



# The relation between empathy and offending: A meta-analysis



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## ABSTRACT

A meta-analysis of  $k = 38$  studies (60 independent effect sizes), including 6631 participants, was conducted to investigate whether differences in cognitive and affective empathy exist between offenders and non-offenders. Cognitive empathy was more strongly associated with offending ( $d = .43$ ) than affective empathy ( $d = .19$ ). Moderator analyses revealed that various study and participant characteristics (i.e., year of publication, impact factor, age and sex of the participant, and assessment instrument) influenced the strength and direction of the association between cognitive empathy and offending. Type of assessment instrument, the number of variables on which the offender and comparison group were matched, age and sex of the participants influenced the strength of the association between affective empathy and offending.

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## 1. Introduction

Empathy has often been considered an important capacity of human beings in reducing violent behaviors toward others. Pinker (2011) even

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argues that empathy is one of the main driving forces behind human civilization. However, the question is whether all human beings equally share this capacity to understand another's viewpoint and to feel compassion for others. For instance, Jolliffe and Farrington (2007) found that males and females who previously demonstrated violent behavior showed relatively low levels of empathy. In addition, a recent study by Van der Helm, Stams, Van der Stel, Van Langen, and Van der Laan (2012) showed that juvenile delinquents had both lower cognitive empathy and affective empathy than non-delinquent adolescents. Notably, there are also studies showing that empathy is unrelated to offending, in particular recidivism of sexual delinquency (Mann, Hanson, & Thonton, 2010). The aim of the present study is to examine in a meta-analytic review whether differences in empathy exist between offenders and non-offenders.

### 1.1. Definition of empathy

In the past few decades, empathy has been defined in many different ways. Some have regarded empathy in cognitive terms (e.g., Hogan, 1969), whereas others have defined empathy in more affective or emotional terms (e.g., Hoffman, 1984; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Despite the ongoing debate about the definition of empathy, a widely agreed-upon definition of empathy has been provided by Cohen and Strayer (1996), that is, the ability to understand and share another's emotional state and context (see Geng, Xia, & Qin, 2012; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). According to this definition, empathy is a multidimensional construct comprising both a cognitive and affective component (e.g., Marshall & Maric, 1996; Davis, 1983). Cognitive empathy is considered the ability to understand another's emotions and feelings, while affective empathy is the ability to share another's emotional state, and to experience feelings of the other person. Singer (2006) states that the cognitive and affective components of empathy constitute different abilities that rely on different non-overlapping neuro-cognitive circuits. Additionally, brain regions relevant to cognitive empathy are thought to develop later than brain regions relevant to more affective aspects of empathy (Singer, 2006).

### 1.2. Empathy, antisocial behavior and offending

A lack of empathy is thought to be associated with antisocial behavior and delinquency, in part, because individuals are not inhibited to show behaviors that are harmful to others (Feshbach, 1975; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Miller and Eisenberg (1988) conducted a meta-analysis of the relation between empathy and antisocial behavior, and found that empathy was negatively related to aggression, externalizing, and antisocial behavior. More recent research also showed that low empathy is related to individual's level of verbal, physical, and indirect aggression (Kaukiainen et al., 1999) and students' involvement in bullying others (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006b, 2011). More specifically, Lovett and Sheffield (2007) found a negative relation between affective empathy and aggressive behavior in adolescents. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of empathy and delinquency, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) found lower levels of cognitive empathy to be more strongly related with delinquency than affective empathy. In addition, the strength of the relation was found to be influenced by a number of factors, namely: the questionnaire that was used, age of the sample, and type of offense.

### 1.3. Factors affecting the relation between empathy and offending

First, the instrument that is used to assess empathy might influence the strength of the relation between empathy and offending. Over the years, several assessment instruments have been developed to examine empathy, primarily relying on self-report. The Hogan Empathy Scale (HES; Hogan, 1969) was one of the first instruments available,

but assesses only the cognitive component of empathy. The most frequently used questionnaires to measure the emotional component of empathy are the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), the Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents/Bryant Empathy Index (IECA/BEI; Bryant, 1982) and the Impulsiveness–Venturesomeness–Empathy Scale (IVE; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978) (see Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Lovett & Sheffield, 2007). The IVE consists of three subscales, of which the Empathy scale presumes to measure emotional empathy. Both the IECA and the IVE were derived from the QMEE.

Two questionnaires have been designed to assess both cognitive and affective empathy, based on a multidimensional approach to empathy. The first is the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980), a multidimensional tool that is composed of 4 subscales. Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) stated that the Fantasy subscale and the Personal Distress (PD) subscale of the IRI are not appropriate to measure cognitive or affective empathy. Studies that used the IRI as a measure of cognitive and affective empathy mostly used the Perspective-Taking (PT) subscale to assess cognitive empathy, whereas the Empathic Concern (EC) subscale is mostly used to measure affective empathy. The second multidimensional tool that has been developed, is the Basic Empathy Scale (BES; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a), which consists of a cognitive and an affective subscale.

Second, the ability to empathize may depend on various individual characteristics of study participants. For instance, cognitive empathy becomes more sophisticated with age and is more evident among adolescents than among children (Hoffman, 1984), whereas affective empathy is already present in early infancy and remains stable across time (Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005). Besides age differences, several studies have found sex differences in empathy, with significantly higher self-reported empathy scores in females than in males (Garaigordobil, 2009; Hoffman, 1977; Rueckert, Branch, & Doan, 2011). However, some authors have pointed out that this could be the result of the earlier maturation of girls compared to boys (Palmer, 2003). Larger differences between males and females were found for affective empathy than for cognitive empathy (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Mestre, Samper, Frías, & Tur, 2009). Finally, Brody, Cauffman, Espelage, Mazerolle, and Piquero (2003) found empathy to be a protective factor for both males and females. Further, they found small differences between males and females in the relation between empathy and offending.

Third, intelligence and SES have been shown to influence the association between empathy and offending. For instance, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) found that the relation between respectively cognitive and affective empathy and offending disappeared after controlling for intelligence and SES. However, closer inspection of these findings revealed that only 3 of the 21 cognitive studies and 4 of the 14 affective studies matched offenders and non-offenders on both SES and intelligence. Besides intelligence and SES other factors may influence the relation between offending and empathy. Therefore, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) stated that offender and control groups should be matched not only on intelligence and IQ, but also on individual, family, and demographic variables to assess whether empathy has an influence on offending behavior independently of other factors.

### 1.4. The present study

The current meta-analysis is a replication and extension of the meta-analysis on empathy and offending conducted by Jolliffe and Farrington covering a period of 32 years of research. Lytton (1994) has suggested that meta-analyses should be replicated as a rule, because the results of meta-analyses are affected by countless decisions about collecting, coding and analyzing primary studies. With the current study, we report on 12 more years of research on empathy and offending, covering the period between 1969 and 2013. New meta-analytic techniques have been used to increase statistical power and facilitate a more extensive

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