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# Cognitive Empathy in Preschool-Aged Children

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# Cognitive Empathy in Preschool-Aged Children

Kimberlee Holness

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# 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
- Learn Strayer and Roberts' (2004) *Empathy Continuum scoring manual* (modified for young children by Montague & Ulmer, 2013)

# Cognitive Empathy Scores (Modified)

| COGNITIVE (INTERPRETATION) SCORE 7-point rating scale: |  |
|--|--|
| 0  | No response or <u>irrelevant</u> response (e.g., "I feel happy because she had a butterfly on her shirt")  |
| 1  | Accurate response but <u>lacks elaboration</u> beyond emotion recognition (e.g., "I feel sad because she is sad")  |
| 2  | Response refers to the <u>situation</u> but not the character in it (e.g., "I feel sad because it is sad to get hit")  |
| 3  | Response refers to the <u>character within the situation</u> (e.g., "I feel sad because the kid was hitting him")  |
| 4  | Response indicates transposition of <u>self in the situation</u> or refers to a concrete <u>personal experience</u> (e.g., "I feel sad because he was hitting him. I remember when 3 friends were chasing me and being bullies at me")                                 |
| 5  | Response indicates understanding of <u>character's internal state</u> (thoughts, feelings) or the character's <u>life situation</u> (e.g., "I felt bad for him because he was sick" or "I felt sad because the other boy was hitting him and he didn't like it")       |
| 6  | Response indicates meaningfully <u>explicit role taking</u> (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") |

# 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

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