correlated with empathy choice, helping choices did correlated. Perhaps, again, empathy may not be as important to transformational leaders as prosocial behaviors such s helping.

This current study adds to the growing literature about attitudes about empathy in the workplace. Transformational leadership is often thought to be the more empathic leadership style, but the results of this current study suggest that it may not be entirely empathy that is driving the prosocial behaviors of these types of leaders. Transformational leaders were not choosing to empathize any more often than other leadership styles when using a behavioral measure. Understanding the processes behind the decision making of leaders with regard to empathy can make it easier to predict how transformational leaders will react to problems in the workplace. The results that empathy choice is correlated to helping behaviors possibly suggests that empathizing with subordinates may predict more prosocial behaviors in the workplace. These results also found that empathy avoidance is correlated with how effective the participant felt they are at empathizing. Perhaps empathy in the workplace could be promoted if expressing empathy is accepted and leaders, or people in general, feel supported when they choose to empathize.

The results of this study could be strengthened if some limitations are addressed. One such limitation could be that we used the general populous instead of targeting specifically leaders or managers as a sample. Using managers or leaders could strengthen the findings because as sample of leaders could be more realistic. Another improvement could be to use a more immersive leadership manipulation, where the participants are assigned leadership roles and subordinates. This could be helpful because a manipulation such as this could more closely model real life and therefore produce more accurate results. A future direction to build on these findings could be to target specific occupations to sample from. There could be a difference in the role of empathy in certain occupations. It could also be interesting to further develop the vignettes used in this study to strengthen them for future use. Currently, no strong set of workplace problem examples such as this exist. Another possible direction to explore could be differences in race, age, or gender and how these are affecting empathy choice. Could female leaders be empathizing more than males? Perhaps younger leaders are empathizing differently than older leaders.

While the results of the relationship between transformational leadership and empathy may be based on the measures used, transformational leadership does predict more prosocial behaviors such as helping. The cognitive costs associated with empathy are also important to keep in mind, as they may be affecting whether leaders in general are choosing to avoid or engage with empathy.

Table 1.

Correlations Between Leadership and Empathy Measures.

	Leader.	Emp. Choice	Help	Punish	IRI EC	IRI PD	IRI PT	IRI FS	EI Emp.	EI Beh.
Leadership	1.000	.058	.312**	.190*	.209**	-.255**	.465**	.203**	.104	.123
Emp. Choice	.058	1.000	.303**	-.034	-.032	.214**	.009	.090	.343**	.318**
Helping	.312**	.303**	1.000	-.033	.015	.173*	.086	.104	.351**	.381**
Punishing	.190*	-.034	-.033	1.000	-.188*	.105	-.101	-.155*	.114	.065
IRI EC	.209**	-.032	.015	-.188*	1.000	-.069	.608**	.456**	.028	-.096
IRI PD	-.255**	.214**	.173*	.105	-.069	1.000	-.261**	.151	.583**	.540**
IRI PT	.465**	.009	.086	-.101	.608**	-.261**	1.000	.438**	-.004	-.081
IRI FS	.203**	.090	.104	-.155*	.456**	.151	.438**	1.000	.336**	.290**
EI Empathy	.104	.343**	.351**	.114	.028	.583**	-.004	.336**	1.000	.766**
EI Behavior	.123	.318**	.381**	.065	-.096	.540**	-.081	.290**	.766**	1.000

Note. $*p<.05$. $**p<.01$. IRI EC = Empathic Concern. IRI PD = Personal Distress. IRI PT = Perspective Taking. IRI FS = Fantasy. All correlations have $N = 165$ except those involving the IRI and EI sub-scales, which have $N = 164$.

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