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## Evolution of Empathy from Infancy to Adulthood

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of empathy took so much attention recently. It is seen that the concept of empathy has been incorporated into several studies even including autism, spectrum disorders, psychopathia, political ideologies, medical care, ethical and moral development, justice and courts, gender differences, relations with media and art, treatment modalities and theory of minds in clinical psychology, popular media and political campaigns. Many negative social events such as bully behaviors, attitudes lack of understanding, anger homicides, domestic violence and many more prove that, there is a growing need of mutual understanding among people in society day by day. Empathy is among the most important components that supports social system. In this century, where tolerance in interpersonal relations diminishes while social diversities escalate, the importance of empathy also increases. Is empathy considered as a natural gift given by birth? How does empathy evaluate from infancy to adulthood? This article will seek the answers of these questions.

**Keywords:** empathy, evolution of empathy, processes of empathy

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### INTRODUCTION

Empathy is defined as "the ability of a person to experience representatively another's feelings, ideas, reactions and sometimes another's motions as if he/she is that person and the capacity to become involved in these".

Kurdek and Rodgon (1975) divided the components of empathy into three; such as perceptual perspective taking, cognitive perspective taking and affective perspective taking. Feshbach (1978) tells empathy has three components. According to Feshbach's three component model, emphatic reaction involves followings:

Ability to diagnose others' emotional status, ability to accept someone else's point of view and the capacity to take his role, remembering of a shared emotional reaction. According to him, first and second cognitive components of empathy are in assertive structure with the third component. Similarly, Hofmann (1979) also mentions about three components of empathy as cognitive, affective and motivational.

Today the most appreciated opinion is that empathy is composed of both cognitive and affective components and these components interact with each other (Chlovpan and friends, 1985). Cognitive empathy can be defined as understanding of other's cognitive status, while affective empathy is defined as having an appropriate emotional reaction in case of cognitive situation imputed to someone else (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron, Cohen and David, 2004). Due to Gallo (1989), cognitive part of empathy is to understand how others think and other part is about ability to emotionally communicate with others. According to Gladstein (1983), what is meant with cognitive side of empathy is to understand how others feel and what is meant with affective side is to feel how others feel.

Wied, Branje and Meeus, (2005) defines emotional part of empathy as the ability to feel others' feelings and ability to give most appropriate reaction. Affective empathy encourages individuals to behave self-sacrificing to their families, friends and strangers and also very important considering moral development. Furthermore, there are some explanations in literature claiming that emotional empathy can play a key role in suppressing violence. Generally, stimulants such as person's voice or expression of face are supportive clues to help us to feel others' feelings in most appropriate way. But, in case these clues are not enough apparent, we may face with difficulties while understanding the

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feelings of that person and giving appropriate reactions. In that case, taking perspective, in other words, ability to look with others' point of views comes into play.

## **INFANCY**

From an evolutionary point of view, new born organisms are over sensitive and extremely open to dangers to the changes in their environments. Since living may be a problem from the moment of birth, there should be certain mechanisms in order to help to survive both in infant and mother. If new born organisms had to wait till their infancy in order to learn what they should do to take their mothers' support and attention, and mothers had to learn how they could give this, there would be so little chance for them to survive. Communication patterns should work when they are first used. So, feelings sent by the baby, play as some kind of communication signals with several adaptable results in order to survive. There are some strong evidences proving that parents have influences on infant's behaviors. The less known fact is that, infants have strong influence on their parents (Plutchik, 1990, s.38-39). In the study of Hoffman (1994) on babies, it is thought that, this situation which is called primary emphatic reactions do not exactly contain empathy. Thus, empathy contains processes of active recreation, awareness, sensitivity and high level perception. Emotional and cognitive clues, in relation with empathy that form basis of motivational grounds of emotional reactions, include function of making sense out of others' status. From this perspective, emphatic accuracy should be considered as individual's reading and extrapolating capabilities. More accurate receptors tend to be more consistent to understand other's thoughts and emotions. This is not an extraordinary perception. This has nothing to do with other psychic phenomenon such as telepathy. Instead of this, it is related with complicated psychological forms in order to understand other people's thoughts and feelings such as observation, sensitivity, memory, information and reasoning.

