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EMPATHY AND COMMUNICATION: A MODEL OF EMPATHY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is an important communication skill that has been shown to affect both individual knowledge acquisition and interpersonal relationships. How empathy develops and subsequently influences human interactions, and the consequences associated with those interactions, is the focus of this study. I examine the empathetic perceptions of upper division undergraduate college students and integrate their lived experience with empathy related factors discussed in the literature to describe a model of empathy development. The results suggest people can learn to communicate more efficiently and effectively by developing empathy in them-selves as well as in other people. More specifically, the findings indicate empathy is a function of several internal and external elements beyond biological and environmental antecedents. Respondents associated four internal themes with increased empathetic understanding: emotional sharing, positive relationships, mutual regard, and personal genuineness. Respondents also identified three external themes that moderated the strength or direction of their empathetic perceptions: the perceived similarity, relevance, and availability of the person being observed. Each of these seven themes is explicated in order to discern how one person might better empathize with another or enhance the ability of other people to empathize with them. The practical implications for more empathetic communication are explored, as are suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Empathy, Empathy antecedents, Empathy mediators, Empathy moderators.

Contribution/ Originality

This study documents how empathy develops in human beings and the communication consequences associated with such empathetic development. The paper provides a review of previous empathetic research before surveying individuals about their personal empathetic experience. Those interviews are analyzed and reveal four mediators and three moderators of empathy development as well as relate a variety of benefits associated with empathetic communication. A synthesis of empathy literature is used in conjunction with survey findings to propose an integrative model of empathy development. The theoretical contributions of this paper may be useful as a basis for future communication research and applied communication applications.

1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy is a fundamental way in which we comprehend and interact with the world around us (Gallese, 2003a; Gallese, 2005). Our ability to understand and relate to other people is, in part, a function of the empathetic process. How well we make rapid and accurate inferences about the feelings, goals, attitudes, motivations, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors of other people determines, to a large extent, what we contribute in a specific social situation as well as our perceived value to other human beings (Mitchell, 2008; Adolphs, 2009). Empathetic understanding is therefore both an important determinant of how well we communicate with each other as well as a personal characteristic that facilitates our ability to persuade other people to accept an idea, feel a particular way, or pursue a certain course of action. Empathy is a communication tool we use every day to understand others and to share our

thoughts, feelings, and personal experience (Rizzolatti *et al.*, 2006). Two empathy theories compete as explanations of this critical communication process: theory of the mind and simulation theory. Neither theory, however, provides an explanation of empathy that adequately describes the underlying mechanism of empathy or the full range of empathetic responses which we observe (Adolphs, 2009). The two paradigms are inconsistent and need to be modified in order to better reflect both automatic (emotive) and voluntary (thoughtful) empathetic processes (p. 697). Theory of the mind reflects the human ability to attribute mental states to other people using a controlled, thoughtful process (Adams, 2001). This process is reflective, requires at least some effort, and relies on language-related reasoning and common knowledge (p. 369). A person is able to accurately understand and predict another's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, to a large extent, based on memories that are shared in common. Effective communication can depend on whether people share a comparable education, similar experience, or a common culture. Although theory of the mind may explain how people perceive and internalize the thoughts and emotions of another person, it doesn't prescribe that such attributions are correct or that it can describe more innate and automatic emotive responses.

Simulation theory, on the other hand, does explain attributions about others' thoughts and emotions which are more automatic or reflexive (Gallese, 2005). Rather than employing the mind to theorize about another person's point of view, people replicate affective, cognitive, and behavioral states in themselves. Individuals mimic what they believe other people may be feeling, thinking, and doing. This process can be explicit, such as when a person invokes her imagination to step into another person's shoes or the process may be implicit, such as when mirror neurons are automatically activated in the brain (Decety, 2011). The more emotive nature of empathetic processes in simulation theory are also subject to perceptual error. An important distinction between these two theories is that empathy under simulation theory is relatively more emotive and relies on mimicking the state of another person whereas empathy under theory of the mind is a more detached mental activity based primarily on the reflection of one's own prior experience.

Every empathetic attribution and corresponding response inform and regulates other empathetic processes and responses (Adolphs, 2009). This complementary nature of empathy attributions is a fundamental omission in both the theory of the mind and simulation theory. Empathy is an important human communication capability for which neither theory of mind nor simulation theory provide an adequate explanation. Empathy is a communication construct which exhibits both an automatic as well as cognitive and behavioral components (Lamm *et al.*, 2009). As a consequence, the problems addressed in this inquiry are twofold. First, an explication of the mechanism and scope of the empathy concept is explored in an effort to provide a theoretical framework that integrates and extends our current understanding of the empathy development process. Second, this study examines the subjective and objective outcomes people associate with more empathetic sources of communication since more effective and efficient communication are expected as a result of empathetic understanding.

