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Examining empathy as a communication technique in the context of gender and cultural differences: A review study

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Abstract

Empathy has several definitions which involve a broad range of emotional states, including caring to help others; also experiencing emotions which may pair with another person's emotions; and caring what another person is thinking or feeling and making differences between the self and the others less different. Empathy helps to communicate better where we can easily understand why people do or say or not say something thus, we can establish a healthy and harmonious relationship with people. Empathy also depends on cultural values, gender and environmental factors because every person is different and so their ability to establish empathy is to be expected different. Purpose of this review study is to explain the importance of empathy, its components and to discuss the effects of gender and culture on empathy.

Keywords: Empathy, culture, gender, communication.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Components of Empathy

Empathy is the ability to realize and understand beliefs, desires and feelings of other people by isolating oneself from thoughts and feelings. He begins to feel like that person and identifies himself with her/him (Cotton,2001). It is one of the most important skills that facilitate communication to concentrate and it develops over time. Empathy is a part of emotional intelligence and both concepts are increasingly becoming important in terms of effective communication skills (Elam,2000). To explain the contents of empathy with the emotional and cognitive is possible. Emotional empathy occurs by approaching with sympathy for other people's feelings, to establish a deep relationship with his feelings. Cognitive empathy is ability to recognize other people's feelings by experiencing other people's feelings (Gutman,2001). Empathic application include both cognitive (what you think I think with you) and affective (what you feel I feel with you) functions (Tuncay & Il, 2009).

Empathy can be divided into two major components:

- a) *Affective empathy* is also called emotional empathy. It is the capacity to respond with suitable emotion to another's psychological states. Individuals` ability to empathize emotionally is required to be based on emotional interaction: being affected by another's emotional state (Kaplan & Arbuthnot,1985).
- b) *Cognitive empathy* is the capacity to understand another's point of view or psychological state. Cognitive empathy and theory of mind are often used as synonymous terms however,it is unclear whether they are equivalenttotally because there is a lack of studies comparing theory of mind with types of empathy (Kaplan & Arbuthnot,1985).

Empathy could be seen as an innate ability for instance: Plomin compared twins and he found that identical twins show more emphatic response than non-identical twins so he suggests that empathy is related to genetics (Plomin, 1990). However,contemporary researchers and educators have seen it as a teachable and learnable skill, in fact empathy can be taught in schools because it is one of the social skills (Pala, 2008). On the other hand, another study states that the exact source of empathy is not known; it is expected that empathy is associated with personality, and to be activated with the training program (Decety, 2009).

Generally, most of the research agrees that there are three basic elements necessary for empathy; first of all, if a person wants to understand other people, it is essential to look at the world with his/her viewpoint in other words, the person should detect and live events like him/her. Secondly, thoughts and feelings of the other people must be understood correctlyin order to establish empathy. Finally, even if the other person's feelings and thoughts arefully understoodand if it is not reported to other person, empathy process is remained incomplete (Cuceloglu, 2009). Empathy is often confused with "sympathy". In fact, these two concepts are very different from each other. We sympathize with people in front of us, we feel the same emotions he felt whereas, when we empathize, we should not share the same feelings and opinions of the person in front of us, we just try to understand his feelings (Dokmen, 1997).It is not essential to understand or to put oneself substitution of people who is symphatized however, being supporter is necessary in sympathy. Briefly, empathy is to understand, on the other hand, in sympathy where the person understands or not, he/she has to agree with the opposite point of view (Ilgar, 2014). When a person put oneself in the place of other people and try to understand, he starts looking at the world through others` eyes that is, the one begin to to feel as other people (Akkoyun, 1987). If a person wants to establish relationships based on trust among people, empathy appears as an auxiliary element. When the person is able to establish empathy or when s/he approachesto others with empathy, s/he feels clearly understood and relieved. At this

point they begin to develop trust towards other people and open their own world and this is the positive aspect of empathy in relationships (Eisenberg & Nancy, 2000). People who can develop relationships based on empathic understanding, are more likely to show tolerant attitude towards other people. The higher tolerance in relationships will lead less conflict (Davis & Mark, 1994). Thus, for an effective communication, conflicts in the social environment must be decreased, when conflicts decreased and person put oneself in place of other people, communication between people will be successful (Ozbek, 2010).

When establishing empathy we need to pay attention to violence of expressing emotions and people should give appropriate response to violence of emotions. Also we need to pay attention to tone of voice, pace of speech, gestures and facial expressions of person apart from person's verbal response, even (Cox & Dainow, 1997). However, people need to avoid judgments because, strict judgments among people prevent establishing empathy, also judging people can not solve the problems between them, even more they can make problems inextricable (Wasserman, 2001).