Hofer (1983) gave evidences that mother-infant connection is developed/composed of primitive biologically grounded with homeostatic arranging functions both exist in parents and infants' autonomic, endocrine and neurochemical systems. Trevarthen (1984), came to the conclusion that, even at very early stages of infancy, babies could mimic adults expressions (they make empathy) and speaking patterns of mothers with babies caused small changes in babies facial expressions and exposed an emphatic sensitiveness. Trevarthen (1984), took attention to facial expressions of babies could have deep emotional affect on adults and these could be felt emotionally. Besides, these actions are also very sensitive to the emotional characteristics of response they have taken from their parents. “Expressions between baby and adult who take care of baby are the first signs of empathic awareness and mutual common control” (Trevarthen, 1984, p.150).

In the study of Frodi and friends (1978) that determines the affects of baby on baby minders, recorded video of a new born was shown to a group composed of mothers and fathers. Some of the parents were shown a smiling baby while other parents were shown a crying baby. Parents were asked to give notes due to their emotional moods and at the same time their blood pressure and skin conductance were calculated. Parents who watched crying baby declared they felt more uncomfortable, more anxious, less happy and less careful in comparison with those who watched smiling baby. Results were taken from both mothers and fathers. On the other hand, grading of mothers tend to be more extreme. Blood pressure of adults who watched crying baby increased, but no change was observed for the parents who watched smiling baby. Increase was detected in skin conductance for the parents who watched crying baby, while parents who watched smiling baby were not affected in this term. Researchers came to the conclusion that, crying and smiling babies took different emphatic emotional and physiological reactions from parents. Researchers declared that, crying was accepted as repellent and parents had very strong feelings to end this repellent signal coming from baby. On the other hand, smiling baby caused enjoyable feelings with few or none stimulation. But, feelings derived from both smiling and crying of baby, caused approaching tendency in parents, for to stop crying in case of the crying baby and to extend the duration of smiling in case of smiling baby. This kind of connection has tendency to be a survival value in evolutionary terms. This study executed by Frodi (1978), strongly supports that babies have powerful affects on parents' emotional moods. From this study, it can also be determined that, sharing feelings via empathy is also a ground for social attachment among parents and children.

## **CHILDHOOD PERIOD**

With the activation of taking role ability, that begins at 2-3 ages and continues and increases during late childhood period, it is declared that the child begins to recognize the differences between his own

feelings and the others' and begins to determine his own needs and starts to add his own interpretations to events (Davis 1996, s.44; Lennon and Eisenberg 1990, s.212). As a result of this, the child begins to be more sensitive to the clues giving information about real thoughts of others in a diversity of expressional social environment, even they can give empathic answers to several feelings which in fact contradict with each other. Meanwhile, as a result of fast growing language skills, usage of symbolic clues strengthen this process, the child begins to express his feelings which become more complicated each day, he can understand which kind of help will be more appropriate to others' situations. Finally, the child becomes to a level that he can empathically be affected before some others problem even that other person is not present and it is defined that this situation carries child to a very fine level (Hoffman 1994, p.166; Davis, 1996, p.44).

According to Shapiro (1998), age 6 is determined as the beginning phase of individual empathy, meaning the child is able to see events from another's perspective and react properly. A child, approximately at the age of 7, perfectly starts to understand the other individual's situation by putting himself in that other's place. As the child sees and lives people with different characteristics and behaviors, he begins to realize that every person has unique characteristics. Thus, he begins to conceive different people can behave differently in different period of times. At these ages, language of the child develops and abstract thinking ability increases. with the help of these developing skills, the child can perceive what happens to other people living in far away (for instance; starving children in Somali). He has never seen them, never lives with them but he can understand them. This is extremely important. Because he can emphatically approach to other problems of people he reads from the books and newspapers. At the late period of childhood, children at the age of 10-12, can extend their empathy feelings more than people he knows from his neighborhood and name them with abstract empathy language and they show interest to less advantaged people even they live in different countries (Shapiro, 1998, p. 56-517).

