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Empathy of adolescents from families of different structure

1. Introduction

One of the personality components, an extremely significant one in the course of interpersonal relationships is empathy. This important regulator of human behaviour often is used for deeper penetration into clarifying the motivation of the behaviour of people in various interpersonal situations. Empathy is also often regarded as an indicator of social intelligence (Cundiff et al., 2008; Plopa, 2012; Bornemark et al., 2014; Allemand et al., 2015).

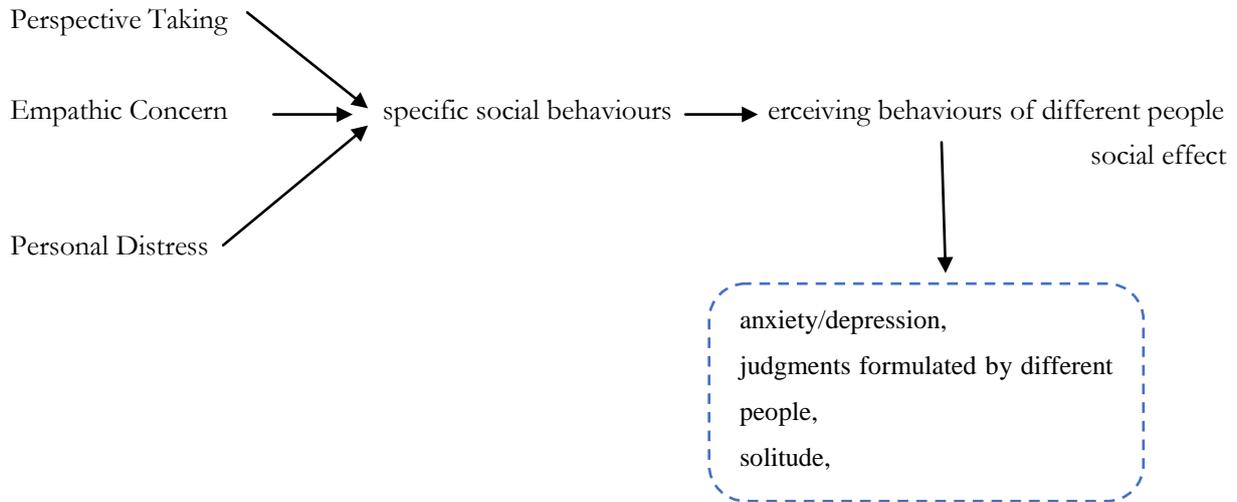
The term *empathy* has been used in many meanings. Originally, it was used mainly in aesthetics, where it referred to direct participation in sensual and emotional experience. In a broader meaning, the concept of empathy concerns the three aspects of functioning of an individual, i.e., emotional, cognitive and executive. The emotional aspect is linked to a capacity of an individual to feel the same emotions as other people. The cognitive aspect concerns an ability to understand other people's reactions correctly. In contrast, the executive aspect includes an ability to respond to different states of other people (Eisenberg, 2005).

The definition proposed by N. Eisenberg and J. Strayer defines *empathy* as an affective reaction stemming from the perception or understanding of another person's emotional state, equal to what the other person feels or to what we believe they can feel. Therefore, it contains both cognitive and affective elements (Eisenberg, Strayer, 1987).

In this article we accepted the definition of empathy by M. H. Davis, who defines it holistically as "a set of theoretical constructions which relate to the responses of an individual to other people's experience. According to the author, the term of theoretical constructions means „the processes occurring in an observer and the affective and non-affective effects that arise as a result of these processes. The phenomenon of empathy takes place in a situation when „(...) an observer comes into some kind of contact with an observed person, which is followed by some kind of reaction from the observer (cognitive, affective and/or behavioral) „(Davis, 1999, s.23) .

Based on his definition, M. H. Davis developed a model of mediation which refers to the connection of empathy with social behaviours (Fig.1). When analyzing the variables included in this model, we can see that it focuses around the concept of flexible empathy. It is assumed here that individuals' permanent tendencies related to Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern and Personal Distress have a major influence on the occurrence of specific interpersonal behaviours. The presented diagram also shows that people's individual behaviour defines how they are perceived by others, which leads in turn to these kinds of relationships that are possible in a given situation (Davis, 1999).

Figure 1. The model of mediation by M.H. Davis, (1999), p. 203



Source: own work

When searching for the sources of empathy, biological grounds for the prosocial human behavior were pointed out. However, it is likely that experience acquired both at home and in other social environments also affects an individual's emotional reactions towards other people (Holmgren et al., 1998; Plopa, 2012).

