Effects of Gender on Empathy and Prosocial Behavior

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Background

- 2 types of empathy of interest to this study:
  - Trait cognitive empathy: perspective taking, fantasy
  - Trait emotional empathy: sympathy and compassion

- Evidence suggests older adults report higher levels of emotional empathy, but younger adults report higher levels of cognitive empathy.1,4

- Previous studies support the evidence older women report higher emotional and cognitive empathy than older men.2,4

- Based on Daniel Batson’s Empathy Altruism Hypothesis, higher empathy leads to greater prosocial behavior, however there is limited research on whether gender plays a role in prosocial behavior in older adults5

- Older adults tend to identify less with their gender than younger adults, which could have an effect on empathy and prosocial behavior4

- This is the first study to investigate the effects of gender roles on prosocial behavior in older adults specifically.

Methods

- Investigated relationship between gender role and age with prosocial behavior and empathy
- Older (55-90) and younger (19-35) healthy adults recruited from Omaha, Nebraska area

Empathy Induction

- Read note from confederate, either neutral (running errands) or empathy (skin cancer)
- Play dictator game with both neutral and empathy confederate
- Rate feelings before/after reading each note (state emotional empathy)

Measures

- Empathy Measure: Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)
  - Emotional Empathy: Empathetic concern sub-scale
  - Cognitive Empathy: Perspective taking subscale, fantasy subscale
- Prosocial Measure: Offer
- Gender Role: BSRI-12 (Bem Sex Role Inventory-12 item version)

Participants: 22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Younger</th>
<th>Older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex. (M/F)</td>
<td>2 M/ 20 F</td>
<td>06/12F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, Yrs. (M. SD)</td>
<td>43.5 (26.3)</td>
<td>20.8 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range, Yrs.</td>
<td>19-88</td>
<td>19-28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pilot Results

![Graph showing Emotional and Cognitive Empathy](image)

- Older adults have greater emotional empathy but less cognitive empathy on the Fantasy subscale (empathy for fictional characters) than younger adults
- Significant findings: Cohen's d=0.5 indicative of a medium effect size

Prosocial Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Neutral Offer</th>
<th>Other Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger Adults</td>
<td>3.7 (2.2)</td>
<td>3.7 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Adults</td>
<td>4.3 (2.6)</td>
<td>3.2 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Older women are hypothesized to show greater prosocial behavior as sample size increases
- Individuals that score feminine on the BSRI-12 are hypothesized to be more prosocial than Undifferentiated, Androgynous or Masculine Individuals

Bem Sex Role Inventory

![Graph showing Sub-Scale Average Score](image)

- Masculine individuals trending towards self-reporting higher emotional and cognitive empathy than masculine individuals

Discussion

- Significant results from the IRI so far are consistent with findings from the previous literature1-4
- The tendency for older adults to show more emotional concern reflects their increased prioritization of social relationships, known as the socioemotional selectivity theory6
- Significantly lower scores for older adults on the fantasy subscale suggests aging may affect only certain domains of empathy.
- Although only a trend in the current data, some studies have reported females (feminine) reporting higher emotional and cognitive empathy than males (masculine), which could effect prosocial behavior2-4
- Examining gender differences in BSRI-12 scores and their relationships to prosocial behavior and empathy subscales could lead to valuable insight on the emotional state of older adults

Future Directions

- State emotional empathy (emotional concern in the moment) differences have not been investigated in older adults, especially in regard to gender

References


Funding

Funder for Undergraduate Scholarly Experiences (FUSE) Grant to AH Program of Excellence Fund, University of Nebraska at Omaha to JB