

The Role of Empathy in Peer Relationships During Childhood and Adolescence

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Abstract: Empathy holds pivotal significance in fostering favorable peer engagements throughout the phases of childhood and adolescence. Although there is a large body of literature that addresses this issue, studies undertaken with children and adolescents have shown inconclusive results about the correlation between empathy and peer relationships. Various measures of peer relationships (such as peer attachment, friendships, and peer acceptability) and empathy (including affective and cognitive empathy, perspective-taking, and Theory of Mind) all contribute to challenges in reaching definitive conclusions. Hence, the association between peer relationships and empathy in children and adolescents remains unclear. Current work seeks to (a) provide an overview of how empathy is commonly conceptualised and quantified in child development and adolescent research, and (b) address pressing difficulties with empathy research in both child development and adulthood. It indicates the distinct roles played by affective and cognitive empathy in different constructs of peer interactions and prosocial behaviours. Additionally, the relationship between empathy and various aspects of peer relationships shows variation between genders and by using different measurements. We conclude by offering suggestions for future research on (a) distinguishing different aspects of empathy; (b) providing a more comprehensive framework of empathy; (c) examining the mediating role of gender in association between empathy and peer relationships.

Keywords: affective empathy, cognitive empathy, peer relationship, children and adolescence, pro-social behaviors

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been a surge of interest in the effects of empathy on children and adolescents' social-emotional development in the field of social and educational psychology. According to Vygotsky's social-cultural theory, he highlights the critical role of social interaction in the developmental process, underscoring how social interactions hold significant importance in the developmental journey of children and adolescents, with their impact intensifying as children transition into adolescence and as adolescence transition into adulthood [1][2]. Robust literature [3][4] has pointed out the importance of empathy for adaptive social relationship and pro-social behaviors. Therefore, in considering the various features of empathy employed in research, it is crucial both theoretically and practically to distinguish between and examine different aspects of empathy among

children and adolescents and understanding whether these facets of empathy hold foregrounding implications for children's and adolescents' interaction with peers in various social contexts.

The current inquiry draws on and synthesizes prior literature in this significant issue in order to examine the role of empathy in peer relationship during developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. Considering the potential distinct associations between affective and cognitive empathy with multiple dimensions of peer relationships, it is important to conduct a comprehensive review of existing research in order to summarize the available evidence, identify any gaps in the literature, and provide recommendations for future investigations. Investigating the correlation between empathy and constructive elements of peer interactions in adolescence is also congruent with psychology which places emphasis on the life-span development of positive psychological attributes to enhance individual flourishing. From a developmental standpoint, it has been suggested that the development of empathy could potentially contribute to wellbeing.

2. Affective Empathy

Affective empathy revolves around the rapid emotional responses that children feel when they witness others in negative emotions, and it usually involves the observer, for example the children, is able to experience a similar emotion or feeling to that of the victim [3]. Emotional reactions to others' distress manifest as the earliest indications of empathy in infancy, and as children grow through the toddler and preschool stages, affective empathy evolves from self-centered distress to other-focused concern [5]. Eisenberg suggests that rapid emotional responses triggered by perceiving others' negative emotions can lead to two different ways of psychological processing, each with distinctive response [3]. One is empathic distress, also referred to as sympathetic response. It involves a profound emotional connection with the difficulty and negative emotions experienced by an individual within a relationship, to the extent that the observer internalizes the emotional turmoil of the partner [6]. Notably, empathic distress differs from personal distress, which involves a focus on one's own emotional discomfort to the point where the emotions or experiences of others are not recognized [6]. On the other hand, personal distress is a self-centered negative reaction to others' difficult situations, prompting to alleviate one's own discomfort rather than focusing on helping the person in need [7]. Also, personal distress is characterized by a greater emphasis on one's own experiences and emotions, and there exists empirical evidence [6] indicating gender disparities in the ability to experience personal distress of affective empathy.

Notably, previous studies on children's affective empathy predominantly employ prevailing research practice [8][9][10] of deducing affective empathy, by examining children's expressive reactions in situations that induce empathy. This way of research practice operates under the assumption that experiencing empathy towards a victim is reflected in facial expressions of sadness and/or concern.