2. BACKGROUND

Interpersonal relationships are mediated by the empathetic knowledge structures people hold about themselves or infer about others (Nakao and Itakura, 2009). That is, a person's self-concept impacts how she or he perceives interpersonal knowledge, what people believe or feel regarding someone else, and influences how that person interacts with other people (p. 46). This statement is true whether the attributions internalized are detached cognitions or the result of imaginative projection or reflexive response (Coricelli, 2005). Much of our empathetic understanding about other people may be automatic or based on simple inferences that depend on shared mental states or common intentions (Gallese, 2009). For example, watching a stranger eat chocolate may result in the inference that she likes chocolate just as I do. Understanding may also be enhanced by more extensive cognitive elaboration that incorporates specific circumstances and takes advantage of previously acquired knowledge (Jacob, 2008). Extending the previous illustration; my friend likes chocolate only when she drinks red wine. Regardless of

how such mind reading occurs, or of its accuracy, empathy is a critical cornerstone of human social interaction (Decety *et al.*, 2012).

Empathy has been defined as having an understanding of and identification with the thoughts and feelings of another human being (Davis, 1983). As a consequence, empathy can describe a wide range of social phenomena, such as feeling concern for another person's situation, internalizing the perceived emotions of other people, discerning and accepting other people's motives or intentions, or adopting what others are perceived to believe or to be thinking (Hoffman, 2000). Such empathetic responses are thought to increase whenever a person has had a related previous experience, perceives a similarity between himself or herself and another person, receives explicit or implicit empathy training, and with the strength or salience of a personal association (Preston and De Waal, 2002).

This broad view of empathy is consistent with an umbrella constructed that is process oriented and includes or subsumes all phenomena that share the same mental processes and cannot be distinguished from them, such as emotional contagion and prosocial helping behavior (Preston and De Waal, 2002). Emotional contagion is sometimes referred to as vicarious emotion; it occurs when a person experiences the emotional state of another individual whom he or she observes, as in someone else's fear or personal distress (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1991). Prosocial helping behavior are actions a person takes to benefit another individual or individuals based on the individual's perception that assistance is needed (Eisenberg and Okun, 1996; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2002; Michalik *et al.*, 2007). Donations of time and/or money to nonprofit organizations which serve a disadvantaged community are common forms of prosocial helping behavior.

Emotional contagion, prosocial behavior, and many other empathy related phenomenon may emanate from a variety of motivations, but are inhibited by empathy deficits (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2010). A lack of empathetic capability has been used to identify, describe, and understand developmental disorders that preclude individuals from sharing the thoughts and feelings of other people in diverse social environments (Decety and Meyer, 2008). The range of symptoms associated with a lack of empathetic understanding includes both individual neurological problems, such as traumatic brain injury and autism, and antisocial personality traits, such as callousness and egocentricity (Mathersul *et al.*, 2013; McLellan and McKinlay, 2013; White, 2014). Individuals with lower levels of empathy have difficulties discerning and making appropriate social judgments; furthermore, they demonstrate a reduction in emotional resonance with other human beings (Lockwood *et al.*, 2013). Previous research has mostly concentrated on a single aspect of empathetic response, or the lack thereof, rather than on how various empathetic states are related or may be activated in people. As an illustration, early work on emotional contagion proposed that this phenomenon developed in humans as a survival mechanism (Plutchik, 1987). Thus, young children who vicariously feel happy upon seeing the smiling face of their mother do so automatically in order to develop a stronger bond with that parent (p. 44). Although such a bond may increase the probability of the child's surviving by enhancing empathetic understanding between a mother and child, little enlightenment is provided on the neurological mechanism for emotional contagion or how it may be related to more elaborate empathetic responses (Preston and De Waal, 2002).

More recent research on the neurological foundations of empathy provide a useful means for integrating the variety of findings on empathy and suggest new avenues for future exploration. For example, a lack of emotional empathy has been found to be a primary feature of autism spectrum disorder (Gleichgercht *et al.*, 2013). Gleichgercht *et al.* (2013) found no difference in cognitive empathy appraisals of appropriate behaviors between autistic individuals and members of a control group. Similarly, Leigh *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that acute brain lesions on the right side of people's brains impair affective empathetic responses — that is, their ability to accurately assess how another person may feel. These findings suggest that empathetic responses may rely on at least partially distinct neural networks that future research could further explicate (p. 2546).

Empathetic processes and structures in the human brain have evolved over millions of years (Decety, 2011). As a consequence, any explanation of how people use empathy to understand each other is likely to be complex. The human brain has developed some unique, at least as far as we know, abilities in the realm of social interaction that distinguish it from that of other animals. Although other species are often aware of the basic emotive expressions in others of their kind, they do not appear to share our higher-level cognitive functions, such as self-awareness and language (Adolphs, 2009). The development of these more elaborate mental capabilities does not seem to eliminate or subjugate human instinctive and automatic responses to others. On the contrary, higher order cognitive abilities appear to mediate and augment the more basic empathetic processes and structures we may share with other species (Decety *et al.*, 2012).