The researchers point out that the development of empathy is fostered by the properly functioning family environment that meets the emotional needs of a child, prevents the child from concentrating on himself/herself too much thereby giving the possibility of exhibiting emotional needs of others, encourages the child to experience a wide range of emotions, provides opportunities to observe and participate in interactions, which trigger emotional sensitivity. But there are a lot of questions about the course of empathy development and the social functioning of a child in an environment other than the full family. Exceptional attention should be paid to situations when a family becomes incomplete or when an incomplete family is reconstructed.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study presented in the article was to answer the question does the family structure influences the level of empathy of the adolescent. Is there a difference between groups of women and men from complete, incomplete and reconstructed families in terms of empathy and whether any difference with regard to the dimensions of empathy can be seen in groups of women from families of different structure and in groups of men from nuclear families, divorced and stepfamilies?

2.2. Research hypotheses of the study and participants

1. There is a variation in the range of expression of the dimensions of empathy between women and men from complete families.
2. There is a variation in the range of expression of the dimensions of empathy between women and men from single-parent families.
3. There is a variation in the range of expression of the dimensions of empathy between women and men from reconstructed families.
4. The level of empathy featuring women from families with varied structure is different.
5. The level of empathy featuring men from families with varied structure is different.

The study included a group of 314 young people aged 20-23 (average age was 21, SD=1,18) from the administrative region of Lodz. The tests were anonymous and done in groups. The participation of all the people in the research had a voluntary nature.

It turned out that the people forming the appropriate sample group were characterized by the uniformity of domicile (large cities, with a population of more than 100 thousand- $\chi^2=4.166$;df=4;p=.384), marital status (single- $\chi^2=1.32$;df=2;p=.516) and education level (secondary education- $\chi^2=1.031$;df=2;p=.597).

2.3. Procedure

To create an appropriate sample group, the following exclusion criteria were accepted: type of demographic structure of the family of origin and full completion of the test sheets.

Taking into account the family of origin demographic structure criterion of the examined and according to the designated purposes, the distinguished environments included: the full family, the incomplete family as a result of the parents' divorce and the reconstructed family. The above-mentioned typology of families was adopted due to methodological considerations connected with facilitating the conduct of research in this area. The appropriate sample group did not include any people originating from other family types than the above-mentioned.

Ultimately, the test group was formed by 314 people (158 women and 156 men). With respect to the family of origin structure criterion of the surveyed, 3 comparative groups were identified. The comparative group I was made up of 105 people from incomplete families (53 men and 52 women). The comparative Group II consisted of 104 people from stepfamilies (51 men and 53 women). In contrast, the comparative group III was created by 105 people from full families (52 men and 53 women).

2.4. Statistical techniques

After scoring the data the empirical material, collected through the survey, was elaborating by the test of independence Chi - square (χ^2). The raw scores collected through the Empathic Sensitiveness Scale (SWE) were elaboration using the computer program, IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0, subsequently, the mean and SD was calculated for the groups (ANOVA test). In order to see the difference between various subgroups women and men from family of different structure in terms of level empathy Tukey's T-test was carried out.

The following test methods were used: survey and standardized Empathic Sensitiveness Scale (SWE) in the adaptation of M. Kaźmierczak, M. Plopa, S. Retowski (2007).

The survey method allowed us to gather data on: the socio - demographic situation of the young people (age, gender, family structure, domicile, marital status, education). The test consists of three components: Empathic Concern and Personal Distress, both referring to the emotional side of the empathy coin and Perspective Taking - a cognitive aspect of empathy. It is psychometrically acceptable and allows for scientific research (Kaźmierczak, Plopa, Retowski, 2007).

3. Results

Due to the fact that women and men react differently to the same stimuli and behave differently in social situations, which is subject to both genetic factors, as well as environmental ones, the results for all the comparable groups of young people from families of different structure were presented taking the distinction between sexes into account (Mandal, 2006; Cundiff et al., 2008).

3.1. Variations in the dimensions of empathy of the tested young people from families of diverse structure

Considering the results of the test groups of women and men from complete, divorced and step-families in terms of the empathy dimensions, i.e. Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, Personal Distress, it appears that there are no statistically significant differences (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1a. Variations in the dimensions of empathy between women and men from complete, incomplete and reconstructed families

Structure of family- complete Components of empathy	Women		Men		F	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Perspective Taking	5.38	1.72	5.54	2.14	.181	.671
Empathic Concern	6.43	1.55	6.52	1.66	.074	.786
Personal Distress	4.98	1.74	5.08	1.13	.111	.739

Tab. 1b. Variations in the dimensions of empathy between women and men from complete, incomplete and reconstructed families

Structure of family - divorced Components of empathy	Women		Men		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Perspective Taking	5.35	2.43	5.66	1.86	.554	.458
Empathic Concern	4.94	2.49	5.38	2.07	.949	.332
Personal Distress	6.12	1.95	5.77	2.02	.781	.379
Structure of family - reconstructed Components of empathy	Women		Men		F	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Perspective Taking	5.15	2.08	4.94	2.39	.228	.634
Empathic Concern	4.43	1.37	4.53	1.99	.082	.776
Personal Distress	6.57	1.20	6.96	1.15	2.931	.090

Legend

M- average; SD- standard deviation; F- test Fishera-Snedecora; p-level of significance

Source: own work

Analyzing the data contained in Tab. 1, it turned out that the specificity of functioning of families having a diversified structure for women and men did not affect the level of empathy of the investigated in a significant way.

