Can Empathy Training Reduce Empathy Avoidances in the Context of Social Disparities: The Case for Empathy Experts

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Introduction

The term empathy, first coined by Edward B. Titchener, can be broken down into two components: *em* meaning in/into, and *pathy*, referring to feelings, sensitivity or perception (Edwards, 2013; "Root Words & Prefixes: Quick Reference," n.d.). Empathy is known for playing a vital role in our interpersonal and prosocial interactions, which helps provide an emotional bridge between individuals by allowing them to resonate with others, emotionally and cognitively, by taking on their perspective and experiences as their own. By understanding how others are feeling, individuals are more equipped to respond more appropriately to the present situation which aids in building trust and connection with others (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988).

Empathy as a motivated phenomenon

Although empathy is often seen as beneficial, effortless and automatic (Cameron at el, 2019), recent research indicates that it is not always as automatic as it seems as it may entail cognitive, emotional, and material costs. This has been referred to as a motivated account of empathy (Cameron et al., 2019; Zaki, 2014). A 2019 study by Cameron et al. suggests that the motivation to empathize derives from factors such as who we are empathizing with and in what context. These forces can shape an individual's response in an empathy eliciting situation. Cameron et al. demonstrated that individuals avoided an empathy eliciting situations when it was perceived to require cognitive cost (money, time and etc.) or when they felt they were not skilled at being empathic (low efficacy). This was found using the Empathy Selection Task, which uses a free-choice response format to assess one's willingness or motivation to engage in empathy. Participants were shown pictures of individual faces and the participants were given the choice to empathize (feel) with the target and attempt to feel the target's emotions or objectively describe (describe) the target such as external features, age etc. The ratio of empathy choices to the total number of choices was then used as indicator of empathy engagement which allowed researchers to participants motivation to engage in empathy.

Other research has indicated that people tend to choose to avoid certain situations based on costly decisions. The "Law of Least Effort", indicates that individuals are more likely to minimize the amount of effort they use in order to attain desirable outcomes (App et al). This same principle is likely linked to the cost-benefit analysis that individuals engage in when making decisions to empathize (or not) in a given situation.

Therefore, if attempting to share in the experience and feelings of a target (i.e., empathizing) is seen as effortful or difficult due to any of the reasons noted above, then this can lead to greater empathy avoidance.

Conversely, individuals who have some sort of training in engaging in empathy and have the necessary skills and tools to perspective take and share ideas may not feel the need to avoid empathy.

Experience sharing and perspective taking

Experience sharing and perspective taking are some facets of empathy which can overlap and be coactive in a situation. Experience sharing is shown to be beneficial by helping people learn each other's norms and emotions. Yet, experience sharing, according to Cameron et al. (2019) is seen as particularly difficult because vicariously resonating with others (e.g., experience sharing) can be cognitively effortful, which can then lead to greater motivation to avoid empathy. Higgins (1981) described perspective taking as the ability to see the world through another's eyes. It is associated with an increase in the willingness to help others and can be linked with decreases in prejudice (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson & Galinksy, 2011). Experience sharing and perspective taking have been shown to have multiple benefits, yet perspective taking and experiences sharing can also increase empathy avoidance. The uncertainty that is involved in attempting to share the experiences or taking the perspective of an unfamiliar stranger may demand a high cost for empathizing. However, the tendency to avoid empathy can also be offset by a sufficient reward or by changing people's efficacy for empathy. Cameron's study demonstrated that simply telling participants that they were more accurate than 50% of participants was enough to create an increased sense of efficacy (as demonstrated by self-ratings of efficacy and decreased cognitive effort) and eliminate empathy avoidance. On the other hand, empathy avoidance may be greater in contexts where the experiences of the target seem far outside of one's own experiences. One such context is when confronting social disparities involving an outgroup.

Empathy Motivation in the Context of Social Disparities

The factors discussed may be a driving force that make empathizing with an outgroup less likely. Cameron and Payne (2011) argues that the human emotion is set to respond more strongly to individuals than to groups. They also argue that empathy collapse, defined as a decrease in sensitivity toward groups of people when the number of people in need of help increases, is due to the attempt to regulate emotions. They tested the hypothesis by observing how often people gave to charities that involve one individual in need of aid vs. charities that aid a large group of people. They found that people donated more to an individual in need of charity vs. a charity that helps a group of people. They argued that the collapse of empathy was not because individuals were lacking compassion to mass suffering. Instead they argued that this was because of natural limits on the human emotional response which may not be able to process the large emotional input associated with mass suffering as opposed to an individual person suffering. Their findings support the idea that individuals tend to avoid empathizing more with numerous individuals in agony as opposed to a single victim of tragedy. Social disparities, another form of large-scale suffering, could also lead to more avoidance as seen in the previous studies above.

