



Geographic variation in empathy: A state-level analysis [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Empathy is often studied at the individual level, but little is known about variation in empathy across geographic regions and how this variation is associated with important regional-level outcomes. The present study examined associations between state-level empathy, prosocial behavior, and antisocial behavior in the United States. Participants were 79,563 U.S. residential adults who completed measures of cognitive and emotional empathy (i.e., perspective taking and empathic concern). Information on prosocial and antisocial behavior was retrieved from publicly available government databases. All indices of empathy were related to lower rates of violent crime, aggravated assault, and robbery. Total empathy was associated with higher well-being and higher volunteer rates. Implications for geographic variation in empathy, prosocial behavior, and antisocial behavior are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Empathy is defined as the tendency to be psychologically aware of others' feelings and perspectives (Decety & Lamm, 2006). As such, empathic responses are multi-dimensional in nature (Davis, 1994), comprised of distinct *emotional* components (tendencies to feel concern and compassion for others) and *cognitive* components (tendencies to imagine different viewpoints beyond one's own). These are commonly referred to as the *empathic concern* and *perspective-taking* components of empathy, respectively. Empathy can be considered either a situational response to others in need or an enduring individual characteristic that is relatively stable over time and across the lifespan (Eisenberg et al., 1999; Grünh, Rebucal, Diehl, Lumley, & Labouvie-Vief, 2008). In this particular paper, we conceptualize empathy as an enduring trait.

Most previous research has focused on individual-level correlates of empathic concern and perspective taking, neglecting how

between-state variation in empathy can explain regional variation in important outcomes, like volunteering, charitable giving, and crime. The current study examines geographic variation in empathic concern and perspective taking, and how state-level empathy is associated with state-level prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, and well-being. These components of empathy have each been associated with a wide variety of outcomes, including lower rates of crime and higher rates of volunteering and helping others in need (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Konrath & Grynberg, 2013; Unger & Thumhuri, 1997).

1.1. Individual-level associations with empathy

Empathy is associated with a wide array of positive outcomes, such as life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000; Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994). Further, both empathic concern and perspective taking are related to higher rates of *prosocial* behavior, like volunteering, donating money to charity, and helping others in need (Davis, 1983; Grünh et al., 2008; Konrath, 2014; Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010). People high in empathic concern do many prosocial things—they are more likely to return incorrect change, let a stranger go ahead of them when waiting in line, carry strangers' belonging, and do favors for their friends (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010). Empathic concern is one of the mechanisms thought to underlie the link

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between perspective taking and helping behavior (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Empathy is also related to lower rates of antisocial behavior. For example, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) found that perspective taking was negatively related to perpetration of criminal acts (i.e., aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, and vehicle theft). Perspective taking has also been linked to less aggressive behavior while intoxicated (Giancola, 2003), fewer accusations of child abuse (Wiehe, 2003), and a reduced likelihood of committing sexual offenses (Burke, 2001). A lack of perspective taking is one of the prominent antecedents of perpetrating aggressive behavior and violent crime (Day, Mohr, Howells, Gerace, & Lim, 2012).

1.2. Regional variation in psychological characteristics

Psychological characteristics can vary across geographic regions and have been linked to important regional level outcomes (Rentfrow, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). For example, neuroticism aggregated at the state level has been positively linked to robbery and murder rates, and state-level agreeableness has been negatively linked to murder, robbery, and property crime rates (Rentfrow et al., 2008). There is considerably less research on regional comparisons of empathy. In one notable exception, Chopik, O'Brien, and Konrath (2016) examined variation in empathy in 63 different countries around the world, finding that collectivistic countries were higher in empathy on average. However, comparing large, diverse countries to one another often masks the considerable differences within a particular country (Chopik & Motyl, 2017).

