Effects of Gender on Empathy and Prosocial Behavior

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Background

- Two 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 behavior.4
- 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 sub-scale, fantasy subscale
- Prosocial Measure: $ Offer
- Gender Role: BSRI-12 (Bem Sex Role Inventory-12 item version)

Participants: 22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Younger</th>
<th>Older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (MF)</td>
<td>M 2/ F 20</td>
<td>06/12</td>
<td>2M8F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age yrs (M, SD)</td>
<td>43.5 (26.3)</td>
<td>20.8 (2.7)</td>
<td>70.6 (9.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range yrs</td>
<td>19-88</td>
<td>19-28</td>
<td>58-88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pilot Results

- Emotional and Cognitive Empathy:
  - 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>Empathy Offer</th>
<th>Other Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>3.7 (2.2)</td>
<td>7.4 (1.8)</td>
<td>3.7 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger M</td>
<td>3.3 (1.9)</td>
<td>7.3 (1.7)</td>
<td>4.0 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older M</td>
<td>4.3 (2.6)</td>
<td>7.5 (2.0)</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

- Femine 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 effect 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 gender1

References


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