

Cross-Cultural Differences in Empathy and Relevant Factors

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Abstract. This paper aims to discuss cross-cultural empathy and ways to promote the development of empathy in various cultures. Empathy is considered one of the most indispensable traits in every society. However, the concept of empathy differs in different communities, due to social, cultural, and religious influences. According to Mencius, empathy contributes to the expansion of moral cultivation. A core concept in Confucianism, benevolence (*Ren*), represents the relationship between people. The practice of compassion requires the ability to conduct moral reasoning. The development of such an ability relies heavily on empathy. Since empathy is crucial to people's daily life in developing critical skills and relationships, fostering empathy in different cultures is helpful. Even though empathy varies significantly in many ways among different cultures, it possesses some fundamental similarities in all of them. The Golden Rule is an excellent example of an ethical principle that could be found in almost all civilizations. Respecting the differences in various cultures, learning more about other cultures and their social norms, and avoiding talking about sensitive topics can help people become more empathetic.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, Empathy, Golden Rule, Confucianism, Buddhism.

1. Introduction

Empathy means that one is mentally relatable to others, putting themselves in others' shoes, and understanding how others feel. It could also be classified as cognitively adopting another person's perspective by taking on their feelings and responding effectively with the same emotion intersubjectively [1, 2]. Sometimes it might be challenging to incorporate this when the two communicating parties are from distinctive cultural and ethical backgrounds, hence the importance of introducing the concept of cross-cultural empathy. This intercultural empathy is not only the prerequisite and assurance for effective cultural communication. It also encourages one to think about and contrast one's feelings with those of others, as well as experience the sentiments of others. Since people in different cultures possess distinctive cultural perceptions and perspectives, viewing the world from others' perspectives can help people resolve differences in non-violent manners, and thus the situation can be alleviated. Plus, provided that people can perceive others as friends and respect them rather than seeing them as social outcasts, the world could eventually become a microcosm of a multicultural community. Given that the realization and appreciation of different cultures lay the foundation for understanding and feeling those with different backgrounds, essential traits, such as trust, respect, love, and human communication can be promoted.

An investigation of the divergence and convergence of trait empathy across two cultures by Kariyawasam and a group of scholars suggested to divide empathy into two categories: affective and cognitive [1]. Affective empathy is defined as the empath and the person being empathized having similar feelings. Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, requires one person to be aware of the other's feelings and understand that they differ from their own. Researchers have found that cognitive empathy is strongly related to moral reasoning. Empathic expression, on the other hand, is the emotion that is congruent with the emotion of another in terms of balance and arousal.

Shao and some other researchers focused on the content of group members' empathic expression and how it changed as the group develops [2]. The results of the analysis were that members mostly

expressed empathy at the cognitive level and least at the group level. Sharing similarities is a unique way for group members to express their compassion. While investigating group empathy, researchers often apply individual therapy ideas to group leader empathy. The role of group leaders in generating empathy among group members has attracted significant attention.

Another approach by Janezic and Arsenault focused on finding out how the antecedents of empathic responding effect and react in discrimination (and anti-discrimination) initiatives and which aspects to induce intercultural empathy can undoubtedly be of great help to build more appropriate and efficient interventions through a qualitative method of inquiry [3]. To better understand the factors that influence how anti-discrimination public service announcements (PSAs) are received, this study looked at the antecedents of empathetic responding. Finding out that facial expressions and commonalities are the most evident empathy triggers. Participants asserted that the more clearly expressed the emotion on the victim's face, the more likely it is that they will feel empathy for them. In addition, regarding their commonalities with others, it is easy for people to understand other people's perspectives.

The Golden Rule has become a cross-cultural consensus. It is precisely named because it has not been unearthed from only two or three different civilizations. Instead, it is the cornerstone insight that can be found, to a greater or lesser extent, in the depths of almost every culture after a massive statistical exercise. Many studies on empathy employ quantitative research that collects and analyzes numerical data and provides a precise and scientific measure of an event or situation affecting people's daily lives. However, there are few qualitative studies on the subject of cross-cultural empathy. Qualitative studies are just as crucial, as they attempt to support people in developing a more holistic understanding of empathy. Since qualitative studies can define empathy in many environments and empathy is a concept that requires in-depth analysis to comprehend fully, qualitative studies are crucial to studying cross-cultural empathy. Additionally, qualitative research collects opinions from participants, enabling viewers to interpret empathy through the perspectives of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. This review paper examined cross-cultural empathy through three topics: empathy across different cultures, empathy in eastern cultures, and ways to foster empathy across all cultures.