3.2. Variations in the dimensions of empathy of the women from families of diverse structure

Comparing the distribution of the average results as regards empathy, obtained by the test group of women from complete, divorced and reconstructed families, two statistically significant differences were discovered.

They concerned the dimension of Empathic Concern ($F=16.458$; $p=.0005$) and Personal Distress ($F=12.872$; $p=.0005$) (Tab. 2 and 3).

Tab. 2. Variations in the dimensions of empathy in groups of women from the surveyed types of families

Sex Components of empathy	Women				
	Family complete M	Family divorced M	Family reconstructed M	F	P
Perspective Taking	5.38 SD=1.72	5.35 SD=2.43	5.15 SD=2.08	.181	.834
Empathic Concern	6.43 SD=1.55	4.94 SD=2.49	4.43 SD=1.37	16.458	.0005
Personal Distress	4.98 SD=1.74	6.12 SD=1.95	6.57 SD=1.20	12.872	.0005

Source: own work.

Tab. 3. The structure of family and the level of empathy of the surveyed women in the light of Tukey's T-test

Structure of family	Empathic Concern	
	reconstructed	divorced
complete	.0005	.0005
divorced	.345	
Structure of family	Personal Distress	
	reconstructed	divorced
complete	.0005	.002
divorced	.347	

Source: own work

While analyzing the obtained test results, it appeared that the dimension Empathic Concern reached the highest average values (above average) in the group of the women from full families ($M=6.43; SD=1.55$) compared with the results obtained by the women from incomplete families ($M=4.94; SD=2.49$) (score average) and the women from stepfamilies ($M=4.43; SD=1.37$) (below average). The obtained results proved to be statistically significant ($p=.0005$).

Among the women from stepfamilies and incomplete ones there were no statistically significant differences in this respect ($p=.345$). Another dimension of empathy, significantly differentiating the tested groups of women was the scale of Personal Distress. The lowest average results in this dimension were obtained by the women from full families ($M=4.98; SD=1.74$) (average results) compared with the women from stepfamilies ($M=6.57; SD=1.20$) ($p=.0005$) and incomplete ones ($M=6.12; SD=1.95$) ($p=.002$), which obtained in this respect the results above the average. The results proved to be statistically significant. The women from incomplete families and stepfamilies were characterized by similar results in terms of Personal Distress ($p=.347$). Perspective Taking, a cognitive aspect of empathy,

did not differentiate the groups of women significantly, and the results obtained in this field were on the average level.

3.3. Variations in the dimensions of empathy in the groups of men from families of different structure

The results of the comparative analysis showed that only two dimensions of empathy differentiated the compared groups of men, i.e. Personal Distress ($F = 20.821$; $p = .0005$) and Empathic Concern ($F=13.990$; $p=.0005$) (Tab. 4 and 5). It was noticed that the received results of examinations referring to the level of empathy displayed by the examined groups of men from families of diversified structure showed resemblance of results to the groups of women in this scope.

Tab. 4. Variations in the dimensions of empathy in the groups of men from the examined types of families

Sex	Men				
	Family complete	Family divorced	Family reconstructed	F	p
Components of empathy	M	M	M		
Perspective Taking	5.54 SD=2.14	5.66 SD=1.86	4.94 SD=2.39	1.672	.191
Empathic Concern	6,52 SD=1.66	5.38 SD=2.07	4.53 SD=1.99	13.990	.0005
Personal Distress	5.08 SD=1.13	5.77 SD=2.02	6.96 SD=1.15	20.821	.0005

Source: own work

Tab. 5. The structure of family and the level of empathy of the surveyed men in the light of Tukey's T-test

Structure of family	Empathic Concern	
	reconstructed	divorced
complete	.0005	.008
divorced	.065	
Structure of family	Personal Distress	
	reconstructed	divorced
complete	.0005	.048
divorced	.0005	

Source: own work

In the light of the results, the research proved that, as far as Personal Distress is concerned, the lowest average results were reached by the men from full families ($M=5.08$; $SD=1.13$) (average results) compared with the men from reconstructed families ($M=6.96$; $SD=1.15$) ($p=.0005$) (below average)

and incomplete families ($M=5.77$; $SD=2.02$) ($p=.048$) (average results). The diversity of the results proved to be statistically significant.