3. Cognitive Empathy

According to Davis, the cognitive aspect of empathy involves the ability and skills to comprehend the thoughts and emotions of others, especially in moments of others' difficulty or emotional distress [11]. The phenomenon of understanding and interpreting others' emotions and thoughts is commonly referred to as perspective taking, theory of mind, or mentalizing, as discussed in the existing literature in different studies. The conceptualization of cognitive empathy has shown a high level of variations and has mainly involved the use of questionnaires assessing emotional perspective-taking, as rated by children, parents, or teachers [12][13][14]. Additionally, acknowledging the complex nature of cognitive empathy, different assessment methods have been developed in measuring cognitive empathy within prior literature. Previous studies on cognitive empathy usually employ cognitive tasks

centered on children in order to evaluate emotion-related abilities during the experiment process. These tasks include labeling emotions expressed by a character, or inferring a character's emotional reaction to a challenging situation [15][16]. Some studies [5] employ methods that assess children's inclination to comprehend their own feelings when confronted with another person's emotional experience, as well as detailing and justifying their own emotional responses. These methods have all been used as measurements of cognitive empathy.

It should be highlighted that not all of these cognitive skills are exclusively linked to empathic processes. Within the prior research on cognitive empathy, a crucial differentiation exists between children's abilities of perspective-taking and children's inclination to engage in perspective-taking when confronted with others' negative emotions and feelings. Underwood and Moore point out such distinction, arguing that empathic perspective-taking represents a specialized facet of theory-of-mind understanding, which involves the skills and abilities of comprehending others' distinct emotions, feelings, and thoughts [17]. Therefore, while the ability to adopt others' perspectives is essential, it alone is not sufficient for cognitive empathy. In other words, as children come across situations that triggers their empathy, their ToM skills, combined with their inclination to engage in perspective-taking with others, both contribute to cognitive empathy and empathic experience [18][17].

4. Peer Relationships in Childhood and Adolescence

Children's interactions with peers initiate during their early years, and by the age of three, stable individual disparities and inclinations for specific peers start to surface [7]. Social abilities that facilitate these peer relationships become more defined during the preschool period because this is when peer groups start to form in terms of friendship circles, gender dynamics, and power hierarchies [19]. It's also a time when some children might encounter rejection from their peers. As childhood progresses, certain children might experience persistent issues within their peer relationships, such as loneliness, involvement in bullying, and becoming targets of victimization [20].

During the developmental stage of adolescence, there is a notable increase in the significance and intricacy of friendships and peer connections for adolescents [21]. In contrast to peer relationships established during childhood, adolescents' notion of close peer interaction and friendships are featured by greater levels of disclosure and intimacy, as well as the development of more substantial attachment relationships [21]. As teenagers experience a growing sense of autonomy, they gradually decrease their reliance on parental emotional support while concurrently increasing their dependence on the emotional support provided by their peers [6]. The significance of friendships and peer relationships for adolescents is indicative of their substantial role in facilitating social and emotional interactions, as well as exerting influence on their life.

5. Empathy and Peer Relationships

Correlations of a positive association are evident between affective empathy and cognitive empathy with prosocial behaviors among children in robust studies. For example, in the study by Findlay et al., children aged 6, as reported by their mothers to possess higher levels of dispositional affective empathy, exhibited an increased propensity to react to theoretical peer-related situations with comprehension and compassion [22]. Also, there are potential indications that task-based measurements of cognitive empathy, such as the Empathy Continuum, are linked to positive peer relationships. For instance, an investigation by Roberts and Strayer involving children aged 5 to 13 discovered a positive correlation between cognitive empathy and prosocial behavior during peer interactions among boys [23].

Notably, existing evidence indicates that affective and cognitive empathy are found to have independent associations with children's peer interactions. For instance, study by Fink and de Rosnay

demonstrates that elements of affective and cognitive empathy distinctly predict variability in peer-reported social preference [4]. Even though this result provides evidence that empathy serves as a positive factor of children's social competence, it underscores the diverse features of empathy and distinct correlations of these features with peer relationships. Different features of empathy, either affective or cognitive empathy, may have distinct roles in the development of children's peer relationships within a school setting.

Although both affective empathy and cognitive empathy have been separately linked to broader social skills, there is a lack of research that simultaneously explores the impact of different aspects of empathy on children's relationships with peers during the transition to school. A noteworthy exception can be seen in a study involving 5-year-old children, where both affective and cognitive empathy show positive connections with children's social tendencies [7]. However, research focusing on children's inclination toward aggressive behavior suggests that direct assessments might reveal a significant distinction in how affective and cognitive empathy are associated with negative social relationships in children. For example, in Noten and colleagues' study, a clear pattern emerges where only affective empathy predicted negative peer conduct in toddlers, while cognitive empathy does not contribute. Similarly, among children aged 8 to 12 years, it is solely affective empathy that displayed the ability to differentiate between those at higher and lower risks of engaging in anti-social behaviors in van Zonneveld and colleagues' investigation [14].

