

Cognitive and Emotional Empathy in Relation to Five Paranormal/Anomalous Experiences

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The term *empathy* has been used to refer to two related human abilities: mental perspective taking (cognitive empathy) and the vicarious sharing of emotion (emotional empathy). Many psychic claimants seem to act more *empathic* than *telepathic*. Five specific hypotheses were tested here: People who have telepathic experiences, aura experiences, sense of presence, experience as psychic healers, and apparitional experiences have a higher capacity for (1) Perspective Taking and Emotional Comprehension (Cognitive empathy) and (2) Empathic Concern and Positive Empathy (Emotional empathy) than non-experients. The participants were 634 adults. Results showed that paranormal/anomalous experients scored higher on Perspective Taking, Emotional Comprehension, Empathic Concern, Positive Empathy and Empathy (total score) than nonexperients. Future studies should examine other variables associated with empathy.

The term *empathy* refers to sensitivity to, and understanding of, the mental states of others. According to Hogan (1969, p. 308), empathy is “the act of constructing for oneself another person's mental state.” The term empathy has been used to refer to two related human abilities: mental perspective taking (cognitive empathy) and the vicarious sharing of emotion (emotional empathy).

Recent research into empathy has emphasized the distinction between the cognitive and emotional components of the construct (Preston & de Waal, 2002). These components assume various definitions. Put simply, however, emotional empathy is commonly regarded as an emotional reaction (e.g., compassion) to another's emotional response (e.g., sadness). This reaction is not dependent on a cognitive understanding of why a person is suffering (Rankin, Kramer, and Miller, 2005), although it may facilitate understanding and action. By contrast, cognitive empathy involves an intellectual or imaginative understanding of another's emotional state, often described as overlapping with the construct of theory of mind (understanding the thoughts and feelings of others) and used interchangeably by some authors (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, and David, 2004).

There are few studies on empathy in relation to psychic experiences. There are a number of paranormal/anomalous experiences which seem to be related—even sometimes confused with—empathy. These experiences seem to involve inter-personal traits (i.e., extrasensorial experiences)

instead of “intra”-personal characteristics such as out-of-body experiences, premonitions, past-lives recall, or mystical experiences. Many psychic claimants seem to act more *empathic* than *telepathic*.

Sanchez (1989) examined empathy and telepathy in natural mother-daughter dyads, consisting of 180 volunteer pairs; the mother served as the receiver, and the child as the sender of telepathic messages. Her results indicated that one form of empathy (personal distress) and diversity were significantly related to telepathy. Telepathy is a controversial paranormal phenomenon, while empathy is based not upon the paranormal but upon sophisticated processing of what is seen and heard in the usual way. The ability to use cognitive and emotional empathy in an integrated way seems important in many circumstances, such as the experiences of healing practitioners or in aura vision experiences.

The experiences of healing practitioners have been the topic of several investigations. Some healers have the empathic ability to feel other people's physical symptoms in their own bodies. An analysis of their cognitive styles indicated that their attention tended to become diffuse, exclusively focused neither externally nor internally, but simultaneously encompassing both the outer and inner environments (Krippner & Achtenberg, 2000).

There also was a tendency for healers to use mental imagery and become absorbed in the process, often to the point of feeling that they were “merging” with the client. The types of imagery reported by the healers included mythic symbols that supported the healers' belief systems, diagnostic information, and treatment process (Cooperstein, 1992). Appelbaum (1993) conjectured that people who benefit most from such healing may have similar or complementary personalities. They, too, may be people who tend to suspend disbelief, who submit easily to awe and admiration of others, who are oriented toward having their needs met by others, and who are confident that others have the power to help them (see also Borysenko, 1985).

Some studies suggest that aura vision may be related to cognitive processes involving fantasy proneness (Alvarado & Zingrone, 1987; Wilson and Barber, 1983), absorption, and cognitive-perceptual experiences (Alvarado, 1994; Alvarado & Zingrone, 1987; Parra, 2010a). Jordan (2008) examined whether the auras seen by those who work with aura-reading are an emotional reaction by the aura-reader or an empathetic reaction to the emotions of the person whose “aura” is being seen. If they are empathetic, then perhaps they are able to sense moods or disturbances in others. If they are not empathetic, then there may be a possibility of misreading the aura of the other person, either because they cannot read it at all, or because a visual aura is being evoked by a

reaction to their own personal feelings towards the person/client. Her results indicated that the aura-readers were not more empathetic than the control group.