The United States had the seventh highest empathy scores out of the 63 countries examined in Chopik, O'Brien, and Konrath (2016). Considering that the U.S. contains significant regional variation in psychological characteristics (Rentfrow et al., 2008), we suspect that empathy may also vary regionally with the U.S. For example, research on variation in the Big Five personality traits (i.e., openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) found that people in the U.S. cluster into three different personality groups, each with a distinct 'personality profile' (e.g., the 'friendly and conventional' cluster in the Midwest had high extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and low neuroticism and openness). Each of these clusters corresponded to a particular region in the U.S., with each regional cluster of personality related to variation in political, sociological, economic, and health outcomes (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Rentfrow et al., 2013). It is unclear whether empathy shows similar regional variation and whether this variation is reliably associated with regional indicators. Geographic variation in psychological characteristics is the cornerstone of many theories in psychology and often forms the basis of entire disciplines (Rentfrow, 2014). Indeed, examining how empathy varies geographically can help uncover the reasons why social behavior also varies geographically. The current study seeks to situate empathy in a broader context, to enable researchers to further examine the mechanisms that give rise to regional disparities in important outcomes.

1.3. The current study

The current study examined geographic variation in dispositional empathic concern, perspective taking, and total empathy in a sample of $N = 79,563$ adults residing in the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. To our knowledge, no study to date has examined within-country differences in trait empathy and how these differences may relate to region-level outcomes.

We used individual-level relationships as a reference for predicting potential state-level relationships. There are multiple forms of prosocial and antisocial behavior which are often distinguished

by the target of such behavior. For example, *formal* prosocial behavior is considered engagement with a broader organization; *informal* social behavior is considered helping behavior toward family, friends, and strangers. In the current study, we examine formal prosocial behavior as there are accurate state-level data available on these indicators. Specifically, prosocial behavior was operationalized as state-by-state rates of volunteering and charitable behavior. Antisocial behavior was operationalized with state-level crime rates per capita. We hypothesized that higher state-wide empathy scores would be related to more prosocial behavior (e.g., volunteering), less antisocial behavior (e.g., committing crime), and higher well-being.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 79,563 adults (55.8% Male), ranging in age from 18 to 90 ($M = 38.12$, $SD = 13.42$), who volunteered to complete an online survey. The majority of respondents were Caucasian (86.8%), followed by Asian or Asian American (6.1%), multi-racial/other (2.8%), Black or African American (2.2%), and Hispanic (2.1%).¹ All available data were used; no stopping rule was implemented and there were no data exclusions. Portions of this data are published elsewhere in a report examining cross-cultural comparisons in empathy (Chopik et al., 2016). The sample size from each of the states correlated highly with each state's population ($r = 0.96$, $p < 0.001$). Although our large sample of participants allowed for more precise estimates of state-level means, ultimately our analysis was done on these 51 observations, as in previous work on national differences in psychological characteristics (Rentfrow et al., 2008). Thus, studies of geographic variation should be interpreted in light of the number of observations used in the focal analysis, rather than the number of observations used to yield aggregate scores for an area. We note this as a limitation of the current study and advise replication of the following associations in different samples and at different units of analysis, which would help to increase the confidence of our findings.

2.2. Materials & procedure

Participants volunteered and completed an online survey through the fourth author's website in 2010–2011. Upon completion of all questionnaires, survey respondents received personalized feedback on their empathy scores. State of residence was determined from participants' IP addresses (see Rentfrow et al., 2013 for a similar approach). State-level indices of empathic concern and perspective taking were created by averaging the scores of the participants living within a particular state.

2.2.1. Empathy

Participants completed the empathic concern and perspective taking subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), a widely used measure of individual differences in empathy. The 7-item *empathic concern* subscale reflects a person's other-oriented feelings of compassion for the misfortunes of others and represents an emotional component of empathy (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"). The 7-item *perspective taking* subscale reflects a person's tendency to imagine others' points of view and represents a cognitive or intellectual component of empathy (e.g., "I sometimes try to under-

¹ Our sample is slightly more male (55.8% v. 50.8%; $\chi^2(1) = 1386.76$, $p < 0.001$), had a higher proportion of White, non-Hispanic respondents (86.8% v. 77.1%; $\chi^2(1) = 4239.60$, $p < 0.001$), and a lower proportion of adults over the age of 65 (3.6% v. 14.9%; $\chi^2(1) = 7972.78$, $p < 0.001$) compared to the general US population.

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