1.2. Gender and Empathy

Patterns of behavior and expectations between the sexes in other words gender-specific roles exist all around the world such as thinking differently leads to development of act and feel approach (Aybek & Ekinçi, 2010). Masculinity and femininity are determined in the difference between gender and socio-cultural standards. Sexual identity develops during adolescence and it is a combination of physical and gender processes (Yavuzer, 2007). During adolescence, certain separation is experienced as a result from differences between the male and female characters. There is a sharp contrast that has an effect on the flow of life also it plays an important role which makes a difference in the feminine and masculine tendencies. (Ones, 1993). Cultural and social effects of society on gender differences are highly determined in distinct measures in which adult men and women are requested to represent themselves or engage a behavior which is explicitly associated to "empathy" or "sympathy" (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Gleichgerrcht & Decety, 2013). According to a survey carried out by Murray (1998) women are more successful than men in empathy. Also another study suggests that women are more successful especially in emotional empathy and in the same study it is emphasized young people are more successful at empathy in comparison with children and adults (Cotton, 2001). A research examining women's empathic skills suggested that female's empathetic skills are better than men's (Feshbach, 1990). Measures used in the research indicated that the average level of empathic skills of women is 2,56 out of 5, while it is 2,46 out of 5 for the men. However, the difference between the female and male participants were not statistically significant therefore it was stated that gender is not significantly associated with empathic behaviour (Carikci, 2009).

Nevertheless, The relationship between empathetic behaviour and being more emotional among women is associated with cultural and difference of their role which comes along with their gender identity in the society (Bacanli, 2006). Yet, meta-analyses considering gender and gender differences in empathy demonstrate results suggesting quite stable gender differences across a wide range of measures. Further, empathy has developmental processes in early infancy (Alexander & Wilcox, 2012; McClure, 2000) alongside evolutionary processes (Preston & De Waal, 2002).

In fact, there is significant overlap between empathetic behaviors illustrated in young people early in development and in animals. Therefore, developmental and evolutionary processes of empathy must be examined for more clear view of gender differences.

According to Zaki and Ochsner (2012), cognitive neuroscience reviews suggest (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012) that the principal components of empathy are still unclear despite it was studied several times. Even though few scholars think that emotional and cognitive component of empathy comprise a basis for a wide range of empathic responses, a comprehensive concept of empathy is still not clear. Examining gender differences in empathy might contribute to perceiving empathy by observing whether distinctions covary across different measures. For instance; if it was found coherent gender differences in both affective empathy and prosocial behavior, however less consistent variations in

cognitive empathy, then affective empathy could lead prosocial behavior. It was stated that empathy is significant component of pro-social behavior, such as; altruism, and of moral development (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; 2006).

Variations related to gender and age are also expectable to be observed in moral development (Murphy & Gilligan, 1980). According Christov-Moore, Simpson, Coudé, Grigaityte, Iacoboni and Ferrari (2014) girls usually demonstrate higher empathy levels than boys, specifically in self-reported assessments. Further, there is a positive relationship between empathy and age in other words; empathy has been indicated to increase with age (Bosacki & Wilde Astington, 1999), and to be associated to a individual's cultural characteristics (Cassels, Chan, Chung & Birch, 2010). A research indicated empathy to be negatively linked to anti-social behavior, aggression and bullying (Gini, Albiero, Benelli & Altoè, 2007; Chan & Wong, 2015; Endersen & Olweus; 2001, Thompson & Smith, 1991; Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). Two studies about cyberbullying indicated that lower scores in empathy are more likely to be linked with higher levels of cyberbullying behavior and victimization among adolescents (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2009; Steffgen et al., 2011).

Unlikely gender differences that are represented for empathy, do not endure for forgiveness. It can be said that there is no clear gender differences in terms of forgiveness however, it has been shown that women are less likely to forgive than men according to the literature review of forgiveness (Worthington, Sandage & Berry, 2000). On the other hand, empirical research do not supply sufficient evidence illustrating significant gender differences in forgiveness (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor & Wade, 2001). Additionally, gender differences in the individual's forgiveness of oneself or others did not differ which may suggest that gender differences in forgiveness can be explored with other variables (Macaskill, Maltby & Day, 2002). Similarly a research showed no gender difference in overall forgiveness in a study examining conflict resolution between mentors and proteges. However, female mentors illustrated higher levels of forgiveness when emotional context was presented for instance; when proteges cried (Kalbfleisch, 1995).