As the child gets older, his empathy to others naturally develops and of course the most important motive to get into action is empathy. For instance; in some studies teachers were asked to what extend children had empathy as individuals and asked to observe children's facial expressions in order to evaluate what kind of reactions they gave to other people's sorrows. In both studies, it was determined that the children with higher empathy capability had higher possibilities to act pro social (Chapman, Zahn-Waxler, Cooperman and Iannotti, 1987, p.140). But the relation between empathy and action is generally weaker in children at early ages; generally empathy does not end with helping. The reason of this is that, children at early ages can understand other person's difficulty but on the other hand, he can not understand exactly the reasons of that difficulty. Thus, for empathy to become more effective on actions, the children first should understand other people's point of views (Eisenberg, Gershoff vd. 2001, p.476). Besides, children should learn how to help other people. For instance; when a child at the age of two sees an adult in pain (example, mother cuts her finger), the child may feel sorrow for this but what will her emphatic sorrow force her to do? According to some anecdotes, she will probably give her mother what she is usually comfortable with, for instance her teddy bear. of course her mother will appreciate this behavior but she will prefer a band-aid instead. But since the child is at very early age, she will not understand her mother's point of view and she will not understand she and her mother have different needs. In that case, there are many preconditions for helping others: Feeling empathy requires not only feel and understand the others' feelings but also reasons of them. For these or other reasons, empathy never means altruism/selflessness is guaranteed. Even so, empathy is a driving force to direct people to help others. Empathy also composes important parts of not only why children stay away from moral rule violations but also explains why they share their toys with others, why they try to comfort their sad friends. (Gleitman, Reisberg, Gross 2007, p.15). Emphatic behaviors of parents to their children and other people before their children are especially related with their children's empathic behavior developments.

### **ADOLESCENCE PERIOD**

As children's capability of abstract thinking develops at early and middle stages of adolescence, it is observed that they begin to attribute more importance to focus on feelings and beliefs, build empathy-communication comparing with early periods. Abstract thinking develops as the age gets older, thus their ability of empathy and understanding others' point of views increase. Researchers declare that adolescence is a very important period to understand the development of positive social behaviors. The reasons of this situation are; interpersonal relations, cognitive and emotional development due to age and changes in social environment during time passing from childhood to adolescence. For

instance; relations with their parents begin to change for the young ones in adolescence period, while they begin to have new friendship and strong relations with their peers. With increasing age, there are more possibilities to expose positive social behaviors, some changes are observed in social cognitive and social emotional skills of the adolescent. For example, increase in abstract thinking and reductive interpretation (hypothetical-deductive reasoning) also encourages increase in empathy and capability to see other point of view. Briefly, social and cognitive changes of adolescents, also affect changes on positive social behaviors. (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen & Randa, 2003; Kumru, Carlo & Edwards, 2004, p.111-112).

Ages of individuals come forth as an important actor to affect both ability and diversity of social behaviors and also other variables that are in relation with this behavior. General findings say, tendency of showing positive social behaviors increase with the age.

## ADULTHOOD PERIOD

Positive social behaviors in adulthood period, are found totally related to empathy/sympathy of early period (Eisenberg and others 2002, p.994). In the research findings of Kalliopuska (1983), it is mentioned that adults have more emphatic emotional understanding and willingness, older children also are more emphatic than the younger ones and expose pro social behaviors (Kalliopuska, 1983, s.487).

## RESULT

In brief, researches put on very several views on components of empathy. But all researchers unite on the opinion that, empathy has multi dimensional structure and it is a part of human nature.

Kohut indicated that, empathy was a basic equipage of human kind coming with birth. Stein (1964) wrote this: "How we are aware of our individualities with experiences we perceive, we are aware of a stranger individual with experiences we get via empathy". (Stein 1964, p.33). Kohut (1977) also said: "Perceiving other people's experiences via empathy, is the natural characteristics of a person such as seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting" (Kohut 1977, p.137, Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987).

Kohut wrote that empathy was a "neutral mode of observation in value" and should be individually evaluated within an empiric context. He defended that, how close were other people's behaviors, desires and values to ours, on the basis of clues that might seem worthless to people that were coming from different infrastructures, our emphatic feelings got into actions (Kohut 1977, s.137, Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987)

We can say that one of the best studies on the subject in historical period of history, is executed by Carl Rogers. The concept of empathy is very important for Rogers' personality hypothesis and an dispersible part of psychotherapy type. One of the main points Rogers mentioned was unless they had disgusted or deviant potentials, people had tendency towards realizing themselves in order to improve themselves and their prosperity. Rogers (1975) defended that nature of humankind are with "good spirit" rather than born with "bad spirit". On the other hand, positive forces of character development, even in childhood period may be stumbled by humiliation of people around him and other negative behaviors. Again, positive environmental conditions, good parenthood, safe neighborhood may support and develop emphatic behavior patterns from infancy to adulthood.

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