The majority of studies on peer relationship during adolescence have indicated either positive significant correlations or no correlations between empathy and positive characteristics of peer relationships. First, there is a positive correlation observed between increased levels of empathy and the presence of stronger peer attachment. It is plausible that the ability to comprehend and empathetically respond to the feelings and thoughts of one's peers facilitates genuine social connections among adolescents. For instance, the empirical research by You and Kim investigating the relationship between peer attachment and empathy have consistently found a positive and statistically significant correlation between peer attachment and two components of empathy, namely perspective taking and empathic care [24]. These findings indicate a positive and significant correlation between peer attachment and perspective taking, empathic concern, or general empathy in both male and female adolescents.

Second, there is a significant correlation observed between empathy and the quality or intimacy of friendships. The study conducted by Chow et al. reveals that there is a consistent association between interpersonal competency and the mediation of empathy and friendship quality [25]. Specifically, Chow and colleagues argue that the ability to engage in intimate peer interactions, such as self-disclosure and providing support, plays a mediating role in the connections between empathy and the level of closeness in friendships. Also, the ability to effectively manage conflicts in friendships mediates the relationship between empathy and the level of discord in friendships. Therefore, it may be beneficial to incorporate interventions focused on empathy into school programs aimed at improving interpersonal competence abilities, specifically in the areas of intimacy and conflict management, as this could potentially enhance the quality of friendships.

However, the association between affective empathy and peer acceptability, likeability, and social preference exhibits diverse outcomes. Therefore, the relationship between affective empathy and peer acceptance, likeability, and social preference remains ambiguous and requires additional research. In research such as by Oberle and colleagues, a positive correlation is observed between affective empathy and peer acceptability, likeability, and social preference [13]. Additionally, findings from Huang and Su's investigation indicate that there is generally no substantial association between cognitive empathy and peer acceptance, likeability, or social preference among girls [26]. Yet, this finding is opposite among boys, meaning that there is positive association observed between peer acceptance and cognitive empathy for boys. Therefore, the existing body of literature does not provide

substantial evidence to support a noteworthy correlation between cognitive empathy and peer acceptability, likeability, or social preference.

Additionally, it is worth noting that gender may play a role in certain instances [24], leading to variations in the link between empathy and certain peer interaction outcomes. This phenomenon could be partially explained by evolutionary theoretical frameworks, which posit that females may exhibit heightened levels of empathy due to their historical role in nurturing and maintaining supportive social connections to enhance the survival prospects of their offspring. According to Smith and Rose, socialization theory posits that individuals exert a significant influence on gender differences by consciously or unconsciously reinforcing these gender disparities [27]. For instance, one way this is done is by engaging in more conversations with girls than with boys regarding emotions and the importance of taking-care of others. It is recommended that parents, teachers, and peers exhibit awareness regarding gender role norms and their influence in perpetuating gender-specific behaviors. By discouraging the use of language and practices that promote traditional masculine ideals of emotional detachment and stoicism, individuals may potentially experience an elevation in their levels of empathy. Lastly, several research have also argued negative associations with higher levels of empathy and peer relationships. In their study, Smith and Rose address the notion of "costs of caring" by identifying a positive correlation between higher social perspective-taking abilities and increased empathic distress.

6. Conclusions

The significance of empathy as a positive factor in peer relationships is substantiated by its association with enhanced social interactions and increased overall well-being. While empathy has been linked to various positive outcomes, such as prosocial behaviors, it is worth noting that not all studies included in current paper reveal a positive significant correlation between empathy and components of positive peer relationships. Also, for research focus on children and adolescents, affective and cognitive empathy exhibit distinct associations with peer relationships. The current paper sheds light on whether certain empathy features gain greater significance during specific developmental stages. As children grow older, their peer connections become increasingly intricate. Consequently, the inclination to exhibit cognitive empathy may assume greater significance than affective empathy in determining children's social preference and social maturity. Additionally, although prior literature indicates that it might not be feasible to incorporate all different features of empathy into a comprehensive empathetic response, the distinct impact of these empathy features on peer relationships indicates that different conceptualizations of empathy may ultimately hinder a comprehensive comprehension of children's actions driven by empathy and their social relationships during the transition to formal schooling. Hence, the current paper calls on future additional research on examining different aspects of empathy and their own association to peer relationships. The current paper also acknowledges that cultivating positive peer relationships among children and adolescents holds substantial implications for children's and adolescents' prosocial behaviors and socio-emotional development.

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