1.3. Empathy and Culture

Life is an experience area that formed by complicated process and it is like a maze. To solve this maze person needed to obtain information. Meaning of being knowledgeable is understanding the presence. People use verbal or nonverbal communication and try to understand each other then by using language they create common meaning for concept which they share with others to expand their knowledge (Metin, 2011). Every individual generates a unique world in its own conditions and share their experiences with other people (Cuceloglu, 2002; 2009; GulbahCe, 2010; Hasta & Guler, 2013). Communication is performed effectively when it will be able to sustain a healthy social life. This also depends on true empathy (Gundogdu, 2010; Yilmaz, 2010). Empathy is a powerful ability that empowers people. Thus, an individual cannot empathize which is excluded from social life and also something that is not empathic remains too weak according to empathic people (Erozkan, 2007; Myer, 2007). Empathy is one of the communication skills, it allows people to be able to establish more satisfying and healthy relationships (Joinson & Paine, 2007; Greene, Derlega & MathewsBak, 2012; Lin & Oh, 2014).

Cultures give values people who living in it. These values reserve an important place. Cultural values take part as indicator of existence for people (Kaya, 2015). Cultural relativism opens the door cultural communication and cultural empathy while giving a chance to understand culture with own values (Ozbek, 2004). Empathetic people will be more careful to social values and be more introspective (Kemp, Overbeek, de Wied, Engels & Scholte, 2007). The person using empathy shows higher probability to help another person in comparison with a person who is not establishing empathy. There are different opinions about helping another people such as: egoistic or altruistic motive (Dovidio, 2000). The feeling empathic for someone in need leads altruistic motivation which has been

defined as "Empathy altruism hypothesis" (Batson, 1987; 1991). Many research provide an evidence that shows feeling empathetic for a person in need cause to increased helping behavior towards to the person (Krebs, 1975). Culture impose some values to people and it is known that these values have an important place in people's life. According to Hoffman, justice and responsibility are taken from culture will improve people's capacity for empathy (Stiwell, 2001). In some cultures, trying to understand other people's thoughts and personal world is considered as an act of aggression or attack to personal space that is, empathetic behavior represents different meanings depending on the culture (Kalliopuska, 1983). People must be careful when installing empathy for instance, staring the eyes of other individuals can lead negative thoughts and feelings on them which reduces the success of establishing empathy towards other people (Bellous, 2001).

According to study, to ensure efficiency in intercultural communication there are some principles; firstly people should be open to new ideas and to be tolerant against the differences between people and then, people should be resilient due to cultural differences in the communication, finally, people must be tolerant for other attitudes, values and made things (Dovidio, Schroeder & Allen, 1990).

Establishing higher qualified empathy is related to people who have similar cultures (Smith, 1996). Some research indicated that while gender differences are determined with French participants, they did not exist in Congolese participants in the context of empathetic behaviour (Kadiangandu, Mullet & Vinsonneau, 2001). Therefore cultural background may also play an important role on empathetic skills. There are few statements that prevents accurate empathy such as: "why the other people say or do this?" or "why others mention wrong actions of oneself?" are harmful opinions that decrease accuracy of empathic understanding. For correct and complete empathic understanding, person should try to understand others through their own private world (Empathy, 2001).

2. Results

Starting and maintaining effective communication in interpersonal relationships requires "appropriate empathy" behavior which plays an important role. In addition, culture may play an important role since it may have an effect on empathetic skills thus, people should not be judged due to differences between cultures. However, there is contradictory findings among research related to gender differences and empathy in other words while some research suggest that there is significant relationship between gender and empathy others state that the relationship is not significant enough to mention gender differences in empathy. To understand others point of view, people must empathize. If people do not empathize, they will be less likely to agree with anyone. Qualified communication occurs when person put him/herself on the place of someone else therefore, they can understand each others' rights, thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, there are some advantages of empathy; firstly empathy is an important skill for cognitive and moral development and psychological health, secondly empathy refers to the relationship and openness between humans. Third empathy helps to increase relations and communications and also helps to resolve conflict. A chance to be successful in personal and business life always grows with empathy. Finally, empathy provides good understanding among different people or sometimes even people who from other cultures (Goleman, 2003; Stein & Book, 2003; as cited in Tuyan & Beceren, 2005). Briefly, empathy is mental, emotional and spiritual discipline and it needs patience. Therefore, the current study has tried to examine empathy in the context of gender and cultural differences which is important technique for communication. However few limitations of this study deserve comment. Since empathy is a broad subject, the current study aimed to consider it in terms of gender and cultural differences. However research related to culture and empathy in the literature examine different empathy required behaviours which can be one of the limitations in terms of concentrating basic cultural characteristics which can contribute on empathy. Moreover, there is a disagreement among research related to empathy and gender which makes it difficult to understand under which circumstances gender differences can be mentioned in empathy. Hence, future research should identify these circumstances also interpersonal relationships in different cultures should be analyzed for better understanding empathetic skills related to cultural values specifically.

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