

Relationships Between Attributional Complexity and Empathy

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ABSTRACT - Many past studies have demonstrated that situationally-manipulated attributions influence an observer's emotional reactions toward, and willingness to help another in need. Less research has examined how individual differences in the attribution process may relate to such outcomes. The present study examined the relationship between individual differences in attributional complexity (Fletcher et al., 1986) and empathy (Davis, 1983) among a sample of 180 undergraduate students. In line with expectations, individuals scoring higher in attributional complexity reported higher levels of perspective taking and empathic concern and perspective taking largely mediated the relationship between attributional complexity and empathic concern.

Researchers have long been interested in understanding how empathy influences interpersonal behavior, and identifying factors that lead people to be more or less empathetic. One common approach to these questions is to manipulate levels of empathy directly (e.g., through instructions to take another person's perspective). Some of the most well-known work in this tradition has been Batson and colleague's work on the empathy-altruism hypothesis which has consistently shown that people induced to feel empathy for another in need (e.g., by taking the perspective of another individual) are more likely to help or otherwise act in a more prosocial manner toward that individual (for a review, see Batson, 1991). Another common approach is to manipulate empathy indirectly (e.g., by manipulating an observer's attributions for another individual's plight). Consistent with Weiner's (1980) cognitive-affect-action model of helping, studies in this tradition have shown that when observers attribute another person's need for help to uncontrollable factors they are more likely to feel sympathy for the person in need and therefore help them (i.e., empathy mediates the relationship between attributions and willingness to help; e.g., Schmidt & Weiner, 1988). Taken together, these lines of research reveal that attributions and empathy often work in concert to determine an individual's likelihood of engaging in prosocial behavior.

While these findings are clearly important, in many cases it may be infeasible to manipulate people's level of empathy and/or their attributions in an effort to encourage prosocial behavior. In such cases, individual differences in empathy and attributional processes may play a more prominent role in people's decision to engage in a prosocial manner. Indeed, many studies attest to the importance of individual differences in empathy, revealing that higher levels of dispositional empathy (perspective taking and

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empathic concern; Davis, 1983) predict better functioning in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Davis & Oathout, 1987; Davis & Oathout, 1992; Franzoi, Davis, & Young, 1985). Less is known, however, about how individual differences in empathy may relate to individual differences in the attribution processes. The present study aimed to shed light on this question by examining the relationship between individual differences in attributional complexity (Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986) and empathy (i.e., perspective taking and empathic concern; Davis, 1983).

Attributional complexity is a multi-faceted construct reflecting the extent to which people are motivated to understand the causes of behavior and prefer complex over simple explanations for behavior. Fletcher et al. (1986) suggest that AC is composed of seven related factors including motivation to understand the causes of behavior, preference for complex vs. simple explanations, interest in understanding one's own thought/attribution processes or 'metacognition', awareness that behavior is influenced by features of the situation, a tendency to infer complex (rather than simple) internal attributions, a tendency to infer more abstract (or distal) external causes rather than simple (proximal) external causes, and an emphasis on external causes that have a longer history or are further removed in time.

A close inspection of these seven factors suggest that when interpreting others' behavior, individuals high in AC should be more likely than those low in AC to deviate from the well-know fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), and correspondingly more likely to appreciate the role of the situation. In fact, at least two previous studies support this line of reasoning. In one recent study (Blumberg & Silvera, 1998), participants read one pro-life and one pro-choice essay ostensibly written by people who were randomly assigned to advocate a pro-life or pro-choice position. When asked to judge the writer's true attitude toward abortion, participants scoring low in AC (the attributionally-simple) were more likely than those high in AC to base their beliefs on the position advocated in the essays. Moreover, participants high in AC believed the writers had identical attitudes toward abortion, revealing that individuals high in AC avoided committing the fundamental attribution error. In another recent study (Pope & Meyer, 1999), participants made judgments in response to a mock trial involving a defendant accused of armed robbery. Participants scoring high in AC were more likely than those scoring low in AC to attribute the crime to external causes and less likely to judge the defendant guilty both before and after presentation of the evidence.

Taken together, the studies just reviewed suggest that, when interpreting the causes of another person's behavior, participants scoring high in AC are more likely than those low in AC to take external circumstances into account. Viewed in the context of Weiner's cognitive-affect-action model, these attributional tendencies should make individuals high in AC less likely than those low in AC to arrive at simple conclusions for the causes of another's behavior (e.g., that an individual in need of help is personally responsible for their plight) and more likely to appreciate the presence of multiple and complex causal factors. Assuming that part of the process of trying to understand another also involves 'walking in the other's shoes,' individuals high in AC should be more likely than those low in AC to engage in perspective taking (Hypothesis 1), as this would facilitate their goal of better understanding another. In addition, given that perspective taking is a common precursor of empathic concern (tender feelings for another), individuals high in AC should also report higher levels of empathic concern than those low in AC (Hypothesis 2). Finally, implicit in this line of reasoning is the hypothesis that perspective taking will mediate the relationship between attributional complexity and empathic concern (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and eighty students (42 men, 136 women, 2 unidentified) from an introductory psychology course completed the measures described below in exchange for extra credit and were debriefed at the end of the academic quarter.¹ Presentation of the scales was counterbalanced.

Measures

Participants completed the perspective taking and empathic concern subscales from Davis' (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Each scale is comprised of seven items rated on a scale from 1 (never describes me) to 5 (always describes me). As an example, one perspective taking item reads "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision" and one empathic concern item reads "I often have tender concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." The two subscales demonstrated acceptable reliabilities in the present study ($\alpha = .76$ and $.75$, respectively).

