

The Effects of Cognitive and Emotional Empathy in Moral Judgement and Relevant Factors

An Zhu*

Department of Biology, Australia National University, ACT, Australia

* Corresponding Author Email: u7343357@anu.edu.au

Abstract. Empathy is described as the ability to understand and experience others' feelings and thoughts. Moral judgment is an important part of moral cognition. Previous studies found that empathy was potentially correlated with moral judgment. In those studies, the researchers noticed that empathic people tended to behave more prosocial and the people with trait alexithymia tended to behave more utilitarian when facing some moral dilemmas. Whether cognitive empathy or affective empathy influence the judgment is still hotly debated. Some researchers thought cognitive empathy promoted positive results and affective empathy introduced negative results. Some other researchers hold the opposite opinion, and they thought that affective empathy should be the dominant, as it is spontaneously generated. As the research of empathy-moral judgment deepens, more and more relevant factors were found, such as guilt, population characters, and punishment. This review systematically reviewed cognitive and emotional empathy's contribution to moral judgment with other factors, such as guilt and moral character. This review suggested that empathy should be treated as an integral predictor of moral judgments. Because cognitive and emotional empathy both have their benefits and weaknesses, when combined, maximum impact could be achieved. This review can provide a relatively comprehensive understanding for developing effective interventions.

Keywords: Cognitive Empathy, Affective Empathy, Moral Judgment.

1. Introduction

The concept of empathy was first mentioned by some philosophers hundreds of years ago. Empathy is described as feeling as others feel and thinking as others think [1]. This concept is usually confused by associated concepts, such as sympathy and compassion. According to Benjamin, sympathy works as feeling for what happened to others, and empathy is like forming a mirror image of the targets by the observers [1]. Some scientists suggested that empathy is a congruent process and sympathy is like an incongruent process. The main difference between compassion and empathy was compassion usually links with a motivation to help others and leads to a direct consequence [2].

Although the concept of empathy is clear, its precise definition is still unclear until now. Different genres of studies advocated their definitions. According to incomplete statistics, empathy has forty-three different definitions in different languages, which are similar but not the same [1]. The most debatable point regarding its definition is if empathy is cognitive or affective. Affective empathy describes an automagical response of emotion caused by an outside emotional stimulus. Cognitive empathy, such as perspective thinking, is described as an ability that enables people to understand the perspective behind others' feelings [3]. Some scientists thought these two constructs should be separated, as neuroscientific evidence suggests that different brain areas are activated when people experience these two kinds of empathy. The others throughout that people were found to be able to regulate affective empathy via modulating cognitive empathy which suggested these two types highly interacted with each other and should be combined but used to express two distinct constructs [2]. Empathy can be evoked by imagination which helped simplify the process of empathy-related studies. For example, to assess the empathy level, the researchers did not need to physically build the dilemma, instead they can build some reading materials and asked the participants to read the question and make a choice. Empathy would be stimulated by the imagination and measured. Some academicians have argued about this form of research (questionnaires) recently [4]. They thought the level of empathy evoked by the imagination differed from the participants physically facing the dilemma,

which can bias the data [1]. If the empathy obtained from two pathways are the same is still ambiguous and becomes a potential limitation of most empathy related research.

Moral psychology, as a cross-subject of moral study and psychology, mainly focuses on moral behavior and cognition. As the core concept of moral cognition, moral judgment refers to the assessable judgments of how people respond to the facts that violate the moral norm. There are four classes of moral judgments with different objects and functions [5]. The first type is typically called evaluation judgment. This type of judgment usually evaluates the events as good or bad. Its object can be nearly anything, such as words and sounds, to human beings [5]. Evaluation is one of the fundamental and fastest responses people generate in their brains when facing a moral stimulus. Most scholars think that evaluation is most affective rather than a cognitive process, as it almost generates spontaneously when people see the object less consideration is involving [6]. Norm judgment is another class that determines if something is admissible or prohibited. This type of judgment is commonly seen in many moral dilemmas, including the trolley one. Moral dilemmas are situations where people make decisions between several clashing options. These options are related to moral issues that can be either personal or impersonal. In norm judgments, the scenarios or the question must relate to morality, which is the main difference that distinguishes it from evaluation [5]. Moral wrongness judgment is the third type of judgment that focuses on the violations that are conducted by people intentionally. Wrongness judgments have been frequently used in moral studies related to impurity or disgust. The central idea within this judgment is that the violations need to be done on purpose [5]. The last type is blame judgment. Unlike the previous three types, this one focuses on the amount of blame the violators deserve. People need to consider the motivation behind violators' actions to evaluate the blame judgment.