A study by Cho et al., (2019) was investigating whether individuals are more likely to avoid empathy when the stimuli they are asked to engage with invoke social disparities/inequalities. She examined this question by using a modified version of the Empathy Selection Task developed by Cameron et al., (2019).

Their modified task included 20 trials total, all portraying an African American target with a brief vignette implicating cause of the suffering as social disparities related or not.

They found that empathy avoidance was particularly strong and was associated with lower empathic efficacy in the context of social disparities. The social disparities context may be particularly likely to lead to empathy avoidance because it contains two aspects already known to relate to empathy avoidance: an outgroup context and mass suffering. These two characteristics of social disparities are likely to induce empathy avoidance as it is likely to be associated with greater cognitive effort and increased feelings of inefficacy because most people do not have the experiences to be able to perspective-take in that situation.

Empathy "Experts"

Although disparity contexts may be hard for most, would less empathy avoidance be seen among individuals who are given the tools to empathize more? Are there people who might show less avoidance in the context of social disparities? For our experiment, we studied a unique population to further understand the factors that may lead to less empathy avoidance /greater empathy engagement. We refer to them as *empathy experts* because they have been trained to engage in empathy or are engaged in empathy daily. We are assuming that due to their experience with or training in engaging empathically with others, that they are more less likely to show empathy avoidance due to increased feelings of efficacy at engaging in empathy and/or a resulting decrease in cognitive effort associated with empathy. One example of empathy experts can be found within the Penn State organization known as *World in Conversation*.

World in Conversation (WINC) is known for expanding perspectives and building an understanding on controversial topics through facilitated dialogue. Facilitated dialogue creates an understanding between individuals, locally and globally, on controversial topics such as race, politics, sexuality and social disparities and injustice. Facilitators are individuals who are trained to navigate the difficult dynamics that can occur between individuals in these dialogues, in order to foster genuine and honest communication with the ultimate goal of creating a better relationship that can produce a more eye-opening and productive conversations ("World in Conversation" n.d). Every World in Conversation facilitator has undergone at least 240 hours of training and yearly facilitators lead more than 1,200 face-to face dialogues, focused on practicing communication skills that encourage every perspective on a topic to be heard, examined, and constructively challenged.

WINC facilitators seek different perspectives in a conversation and trust that sharing of experiences and ideas will lead to a greater understanding of one's self and others. They are encouraged to take a neutral position during facilitated dialogues, even if their own feelings on a topic are not neutral. Aside from facilitating dialogues, facilitators take a class with other facilitators, from all different cultures and background, in which they are the participants of the dialogues in which they get to hear different perspectives while also sharing their experiences about different controversial topics and their lives. Thus, the skills, the conversations, and training which facilitators have undergone have allowed them to regularly engage in situations that use empathy and require them to get in touch with the feelings and experiences of others.

The Present Study

Prior work, such as the research done by Cameron et al. (2019), shows that people are motivated to avoid cognitive work, but no studies have examined how this domain-general preference applies to people who engage in experience sharing on a regular basis. The ability to navigate difficult social issues (such as those related to racism, social inequality, etc.) requires empathy as a crucial first step toward this process (Watt, 2007).

This study will examine if expert facilitators who are being trained to facilitate difficult dialogues around social issues (including social disparity) show a decreased tendency to avoid empathy and view empathy as less cognitively taxing or have higher perceived efficacy in engaging in empathy relative to non-facilitators in a context in which social disparities are highlighted. The findings of this study will help identify whether training in experience sharing and empathy might allow individuals to choose to engage with others even in circumstances when others tend to avoid it. By identifying such a skill, we can take steps toward improving intergroup relations in our society.

Using a sample of empathy experts from the WINC program as participants we will test our research question by conducting an online experimental study using the modified version of the Empathy Selection Task used by Cho et al. (2019), which features distressed African American individual with social disparities either implicated as the cause of the distress (or no cause given). We predict that the sample of empathy experts from the WINC program would choose to engage in empathy significantly more when compared to the Cho et al., (2019) sample due to greater experience and training in engaging in empathy.