In this study, five paranormal/anomalous experiences, telepathy, aura vision, healing, sense of presence, and apparitional experiences were examined. Five specific hypotheses were tested. People who claim to have had telepathic experiences, aura vision experiences, sense of presence, have acted as a healer; or have apparitional experiences will show a higher capacity for Perspective Taking, Emotional Comprehension (Cognitive empathy), Empathic Concern, and Positive Empathy (Emotional empathy) than non-experients.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were adults, 634 (61%) females and 404 (39%) males, ranging in age from 17 to 64 years ($M = 33.60$, $SD = 12.65$). Most of them were students at the South Campus at Universidad Abierta Interamericana in Buenos Aires, Argentina. There were 1,038 usable questionnaires in all.

Measures

The Spanish version of the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI), previously translated and tested in the Spanish context by Pérez-Albéniz, de Paúl, Etxebarria, Montes, and Torres (2003), was used in this study. The IRI (Davis, 1996) is a 33-item self-report, Likert scale (1 = lowest score to 5 = highest score of empathy), which contains four subscales: two on Cognitive Empathy and two on Emotional Empathy. The first two are Perspective-Taking, which is very similar to its homonym in Davis's IRI; and Emotional Comprehension, which aims to measure the tendency to try to find out and understand how another individual is feeling at a specific point in time (López-Pérez, Fernández, and Abad, 2008). The second two are Empathic Concern and Positive Empathy (Emotional Empathy). The scores on both scales are combined to obtain a total score, such that a high total score implies high empathy. The Spanish version of the whole instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha total score of .87.

The second instrument was used in a number of previous papers (Parra, 2006, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). It is an 18-item self-report inventory (T/F response) designed to collect information on spontaneous paranormal experiences, inspired by the English version of Palmer's (1979) survey of students. I used five out of 18 paranormal/anomalous experiences: Extrasensorial (telepathy-focused) experiences ("I have had the experience of mentally grasping the thoughts of other people or transmitting my thoughts over a distance"), Aura vision ("I have had the

experience of seeing energy fields or lights around the body of a person”), Healing experience (“I have had the experience of diminishing another person’s pain solely by touching him”), Sense of presence (“Being alone, I have had the vivid impression of a sensation of presence, but nothing was visible where I was”), and Apparitional experience (“While becoming awake, I have had the experience of hearing voices or seeing appearances invisible to others, which forewarned me about an impending danger that shortly thereafter occurred”).

Procedure

Participation was voluntary, and no one received pay. The set of scales was given in a single envelope. Each person was invited to complete the scales voluntarily and anonymously in a single session. All students who requested questionnaires were given a cover letter and copies of both instruments at the same time. Returned questionnaires were stored unexamined through the recruitment and collection periods.

RESULTS

Data analysis was conducted using non parametric statistics (Mann-Whitney). Table 1 shows the number and percentage of experiencers and non-experiencers for five paranormal/anomalous experiences.

TABLE 1 Number & % Experiencers & Non-Experiencers for Five Paranormal/Anomalous Experiences ($N= 1038$)

| <i>Groups</i> | <i>Telepathy</i> | <i>Aura</i> | <i>Healing</i> | <i>Sense of Presence</i> | <i>Apparitional Experience</i> |
|--------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Non-Experiencers N | 593 | 861 | 609 | 811 | 902 (86.9) |
| (%) | (57.1) | (83.0) | (58.7) | (78.1) | |
| Experiencers N | 445 | 177 | 429 | 227 | 136 (13.1) |
| (%) | (42.9) | (17.0) | (41.3) | (21.9) | |

Hypothesis 1 was that those who claimed to have experienced telepathy would score higher on Perspective Taking, Emotional Comprehension, Empathic Concern, Positive Empathy and Empathy than nonexperiencers. This hypothesis was supported: Scores on three subscales of empathy were significantly higher for experiencers (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 2, that aura experiencers would score higher on the same four subscales than nonexperiencers, was supported: Scores on the four subscales of empathy were also significantly higher for experiencers, except for Empathic Concern (see Table 3).

TABLE 2 Comparisons Between Telepathy Experiencers & Nonexperiencers on Empathy

| | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Mean</i> |
|--|-------------|-------------|
|--|-------------|-------------|

| <i>Telepathy</i> | <i>Experients (SD)</i> | <i>Non-Experients (SD)</i> | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Perspective Taking | 27.29 (5.70) | 26.30 (5.18) | 2.69 | .007 |
| Emotional Comprehension | 31.73 (6.19) | 30.05 (6.09) | 5.28 | .001 |
| Empathic Concern | 24.03 (5.74) | 23.33 (5.74) | 1.52 | .126 |
| Positive Empathy | 31.95 (5.44) | 30.42 (5.79) | 4.58 | .001 |
| Empathy (Total score) | 115.11 (15.14) | 109.89 (13.99) | 5.52 | .001 |