2. Empathy across different cultures

2.1. A comparison of empathy in eastern and western cultures

Empathy, by its most widely accepted definition, is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Empathy is a social construct and exists among humans [4]. Even though all societies have some empathy, it is expressed differently due to cultural and religious factors. People in collective societies like Iran exhibit higher levels of cognitive empathy than people in western societies like the United States, but people in western societies demonstrate better emotional empathy. Buddhism and Confucianism also impact many Eastern cultures, including Sri Lanka and China. People living in Eastern communities are prone to self-criticism, resulting in a lower level of self-compassion. Similarly, Christianity greatly influences western societies.

People in collectivist societies are more likely to be interdependent, associative, and concerned about other people's perceptions. Yaghoubi Jami and other researchers surveyed groups of Iranians and Americans and found that Iranians score higher on cognitive empathy [5]. Cognitive empathy requires one person to be aware of the other's feelings and understand that they differ from their own. Iranians' higher score is a result of being a collectivist country. People living in collectivist culture tend to express their feelings through other people's eyes. They imply their feelings by telling how other people are thinking. Cognitive empathy allows people to look through other people's perspectives better. In contrast, western societies encourage people to express their thoughts directly, and people favor straightforward communication. As a result, people in western societies tend to possess better emotional empathy.

Due to its predominantly Buddhist culture, Sri Lankans typically have higher empathy levels for others and lower levels for themselves. Buddhism has an essential concept called “karuna,” which means the practice of compassion. It emphasizes the idea of sharing suffering with another. In Buddhism, the Golden Rule is manifested as a negative formulation. It became a fundamental ethical principle in many places and forms throughout Tripitaka. As a saying in Udanavarga says, “Hurt not others in ways that one oneself would find hurtful.” (5:18). An experiment designed to examine the perceptions of empathy among students in Sri Lanka using in-depth interviews yields the following conclusions: people in a collective and Buddhist country develop greater compassion towards others but are less likely to have self-compassion [1]. Many participants defined self-compassion as understanding their situation and giving themselves greater tolerance. While most people understand the value and significance of self-compassion, few can put it into practice. People are more likely to forgive others than themselves because they frequently hold higher standards for themselves. When others criticize, it can be challenging to develop self-compassion. People are often uncertain about the purpose of compassion for others, and many believe that concern for others is motivated by social obligation rather than sincerity.

According to the New Testament of Christianity, Jesus declared the Golden Rule as the second primary commandment in his Sermon. Both the Old and the New Testaments establish the fundamental ethical principles of the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule stands for universal love and care. The universal love mentioned is essentially the interpersonal love introduced by Confucius. Interpersonal love should not be understood as hierarchical, familial, graded, or unfair partial love. In this respect, Confucianism and Christianity are similar. The Golden Rule, which contains the principles of treating others as they please, states, “Treat others as one would like others to treat one in a positive way; do not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated in a negative way.” In the book *Analects of Confucius* – the “Confucian bible” – shares similar ideas. It suggests that people should not force others to do things they do not want to do themselves, encourages people to speak up for their beliefs, and pushes others to go in their desired direction.

2.2. Empathy in eastern cultures

Confucius’ account of the Golden Rule can be understood as the role and expression of empathy. After Confucius, Mencius, the most crucial philosopher of Confucianism, made more theoretical constructions on this. “*Ceyinzhixin*” (directly translated to “the heart of compassion”), presented by Mencius, is one of the most important and classical categories and significant moral elements in Confucianism, which is the Confucian heart-mind of pity and compassion [6, 7]. *Ceyinzhixin* in *Mencius* 2A6 is usually discussed as a fundamental moral and psychological tenet of Confucian love and is commonly understood as the heart of feeling for others. That is a kind of empathy and a side of empathic concern, *Ren* being the primary Confucian virtue. Confucius defined heart-mind (*xin*) as the feeling of others [8]. Rather than a simple or impulsive sensation, *ceyinzixin* is a complex cognitive emotion that properly targets the perception of and response to external stimulation. Many scholars study the concept of *ceyinzixin* and its moral, and psychological nature to understand the Confucian heart-mind and other-concerning love.