Methods

Participants

Participants were World in Conversation student facilitators who were recruited via emails. The final sample consisted of 14 World in Conversation facilitators with an average age of 26 with 50% male and 50% female. In terms of race, 8 identified as White, 2 Black or African America, 1 Asian, 2 Mixed Caucasian/Other. Upon completion of the study each participant was emailed a $5.00 electronic amazon gift card to the email provided.

Measures

Modified Empathy Selection Task (EST). For the purpose of the present study participants completed a modified version of the Empathy selection task (Cameron Et al 2019). The original EST involves presenting participants with various pictures of a distressed individual. Participants then choose to either empathize with ("feel the target individual's internal feelings") or describe the target in the picture ("remain objective and identify the person's external features such as gender, age etc."). Afterward they are asked to write three keywords that reflects their selected option.

The modified version used in the present study uses 20 trials free choice trials were participants are specifically presented with images of a distressed African American individual with brief vignettes implicating the cause of the suffering as social disparities. For example,"In the US, if you apply for a job with a Black-sounding name, you are 50% less likely to get a call back than with a White-sounding name. The person in the photograph has been struggling to find a job". Next, participants choose between engaging in empathy (FEEL option) or remaining objectively detached (DESCRIBE option).

NASA Task load index. After completing the EST, Participants completed the NASA task load index which measures the participants perceived cognitive cost associated with each choice. The NASA task load index included questions regarding the degree of mental demand ("How mentally demanding was this option?"), effort ("How hard did you have to work to accomplish your level of performance with this deck?"), efficacy ("How successful were you in accomplishing what you were asked to do in this deck?"), and stress ("How irritated, stressed or annoyed were you by this option?). These different questions allowed us to examine how distinct facets of cognitive work might relate to empathy avoidance (Cameron et al, 2019).

Demographics. After participants complete all 20 trails, they proceeded to answer questions about their demographics, such as gender, country of birth, political leaning, age, and how many semesters they have served as a World in Conversation facilitator. We included a question about amount of time served as a facilitator to possibly be used as a moderator, given that greater amounts of experience could be associated with less empathy avoidance.

Additional Measures. Our survey incorporated additional measures that were not used in the current study. Participants completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) which is comprised of personal distress (PD) and Empathic Concern Scale (subscale of the interpersonal Reactivity Index) which measures participants' feelings of warmth, compassion, concern for others (Davis, 1980) and the Identification with All Humanity Scale (IWAH).

Procedures

Participants were recruited through an email sent out to a list of World in Conversation facilitator. The study was completed online via a Qualtrics survey. The first screen presented to the participant was the informed consent form and by continuing with the study, participants indicated their consent to participate. Once consent was obtained, the participants were given task instructions informing them that they would complete a series of trials in which they would be asked to make decisions. Participants then completed the modified Empathy Selection Task. Next, they completed the demographics questions along with additional measures. After the survey, a debriefing was provided to explain the purpose of the study to the participants.

Results

Data Analysis Approach.

The main dependent variable for the study was empathy choice, calculated as the percentage of total trials where participants chose to feel empathy over describe We tested whether the mean empathy choice score was significantly different from .50 using a one-sample t-test to see if there was evidence of empathy avoidance. We then compare these results to those of the previous study (Cho et al. 2019—the poster) in order to determine whether facilitators avoid empathy less, also using a one-sample t-test evaluated against the empathy choice scores obtained from Cho et al.

Preliminary Analysis

The main outcome of interest in the study was the percentage of trials that the participants chose to empathize over describe. Overall, the results denoted that individuals leaned toward choosing to empathize with the targets more than they chose to describe the targets objectively 62% vs 38%. The sample t-test revealed that this was significantly different from the 50% expected by chance, $t(13) = 2.70$, $p = .02$ indicating that there was less empathy avoidance in our sample.

Primary Analysis

Our hypothesis was that participants would show decreased empathy avoidance in the context of social disparity, due to previous training and experience with engaging in empathy, in comparison to the findings from Cho et al. (2019). An independent sample t-test revealed that the mean empathy choice in Cho's at al., (2019) social disparity condition (.41) was significantly different than the mean empathy choice in our condition (.62), $t(13) = 4.70$, $p = .00$. The mean of the conditions was opposite the direction as reported by Cho et al., (2019), with individuals showing more engagement with empathy rather than avoidance.

Discussion

Empathy plays a vital role in interpersonal and prosocial interactions and yet people tend to avoid empathy due to perceived cognitive effort and inefficacy (Cameron et al., 2019). This study focused on whether this avoidance might be reduced among expert facilitators who have been trained to facilitate difficult dialogues around social issues (including social disparities) as part of a university program (World in Conversation). We found that, compared to "non-experts," facilitators showed a tendency to engage in empathy, rather than avoid it in social disparity contexts.