Participants also completed Fletcher et al.'s (1986) attributional complexity scale. The ACS contains 28 items reflecting the seven subscales discussed above (4 items per subscale). Participants rated each item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A preliminary examination of the internal reliabilities from the 7 subscales revealed that 6 of the 7 scales had reliabilities below the typical .70 standard (ranging from .47 to .62), consistent with Fletcher et al.'s original findings. A composite AC index comprised of all 28 items, however, was highly reliable ($\alpha = .88$). Thus, following Fletcher et al., analyses were conducted using the overall AC score.

Results

As predicted, higher scores on AC were associated with higher levels of perspective taking ($r = .41, p < .001$) and empathic concern ($r = .34, p < .001$) and, consistent with past research (Davis, 1983), perspective taking and empathic concern were positively correlated ($r = .53, p < .001$). To test the hypothesis that perspective taking would mediate the relationship between AC and empathic concern, I next conducted a hierarchical linear regression in which I regressed empathic concern in a series of two steps on AC and perspective taking, respectively (cf., Baron & Kenny, 1986). In line with the mediation hypothesis, the relationship between AC and empathic concern ($\beta = .34, p < .001$) was notably reduced ($\beta = .15, p < .05$) when perspective taking was entered into the model; as a set, AC and perspective taking explained 30% of the variance in empathic concern, $F(2, 174) = 37.29, p < .001$. Further analyses, following Sobel (1982), revealed that the reduction in the AC-perspective taking relationship was statistically significant ($z = 4.47, p < .001$). However, because the relationship between AC and empathic concern remained significant, it is most appropriate to conclude that perspective taking partly mediated the relationship between AC and empathic concern.²

Discussion

The present study supported the three related hypotheses that individuals scoring high in attributional complexity (Fletcher et al., 1986) would report higher levels of perspective taking and empathic concern (Davis, 1983), and that perspective taking would mediate the relationship between AC and empathic concern. These results suggest that attributional complexity motivates an individual to understand others through perspective taking, and that perspective taking subsequently results in heightened feelings of concern for others, presumably in part because it allows an observer to override their tendency to attribute

behavior solely to the target's disposition. This pattern of findings is quite consistent with past research demonstrating that (situationally-induced) attributions influence willingness to help another via their effect on an observer's emotional response (i.e., pity/sympathy vs. anger; Schmidt & Weiner, 1988). More specifically, when observers are led to believe that a target's need for help is uncontrollable, they feel higher levels of pity/sympathy and lower levels of anger, and are, as a result, more likely to help the target. While the present study did not focus on helping behavior, it seems reasonable to suggest that higher levels of perspective taking and empathic concern among individuals high in attributional complexity may mediate between attributional complexity and willingness to help another in need.

The present results also help to extend work on attributional complexity. To date, much of the work on attributional complexity has been focused on evaluating the relationship between attributional complexity and attribution processes, most commonly the fundamental attribution error. As noted earlier, two recent studies addressing this issue have demonstrated that individuals high in AC were less likely to commit the fundamental attribution error (Blumberg & Silvera, 1998; Pope & Meyer, 1999; cf. Devine, 1989). However, at least one study has shown that individuals high in AC were somewhat more likely to commit the fundamental attribution error (Fletcher, Reeder, & Bull, 1990). While the current study did not directly examine causal attributions within a specified context, the general pattern of findings suggests that individuals high in AC may be less likely to attribute others' problems to internal causes as a result of their higher level of perspective taking. Future research addressing this question could yield important insights into the benefits of attributional complexity within relationships.

While the current results suggest attributional complexity may facilitate functioning in relationships, several studies have also revealed that moderately depressed individuals score higher on attributional complexity in comparison with those scoring very low or very high in depression (Flett & Hewitt, 1990; Flett, Pliner, & Blankstein, 1989), which may bode less well for those high in attributional complexity. Clearly, additional research is needed to fully understand the benefits, and potential drawbacks of high levels of attributional complexity.

When interpreting the present findings, several limitations should be kept in mind. To begin, given that the data were correlational, it is not possible to clearly establish the causal direction of these relationships. There is evidence that the relationship between AC and empathic concern is mediate by perspective taking, but this does not necessarily demonstrate that AC is the causal variable. Based on work by Weiner and colleagues (1980) it seems plausible that attributional complexity drives perspective taking and empathic concern, but previous studies have also shown that heightened levels of empathy can result in attributions that emphasize the role of the situation rather than the person (e.g., Gould & Sigall, 1977; Regan & Totten, 1975). Future longitudinal research could help in more clearly addressing the question of causation. Another limitation is that the current study did not focus on prosocial behavior per se, but rather, self-reported levels of empathy. Nevertheless, the empathy scales used in the present study have been shown to predict (better) functioning in interpersonal relationships. Thus, the present results are likely to have implications for interpersonal behavior. Future research addressing this question could add to our understanding of how attributional processes impact prosocial behavior and functioning in interpersonal relations.

Footnotes

1. Participants completed a number of additional measures not directly relevant to the present study.
2. Women scored significantly higher on empathic concern ($p < .001$) and marginally higher on both

AC and perspective taking ($p < .10$). Accordingly, I conducted an additional set of regression analyses controlling for gender. These analyses yielded results identical to those reported in the main text.

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