Some factors frequently seen in moral psychology studies are related to moral judgment, such as population characters and punishment [5]. The two commonly seen population characters are in-group (someone close to the observer) and out-group population (strangers or not familiar to the observers). Previous researchers suggested that population characters can strongly interfere the decision of moral judgments. People are found to favor the in-group populations most of the time [4]. Some scholars thought that punishment might be another type of moral judgment. However, these years' studies indicated that it was closer to blame, which was an outcome that followed moral judgment. Nevertheless, compared with blame, punishment seems like an actual moral sanction based on a moral evaluation. It is commonly seen and used in the Ultimatum Game, and some research aims to evaluate the willingness of participants to uphold justice through the purpose of high-cost punishment [7].

Empathy may influence moral judgment, which was noticed by some psychologists few decades ago. Previous research suggested that empathic people would be more altruistic compared to those with trait alexithymia. Furthermore, they found not all the empathy may influence moral justice—a branch of moral judgment. The mainstream research direction of empathy-moral judgment relation focuses on the effect of single type of empathy either affective or cognitive. Less was focused on the interference of them together, and other factors, such as guilty in the empathy-moral judgment relation. This review systematically reviewed the effect of empathy and other factors on moral judgment and pointed out new evidence to support that cognitive empathy and affective empathy should be considered together when people evaluate the effect of empathy on moral judgment.

2. The impact of empathy on moral judgment

2.1. The contribution of emotional empathy to moral judgment

Many researchers advocate that big variation of emotional empathy can be observed only in psychopathy and people with trait alexithymia. The people with trait alexithymia are usually hard to express their emotion including empathy. Previous studies suggested that people with trait alexithymia behaved more utilitarian in moral judgment [8]. For example, Patil and Silani's study used Reactivity Inventory and two moral dilemmas (personal and impersonal) to assess the

relationship between trait alexithymia and utilitarianism. Their results showed that fewer utilitarian decisions were made when ordinary people faced personal moral dilemmas. Resistance was observed. People's recognition process was affected by the emotion which leads to less utilitarianism behavior. People with trait alexithymia obtained lower score of emotional empathy and more utilitarian choice than other participants in the research. They were more resistant to personal dilemmas [8]. Some physical and neuroscientific evidence also supported the finding. Less physiological activation such as heart beat, skin conductance was found in the people with trait alexithymia when they made the decisions [9]. In the study of Cecchetto et al., the researchers measured the heartbeat and skin conductance of people with trait alexithymia and other participants when they faced moral dilemmas. Researchers found that under same dilemmas, less change of skin conductance was observed in people with trait alexithymia than other participants. In general populations the skin conductance was found to increase with empathy. This increase was not observed in people with trait alexithymia. Moreover, some other research that uses ECG to measure the electrical impulse also suggested that people with trait alexithymia were less empathetic. The brain area that is responsible for the affective empathy was less activated in people with trait alexithymia.

Other research suggested that affective empathy was able to promote prosocial behavior, especially within groups. In the research of Redford and Ratliff how did empathy related to moral responsibility was investigated. The participants were asked to decide if they were more willing to donate more money to someone that shares the same nationality with them or someone in the other side of the earth that they never known. The level of moral responsibility and affective empathy was measured by scales. Redford and Ratliff found that affective empathy was positively correlated with in-group moral concern. They found that empathetic people obtained higher in-group moral responsibility, but not in out-group population [10].

2.2. The contribution of cognitive empathy to Moral Judgment

Perspective-taking, a vital part of cognitive empathy, is the ability to infer the internal mental activity of others [11]. Perspective-taking focuses on other thoughts and intentions, while emotional empathy focuses on the feelings and emotions of others. Perspective-taking can help people understand each other's strategic intentions to improve combat capabilities in strategic interactions. In recent years, people found that perspective-taking can influence the degree of moral condemnation. Previous research found that perspective-taking could increase or decrease moral condemnation because this behavior could magnify the initial intention of the observer [11]. For example, if people start with a sympathetic attitude toward the offender, perspective-taking will reduce the moral condemnation of the offender. In contrast, if the perspective taker starts with a condemning attitude toward the offender, the perspective taker will increase this disgust [12]. This idea was tested by Brian et al.'s research. Researchers found that when the transgressor's behavior was perceived as malevolent, the moral condemnation of the perspective-takers increased when their behavior was perceived as benevolent, and the penetration decreased moral condemnation [12]. Decety and Yoder's research also discussed cognitive empathy's contribution to moral judgment. They tested the participants with several moral questions. These questions aimed to test how people would decide when their self-happiness would be affected by their moral obligations to others slightly. Brian et al. found that empathic concerns were highly correlated with moral justice, but only the cognitive empathy part predicted the trend of justice towards others or themselves. No notable relationship was found between affective empathy and moral justice [11].

2.3. Opinions on empathy and moral judgement

Currently, some scholars think that people with higher affective empathy would be less cold blooded, have a higher social responsibility, and have higher justice sensitivity towards others. Another scholar thinks that affective empathy could negatively affect moral justice. Only cognitive empathy can promote moral justice towards others and oneself. This review suggested that to evaluate the effect of empathy on moral judgment in real life, cognitive and affective parts are better combined.