A statistically significant difference in this scope was also noticed between the groups of men from incomplete and reconstructed families ($p=.0005$). It proved that the men from reconstructed families more frequently displayed the dimension of empathy called Personal Distress. The second factor empathy differentiating the test groups of men was Empathic Concern. This dimension reached its highest average values in the group of men from full families ($M= 6.52$; $SD=1.66$) (average score) compared with the men from stepfamilies ($M= 4.53$; $SD=1.99$) ($p=.0005$) (results above average) and incomplete families ($M=5.38$; $SD=2.07$) ($p=.008$) (average score). The diversity of the results proved to be statistically significant. The cognitive component of empathy Perspective Taking did not differentiate considerably the surveyed groups of men, who got average scores in this scope. While comparing the groups of men from stepfamilies and incomplete families, we noticed a clear trend, approaching the level of statistical significance ($p=.065$), which showed a more frequent occurrence of the dimension called Empathic Concern in the behaviour of the men from incomplete families.

4. Discussion

The own examination results concerning differentiation of the dimensions of empathy in the groups of women and men from the examined full, incomplete and reconstructed families did not show any statistically significant differences in this scope. It may be assumed that the influence of the closest environment of the young individuals shaped their sensitivity to the needs of others in a similar degree. The comparative analysis of the average results obtained by the groups of women and men from the surveyed types of families with regard to the dimensions of empathy revealed statistically significant differences in terms of the Empathic Concern scale and the Personal Distress scale.

It turned out that the young people from full families were more often willing to engage in friendly relationships with other people than the men and the women from incomplete and reconstructed families and they clearly displayed the need for closeness. In turn, the women and the men from reconstructed families were more likely to suffer from irritability and experience the continuous tension than the surveyed young people from full and incomplete families, which could be of importance for the quality of their social contacts. The component of empathy defined as Perspective Taking did not differentiate considerably the examined groups of women and men, who mostly received average scores in this scope.

The obtained research results can explain the research findings of M. Plopa (2005), who states that in the developmental aspect the quality of empathy to a large extent is conditioned by a family situation. He thinks that the parental socialization practice reflects to some extent the parents genetic structure which is handed over to the offspring and influences the ability of children to empathize with others (Bornemark, 2014; Davis, 1999; Plopa, 2005).

Therefore, the observation of parents by the girls and the boys from full families, who, as it turned out, succeeded in their socialization, had a positive impact on the formation of disposal associated with empathy. In addition, it is assumed that the development of empathic reactions is more complete if the child can see a number of models showing emotional expression, sensitivity and compassion for

others (Soenens, 2012). This was apparently the case in the groups of women and men from full families. In reconstructed families probably focused on the processes leading to family integration, trying to solve emotional problems or overcome other difficulties which are an obstacle to a family harmony there were no conditions to develop the ability to empathize with other people. The related to the subject literature emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the quality of the early parent-child relationships and the reactions of the young individual displaying empathy (Decety, 2015). It turns out that the quality of the closest relationships during the first two years of someone's life can in a significant way determine the empathic reactions in this person's future life (Bornemark, 2014).

Therefore, we can assume that in full families, unlike in reconstructed ones, the parents moulded, in their children, a strong feeling of confidence in others, gave them the sense of security, which, later in their life, could make them focus less on fulfilling their own needs and more on responding to the needs of other people (Lougheed, 2015).

The examinations carried out by J. Rostowski are worth noticing. The author states that 3-year-old children securely attached to their mothers are generally more sociable, emotionally competent, cooperating, persistent, obedient and self-controlling than those lacking such a secure attachment, who more frequently display negative forms of behaviour (Rostowski, 2003).

In addition, many researchers indicate that there is a relation between the occurrence of empathy and the upbringing style. The parents who require high standards of behaviour from their children, use persuasion in order to ensure discipline, expect mature behaviour but do not exercise excessive control and do not apply punishment are likely to raise a child displaying empathy (Eisenberg, 2005).

6. Conclusions

The empathy reflects an innate ability to perceive and be sensitive to the emotional states of others coupled with a motivation to care for their wellbeing. It has evolved in the context of parental care for offspring as well as within kinships. The development of empathy, to a large extent, takes place together with the acquisition of family and social experience, the development of cognitive structures and the increasing emotional control.

Empirical studies document that empathetic reactions emerge early in life, and that they are not automatic. Rather they are heavily influenced and modulated by interpersonal and contextual factors, which impact behavior and cognitions. In the late adolescence period young people are able to show empathy, provided they acquired such an ability in the course of their socialization process. The mechanisms supporting empathy are flexible and amenable to behavioral interventions that can promote caring beyond kin. Empathy is flexible and can be promoted.

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