The philosophy of Confucius highlights the importance of empathizing with and perceiving other people’s feelings and emotions. Confucius demonstrates empathy for others, as he would feel grieved when passing by a funeral and would stop laughing. He would not eat when sitting next to someone suffering from hunger and would endure starvation with them. Confucian philosophy has primarily influenced Chinese culture, leading the Chinese to value understanding the emotions of others and sharing their sufferings.

Human’s empathetic capacity initially sets people on the right track. However, the next stage is to develop the ability to put aside one’s emotional arousal for empathy and take action to do something about the suffering person. Otherwise, those who are overwhelmed by empathy may be rendered incapable of being able to help those in need. As mentioned in Mencius’ moral motivation, compassion grows with increased ethical awareness. This is also why individuals motivated by their

cold logic and reasoning do more to help people than those gripped by empathic feelings. In Barrett-Lennard's conceptual model of empathy cycles, empathic concern was divided into several phases [9]. Here, empathetic expression is described as the verbal or nonverbal communication of empathic understanding to the empathized individual. Accordingly, "empathetic concern" is significant in Eastern philosophy. Both empathic concern and embodiment cognition are based on one's capacity for empathy, which plays a crucial role in expanding people's moral mind (so-called moral cultivation). The core concept of Confucianism—"Confucian love" mentioned above, benevolence (*Ren*) is the mutual feeling between people: intersubjectivity. Culturing this ability (moral reason and emotion) is inseparable from people's innate empathy and empathic concern. The empathic side of *ceyinzixin* by stating that the observer in *Mencius* 2A6 "experiences a basic state of empathy, i.e., sudden fear, stress, and affective reaction toward the child's pain and suffering" [10].

The "mind" (*xin*, Heart-Mind) of Mencius' demonstration had its ontological and transcendental character, but it also had a psychological aspect. The consequence of a study about group members' empathy is that they may share their opinions and feelings as a natural way to understand and care about other people. Another approach to showing their concerns is to demonstrate their similarity to other group members and to relate to them in some ways. Accordingly, to explain it from this point of view, people from individualistic cultures are more independent and emphasize personal boundaries. In contrast, people from collectivistic cultures tend to be more interdependent and emphasize interpersonal relationships [3, 11]. In light of this, one hypothesis is that the areas of "similarity" may be more prominent among Chinese samples, where people are more inclined to empathize with others in appropriate ways. In addition, *Ceyinzhixin* is a human instinct ("Man has these four sprouts just as he has four limbs." in *Mencius* 2A6). It inevitably has an empathic component. *Ceyinzhixin* can be interpreted as a significant cause of the empathic performance of a collectivistic country—China.

3. Cross-cultural comparative and foster empathy

Cultural empathy has been defined as a general awareness or attitude that bridges the cultural gap between people with different cultural backgrounds, given that people are inextricably influenced by the culture, religion, and social structure of the community they reside. As lacking the understanding of the exotic basic factual information and deep-structured cultural value, this intercultural unawareness is seen as the cause of the emergence of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Conflicts and exclusive behaviors can be diffused if only people can appreciate and comprehend those differences. Another key concept is to avoid arguments relating to deep-structured values [12]. This value has an intense emotional impact on people's trust, which is unalterable in people's innate cognition. Instead of pressing for answers or forcing one to accept others' ideology, one should attempt to obtain others' "built-in" values and behaviors, which can facilitate effective communication. For instance, it is intrusive to ask people living in western society about their income, which is common in a collectivist society. Even in the same country, people will have different perspectives depending on where they live. Hong Kong citizens are sensitive about discussing their salaries, as evidenced by the fact that Western colonization primarily influenced their values until the last century. Therefore, eastern Chinese should avoid discussing sensitive topics like personal income with their HK counterparts as much as possible to prevent the occurrence of awkwardness. At the same time, Hong Kong residents should attempt to adopt the customary differences in eastern society.

Appropriate cultural fusion plays a significant role in work-related settings as well. Instead of being indifferent to multicultural others, one should see the differences as an opportunity for interaction and exploration. Enterprises should hold exchange meetings that can provide minorities a chance to introduce themselves and their unique cultures to others. An appropriate and harmonious scenario could be, thus, cultivated for employees to understand each other without ever attempting to ridicule, belittle or deny their offshore counterparts' respective cultures.

