Cognitive Empathy in Preschool-Aged Children

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Cognitive Empathy in Preschool-Aged Children

Kimberlee Holness
Faculty Advisor: Diana P.F. Montague, PhD
Empathy Defined

Affective Empathy
  Coming to feel as another person feels (matching)

Cognitive Empathy
  Knowing another person’s internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings (understanding)

Advanced empathy includes both affective and cognitive components (Batson, 2009; Hoffman, 2000).
Development of Empathy: Hoffman

Hoffman viewed empathy as the glue that makes social life possible, through evolutionary history. (Hoffman, 2000)

Progresses along a development continuum:
  - **Early**: Infants mimic emotion through mirroring (no cognition processing)
  - **Later**: Ability to take on other roles and imagine the feelings of other (cognitive processing of empathy emerges)
Hoffman’s 6 stages of Empathy Development

1. Global empathic distress (newborn reactive cry)
2. Egocentric empathic distress (11-12 months)
3. Quasi-egocentric empathic distress (13-24 months)
4. Veridical empathy (2-3 years; become more complex with age and self-other distinction)
5. Empathic/sympathetic distress beyond the situation (7-10 years)
6. Empathic/sympathetic distress beyond the situation extends to distressed groups (11+ years)
Eight related but distinct phenomena on Empathy: Batson

- Knowing another person’s internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings
- Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other
- Coming to feel as another person feels
- Intuiting or projecting oneself into Another’s Situation
- Imagining how another is thinking and feeling
- Imagining how one would think and feel in the other’s place
- Feeling distress at witnessing another person suffering
- Feeling for another person who is suffering
Empathy in Preschool-Aged Children

Previous research with young children (e.g., Strayer & Roberts, 1989) revealed evidence of affective empathy but not cognitive empathy.

Montague and Ulmer (2014): perhaps videos typically used to assess empathy (scenes from documentaries and commercial movies) may not be valid for use with young children.

They suggested that a better assessment of young children’s empathy is to show videos more relevant to the age of the children.
Montague research
Phase 1: Affective empathy

1. Created 3 age-appropriate video segments for children to watch:
   - **Sick**: child feeling sick, crying, & waiting for dad to pick him up
   - **Hitting**: child being hit by another child
   - **Playing**: two girls drawing and laughing about their drawings

2. Showed them to preschool-aged children.

3. Video recorded participants while they watched videos

Assessed affective empathy (facial expressions & matching)

Result: Children displayed affective empathy when shown age-relevant videos
Picture of Set Up

need to get from Dr. M tonight
Current Project
Phase 2: Cognitive Empathy
(Spring & Fall 2016)

Continuation of Montague and Ulmer (2014) research.

To assess Cognitive Empathy:

• Transcribe the child participants’ verbal responses (verbatim) from video recordings

## Cognitive Empathy Scores (Modified)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE (INTERPRETATION) SCORE</th>
<th>7-point rating scale:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No response or irrelevant response (e.g., &quot;I feel happy because she had a butterfly on her shirt&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Accurate response but lacks elaboration beyond emotion recognition (e.g., &quot;I feel sad because she is sad&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Response refers to the situation but not the character in it (e.g., &quot;I feel sad because it is sad to get hit&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Response refers to the character within the situation (e.g., &quot;I feel sad because the kid was hitting him&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Response indicates transposition of self in the situation or refers to a concrete personal experience (e.g., &quot;I feel sad because he was hitting him. I remember when 3 friends were chasing me and being bullies at me&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Response indicates understanding of character's internal state (thoughts, feelings) or the character's life situation (e.g., &quot;I felt bad for him because he was sick&quot; or &quot;I felt sad because the other boy was hitting him and he didn't like it&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Response indicates meaningfully explicit role taking (e.g., I felt sad because he was sick and crying. His dad's not picking him up and he's scared that he's not gonna come, and that's what I'd feel like if I was sick and scared and my dad wouldn't come&quot;)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cognitive Empathy Scores

HIGH SCORES - Explicit understanding of the character in the situation; role taking

Subject reported feeling: Sad

Reason: “I felt sad because he was sick and crying. His dad's not picking him up and he's scared that he's not gonna come, and that's what I'd feel like if I was sick and scared and my dad wouldn't come"

LOW SCORES – Irrelevant responses

Subject reported feeling: Happy

Reason: I don’t know
For Fall 2016 semester:

• Code verbal responses from video recordings of child participants, using modified scoring.

• Enter and analyze data (SPSS)

• Interpret findings and implications
References