Because in real life, there exist many influential factors. For example, the target population can be someone close to them or not. According to Redford and Ratliff, when dealing with out-groups' moral sensitivity, emotional factors occupy a short position, and the dominant part is cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy works well in helping people recognize who deserves more help. The out-group justice advantage could be driven by a cognitive construct like humanitarianism, which admits the moral worth of both the intergroup and outer group. Empathy and humanitarianism complementarily contributed to group-based moral sensitivity and willingness to help. Empathy works better for moral sensitivity within groups, and humanitarianism predicts better moral sensitivity between groups [10]. The study conducted by Patil and Silani may support this idea. They thought that rather than having a less affect empathic ability, those with higher utilitarianism tendencies in personal dilemmas are susceptible to empathy. Cognitively empathic people can control their affective empathy when facing moral judgment as they may have exercised reasonable emotional control under the condition of long-term solid emotions with themselves. When they face moral dilemmas, they will lower their emotional feedback to make more utilitarian choices [8].

Further investigation can be done to investigate the effect of cognitive empathy and affective together on moral judgment and the effect of only one factor within the same person to see which achieved the higher moral fairness.

3. Relevant factors in the relationship

Population character is an important factor that will influence the moral judgment as people are suggested to be closer and more empathetic to in-group population [13]. The study conducted by Redford and Ratliff suggested that empathy was responsible for moral responsiveness within the group and humanitarianism was the potential factor in charge when the target population is out-group. They found that with no restriction of citizenship and resources, the in-group (not out-group) moral concern was positively correlated with affective empathy. Moreover, as expected, humanitarianism successfully captured the trend of out-group moral concern. However, when mono-citizenship was required, and resource was limited, the researchers found that humanitarianism predicted out-group allocation better than in-group. Surprisingly, empathy did not significantly affect charity allocations in this case [10]. The study about moral obligation and empathy also suggested that moral character is influential. The study found that empathy did better in the in-group obligations test but not out-group one. Humanitarianism achieved higher scores in the out-group obligation test. Furthermore, they thought that moral obligation may help explain why empathy and humanitarianism cause divergence in allocating limited resources in and out-groups. As they found when the target was out-group population and resource was limited, unless people feel they obligated to do something good they would not perform the action. Empathy did not work here [10].

Punishment is another factor commonly seen in some research to test the willingness of people to hold moral justice. For example, a study was conducted by Brian et al. to test if perspective-taking would influence the cost of punishment. The researchers designed a selfish dictator who kept all the 10 US dollars by himself. The participants were divided into two groups, one group was asked to treat the event cognitively (perspective-taking) the other group was asked to treat the event affectively (empathetic group). Both groups were asked to decide if they would like to punish the dictator. The behavior of the dictator used to be regarded as malevolent and unethical. However, if the participants want to punish the dictator, they need to pay 5 dollars, or they can keep this amount of money and do nothing. The results showed that most participants in the perspective-taking groups were more willing to spend the money to punish the dictator than those in the empathy groups. All four studies showed that perspective-taking would increase moral condemnation when the participants thought the transgressor's intention was malevolent. Moreover, less moral condemnation would be made if the participants thought the intention was benevolent [12].

Besides the above two traditional factors there still are several interesting factors such as desire and guilt. Previous academics suggested that adults' moral values are relatively stable, vibrate with

time, following specific patterns. They found that if people desire to become more empathetic and start practicing (especially perspective-taking), their moral foundation will be higher. Some psychologists noticed that people would feel guilty when they face moral dilemmas, especially when they need to make some decisions. If people need to harm others, altruistic guilty will be generated and if they need to break some rules the deontological guilt will occur [14]. In the research of Migliore et al., how people would be influenced in moral decision-making when facing altruistic (AG) and deontological guilt (DG) was investigated. The physical attachment enhanced AG of harming the target (empathic condition), and the presence of the authority enhanced the DG of breaking the rules (deontological condition). They found that participants were less likely to harm the target in the empathic condition compared with the standard condition. Furthermore, under deontological conditions, people tend to choose the choice that may not break the rule. Migliore et al. suggested that physical attachments with the victims and the authority's pressure on moral judgment would affect the decision-making process. Guilty may be an important factor that drives people's decision of moral judgment as it enhances the affective empathy of participants towards the victims and lead to less utilitarian results [14].

4. Conclusions

Most of the research available now contains some common limitations. First, in most of the experiments, empathy is invoked by imagination rather than real scenarios. Nevertheless, if empathy produced via imagination is the same as by actual situation is still debatable. Thus, the results obtained by questionnaires may be less convincing. The second is that researchers usually need to tradeoff between sample size and experimental period. Moreover, most of studies were using self-reported scales, which may have personal bias. This review discussed the contribution of affective and cognitive empathy and other factors to moral judgment. A potential direction to investigate the empathy-moral judgment relationship was to consider the effect of affective and cognitive empathy together rather than focusing on one type. This review suggested that empathy may be a potential predictor of moral responsibility in real life. It can provide some clues for designing effective moral judgement related interventions and curriculums.

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