Note: Experients N= 445; Non experients N= 593

TABLE 3 Comparisons Between Aura Experients & Nonexperients on Empathy

| <i>Aura</i> | <i>Mean Experients (SD)</i> | <i>Mean Non-Experients (SD)</i> | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|----------|----------|
| Perspective Taking | 28.45 (5.10) | 26.36 (5.42) | 4.84 | .001 |
| Emotional Comprehension | 31.60 (6.03) | 30.58 (6.20) | 2.18 | .029 |
| Empathic Concern | 23.75 (5.64) | 23.60 (5.78) | .62 | .532 |
| Positive Empathy | 32.01 (4.86) | 30.88 (5.83) | 2.00 | .045 |
| Empathy (Total score) | 116.15 (13.89) | 111.27 (14.73) | 3.97 | .001 |

Note: Experients N= 177; Non experients N= 860

TABLE 4 Comparisons between Healing Experients & Nonexperients on Empathy

| <i>Healing</i> | <i>M Experients (SD)</i> | <i>M Non- Experients (SD)</i> | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Perspective Taking | 28.75 (5.78) | 26.16 (5.19) | 6.69 | .001 |
| Emotional Comprehension | 31.86 (6.45) | 30.47 (6.08) | 3.71 | .001 |
| Empathic Concern | 24.44 (5.84) | 23.40 (5.70) | 2.44 | .015 |
| Positive Empathy | 32.29 (5.21) | 30.74 (5.78) | 3.78 | .001 |
| Empathy (Total) | 117.80 | 110.54 | 6.5 | .001 |

| | | | |
|---------|---------|---|---|
| (15.07) | (14.23) | 3 | 1 |
|---------|---------|---|---|

Note: Experiens $N=227$; Non experiens $N=811$

Hypothesis 3, that healing experiens would score higher on the same four subscales than nonexperiens, was supported: Scores on the four subscales of empathy were significantly higher for experiens (Table 4).

TABLE 5 Comparisons Between Sense of Presence Experiens & Nonexperiens on Empathy

| <i>Sense of Presence</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------|----------|
| | <i>Experiens</i> | <i>Non-Experiens</i> | | |
| | <i>(SD)</i> | <i>(SD)</i> | | |
| Perspective Taking | 27.93 (4.89) | 25.88 (5.62) | 5.78 | .001 |
| Emotional Comprehension | 31.61 (6.07) | 30.18 (6.20) | 4.57 | .001 |
| Empathic Concern | 24.30 (5.61) | 23.16 (5.80) | 3.54 | .001 |
| Positive Empathy | 32.00 (5.69) | 30.43 (5.61) | 5.05 | .001 |
| Empathy (Total score) | 115.87 (14.60) | 109.49 (14.24) | 7.21 | .001 |

Note: Experiens $N=429$; Non experiens $N=609$

Hypothesis 4, that healing experiens would score higher on the same four subscales than nonexperiens, was supported: Scores on the four subscales of empathy were significantly higher for experiens (see Table 5). Hypothesis 5, that apparitions experiens would score higher on the four subscales than nonexperiens, was partially supported (Table 6).

TABLE 6 Comparisons Between Apparition Experiens & Non-experiens on Empathy

| <i>Apparitions</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------|----------|
| | <i>Experiens</i> | <i>Non-Experiens</i> | | |
| | <i>(SD)</i> | <i>(SD)</i> | | |
| Perspective Taking | 28.24 (5.83) | 26.49 (5.33) | 3.17 | .001 |
| Emotional Comprehension | 30.64 (6.45) | 30.79 (6.15) | .69 | .485 |
| Empathic Concern | 23.78 (5.51) | 23.61 (5.79) | .40 | .687 |
| Positive Empathy | 31.40 (5.62) | 31.03 (5.71) | .71 | .475 |
| Empathy (Total score) | 114.10 (17.28) | 111.83 (14.28) | 1.60 | .108 |

Note: Experiens $N=136$; Non experiens $N=902$

DISCUSSION

Healers and other paranormal/anomalous experiens (such as psychics and mediums) use emotional empathy and become absorbed in the process, often to the point of feeling that they are “merging” with the

clients and sitters. Some psychologists use the word *sensitivity* when theorizing that certain persons may be more readily affected by anomalous influences than others (e.g. Cornell. 2000). Jawer (2006) suggested that hypersensitivity may encompass a psi aspect, as the respondents are much more likely than controls to report having had one or more apparitional experiences.

Jawer's (2006) survey results also supported the hypothesis that certain people – perhaps due to their innate neurobiology – are much more susceptible to a number of both environmental (allergies, illness) and psi sensitivity link than the general population. Future studies should examine other variables associated with empathy, such as those falling under the broad category of emotional intelligence and thinking styles.

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