Our study is one of the first to document empathy engagement with the Empathy Selection Task, as opposed to other studies that document a tendency toward empathy avoidance (Cameron at al., 2019, Cho et al., 2019). For example, Cameron et al. reported that participants were primarily avoiding empathy and that this was linked to the perception that trying to share in the feelings of others was a cognitive struggle. For the empathy experts in our study, however, the hands-on emotional experiences associated with facilitating difficult dialogues (empathizing, perspective-taking, appreciation of multiple viewpoints) may have helped diminish any concerns about inefficacy around feeling or sharing in the target's emotions. Thus, having the skills to understand that everyone's perspective and experience is needed may have allowed facilitators enough practice in using empathy that they were comfortable choosing empathy with greater frequency.

Although we were unable to test this given our current sample size, we suspect that facilitators would report a greater sense of efficacy in empathizing and feelings that less cognitive effort was required in completing the EST, relative to what has been reported in previous studies (Cameron et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2019). Although no other studies have examined how empathy experts fare in completing a task like the EST, we do have reason to believe that reduced feelings of inefficacy can lead to less avoidance. Specifically, Cameron et al. tried to manipulate sense of efficacy and found that they were able to make participants feel more efficacious, and this was subsequently related to less empathy avoidance. Or strategy in the present study was not to manipulate sense of efficacy, but to find individuals who we suspected would already have greater sense of efficacy. It would be interesting to also try to manipulate efficacy among a sample of empathy experts to determine whether there we can increase empathy engagement even further. Future studies can consider asking this question.

Implications

Our results do not imply that people will always not avoid empathy, but it does imply that empathy is a learned skill and that receiving training in empathy is associated with an increase in one's willingness to empathize. This can possibly contribute to advancing programs that align with training in empathy, such as the World in Conversation program.

By advancing programs such as World in Conversation we can help develop more empathy experts, who can be people that are doing academic, social and scientific work, while constantly engaging in empathy. Future work can also study other individuals who could be considered empathy experts. As an example, those with social justice training may also demonstrate less empathy avoidance in a disparities context. There may also be other individuals who are in fields of study where empathy is a primary skill that is needed such as nursing, clinical psychology, and education. There are likely many empathy experts out there, we just need to include them in our future research to determine how they approach or avoid empathy in difficult situations such as the disparities context we examined.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study had numerous limitations. One weakness of the study was the sample size, unfortunately we were not able to recruit the number of participants we had initially targeted. The sample size of our study was also much smaller than that of Cho's study ($N = 14$ vs. $N = 130$), though the direction and magnitude of our results appear to be somewhat robust given that we still found a significant comparison with chance levels and the Cho et al. (2019) sample. Nevertheless, additional data should be collected in order to have greater statistical power to detect our effects of interest.

Another limitation of our study is the variability of ages and gender of the targets in the photos and the participants. This variability could have affected participants' choice to empathize or not. For example, participants could have felt that women or male targets were more deserving of empathy and we did not explicitly test for this. We also did not have enough of a sample size to examine gender difference in empathy engagement among our WINC facilitators. This is important because studies have shown that women are more likely to empathize more than men (Ta & Ickes, 2017). Another between subject factor that might be interesting to examine is race since previous research has already demonstrated empathy avoidance or deficits with outgroup members (Tarrant et al., 2009).

Lastly, our study did not adequately study possible individuals difference that might relate to empathy avoidance. For example, in the future we aim to study individual tendencies in being empathic (using the empathic concern subscale of the interpersonal Reactivity Index) might affect empathic choice. Unfortunately, we were unable to do so in the present data given the small sample size. Another individual difference factor of interest would be level of experience (in terms of time spent being a facilitator) and how long ago they last facilitated, both factors that should be included in future studies.

Conclusion

This study, when taken in consideration with prior research, demonstrates that empathy experts did show a decrease in empathy avoidance. It shows that empathy is a learned skill and with the help of training (or a class) we can increase an individuals' willingness to empathize. Our work is the first to show that receiving training in empathy is associated with an increase in empathizing and that engaging frequently in experience sharing might lead to less cognitive effort associated with engaging with empathy. Although preliminary, we hope this research will contribute to research on motivation and empathy and possibly contribute to training on empathy in order to take steps toward improving intergroup relations in our society.

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