The conservatives in monocultural areas generally have more prejudice toward those who have different philosophies from theirs, resulting in cultural exclusion and contradictory behavior. This can also be defined as a part of human nature. Researchers have found that social identity makes people feel that their culture is superior to others in numerous ways (in-group bias). By having a sense of superiority over those with the same background, they are likely to develop a sense of pride, which provides an illusion that reassures them that their culture is well above the others. Thus, the uniqueness and importance of belonging are attributed to this superiority. Although there are differences between different countries, people still share many fundamental values. So, people can connect more conveniently based on what they have in common.

The government can also promote harmony in the communities by designating specific foreign events to popularize cross-cultural traditions. As people become more aware of other cultures, they are more likely to eliminate their prejudice against them. Researchers tested native Canadian college students through questionnaires shortly after the Quebec City Mosque shooting. The study reported that, usually, the facial expression of an oppressor is much more telling than that of those being discriminated against. Therefore, peripheral viewers tend to concentrate more on the oppressors than the victims. Participants also stated that if they could see the obvious emotion on the victim's face, it would better trigger empathy in them. Nevertheless, not all negative facial expressions can stimulate empathy. For example, though angry people may seem more conspicuous at the scene, they seldom get empathetic triggers from others. In addition, what triggers empathy is that people feel obliged to help or attempt to help when they are aware of discriminatory incidents. Most subjects agreed that those being discriminated against received the most extensive degree of empathy when they managed to show all their negative facial expressions [3].

The perceived similarity in religion can facilitate the transposition and vicarious emotional sharing inherent to empathy. If they realize the similarities in beliefs, those with different faiths will more readily project themselves onto others' scenarios and share emotions more easily. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity all advocated that people should be compassionate and feel distressed in response to others' pain. People express their willingness to help those who are in need. The Eastern philosopher Mencius also advocated the integration of benevolence into administration. Even if the monarch is in court, he should be able to immerse himself in the living conditions of the people. A favorable emperor is supposed to have the ability to empathize with his people. To sum up the above, Mencius put forward the famous saying, "The people are the most valuable, the state is the second, and the king is the least." It is known as "benevolent politics," which proves the importance of a good manager's role in fostering empathy [3, 6].

On the other hand, commonalities are similar to the philosophy mentioned above. When people find similarities, they tend to feel more closely related to them and treat them more like humans. Making connections has a tremendous impact on levels of empathy. For example, many people who initially considered Arabians as relentless terrorists changed their minds after knowing that an Arabian father reads bedtime stories to his daughter. People become more friendly and empathetic after learning the similarities between them and other groups [3].

4. Conclusions

People are inextricably connected with the culture, religion, and social structure of their community, building cross-cultural bonds to boost their mutual understanding and acceptance. People in collectivist societies are more likely to be interdependent and concerned about other people's perceptions, while those in independentism societies are more concerned about individual identity. In Eastern culture, *Ceyinzhixin*, a human instinct, can be understood as empathy, while Ren is the primary Confucian virtue. The aforementioned Golden Rules, as a cross-cultural consensus, largely build on universal empathy among people. Both empathic concern and embodiment cognition are essential elements for building one's capacity for empathy and benevolence. It can be understood as the core cause of the empathic performance of a collectivistic culture – China. By fostering this

capacity, people could view the differences as opportunities for intercultural interaction and expand their knowledge of other's offensive topics. However, seeking similarities and commonalities with others allows one to expand one's religious and cultural relevance to others.

The limitation of the previous studies is that they have mainly explored the causes of empathy (including empathic concern, etc.) at the level of cultural phenomena and the differences caused by different cultural contexts. However, staying at the phenomenological level is its most significant limitation. Even though individual studies have tried to break through it, they have not been able to go beyond the scope of these social sciences. The dichotomy between collectivism and individualism is an example. Although it's crucial for all psychological research, researchers should be arguing more than it. As mentioned above, the psychological nature behind empathy may be a profound philosophical discourse that one or a few sociological theories cannot cover. As a result, future research should go beyond the limits of pure social science and investigate the philosophical or metaphysical causes of each psychological manifestation.

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