2.1. Biology (Nature) and Empathy Development

Mirror neurons identified in the human brain provide a plausible explanation of the most basic forms of empathetic response. A mirror neuron is a premotor neuron that fires automatically when an action is observed in another person (Gallese, 2005; Iacoboni *et al.*, 2005). Those are the same neurons that fire whenever a person undertakes the specific actions him or herself, and they allow people to form a congruent mental response or representation (Gallese, 2003b). Observation of another person's behavior simply causes the arousal of the same neural mechanism in the observer. This empathetic link between individuals corresponds to more than the identification of the emotions another person feels. Gallese (2009) reviewed findings from a series of experiments that suggest people can accurately discern the motivation and behavioral intentions of others from the emotional states of the people they observe.

When babies match the facial expressions of their mothers, this physiological display is thought to be a precursor of empathy development (Dondi and Simion, 1999). Mirror neurons in a baby's brain make such a response automatic and facilitate the development of congruent emotions; for example, smiles elicit happiness (Decety and Moriguchi, 2007). Several studies suggest that such mimicry is a critical basis of parental bonding and language development (Plutchik, 1987; Lamm *et al.*, 2008). By 2 years of age, most children have developed the cognitive capacity to understand the psychological and the physical state of another human being. That is, even young children exhibit the emotional capability to experience another person's feelings, recognize the psychological and physical states of another, and respond in a manner designed to alleviate the distress or sustain the joy they discern in another person (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow, 1992). The cognitive abilities necessary to accurately perceive the thoughts and feelings of another person or to imagine oneself in the shoes of another person continue to improve as a person's empathy-related skills develop over time (Schwenck *et al.*, 2014).

Older primates have significantly more spindle brain cells than younger primates, and these neurons are found in the anterior cingulate and insula regions of the brain (Allman *et al.*, 2005). These two regions are unique among primates and are thought to be critically important to empathy. Craig (2007) suggests that spindle neurons are responsible for the human ability to make the rapid and highly complex emotional responses that are a foundation of empathetic understanding. Of course, the natural progression of empathy development may be precluded by physical trauma and/or personality disorders.

Brain lesions and brain injury have been shown to impair the development of affective, cognitive, and behavioral empathetic responses, according to Leigh *et al.* (2013) and McLellan and McKinlay (2013). These authors document a lack of affective empathy, in particular, among adults who suffer from brain lesions in the anterior insula. Calder *et al.* (2000) also document the impaired empathetic ability of a person who suffered brain damage to his left insula. This individual was less able to ascertain signals of disgust from others or to experience feelings of disgust himself in disgust-provoking situations when compared with uninjured research participants (p. 1078).

In addition, a lack of or impaired empathy has been associated with several psychological disorders. These disorders range from psychopathy, the complete lack of empathy; to autism spectrum disorder, an inability to recognize and respond to the social cues of another person; to a personality disorder such as narcissism, in which individuals demonstrate difficulty recognizing social signals from other people and may not care about or may be unaware of how their actions affect others. Individuals with psychological disorders such as narcissism, autism, and psychopathy display various levels of diminished ability to accurately distinguish and appropriately respond to the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of other people whom they observe (Wiehe, 2003; Gleichgerrcht *et al.*, 2013; Mathersul *et al.*, 2013; White, 2014).

Empathy development in human beings may also be a function of gender as well as of age and health. Taki *et al.* (2011) demonstrate that the ratio of brain gray matter to cranial capacity in young women is significantly higher than in young men and that this relative difference in brain gray matter disappears with age. Although this research did not include people under 20 years of age, it would not be surprising if physiological differences in brain development between males and females held true at an even earlier age. Whether such a gender difference in brain development is directly related to empathy is, as yet, an unanswered question. Little physiological research has been conducted on the brain development of young children as differentiated by gender. Indirect evidence, however, suggests that significant differences do exist between boys and girls in terms of empathy-related dysfunction. Hsiao *et al.* (2013) in a sample of 1,321 primary-age schoolchildren, noted significantly more school-related social problems and peer relationship issues in young boys with autistic traits than in girls with autistic traits of the same age. Zajdel *et al.* (2013) also found that young girls, elementary-age schoolchildren, experienced significantly higher levels of emotion than young boys of equivalent age after observing the same emotionally laden stimulus.

For the sake of parsimony, we group the age, health, and gender antecedents of empathy into a nature category. There are, of course, environment-related factors that may be expected to enhance or impede the development of empathy at any given point in a person's life. Culture, family background, and prior experience are but three broad environment elements that we economically group into a nurture category of empathy antecedents.

2.2. Environment (Nurture) and Empathy Development

Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1992) suggest that culture, family background, and prior experience may affect the development of empathy and be fruitful forms of inquiry. Culture would have the broadest influence of the nurture antecedents on the development of empathy. Empathy is, in part, based on the shared meanings held among people. The ability to accurately understand the feelings and thoughts of another person, or to predict his or her behavior, will be enhanced by memories that are shared (Adams, 2001). The idea that disparate cultures will share all concepts in common or will interpret similar concepts in the same way with corresponding behavioral responses is unlikely to be true. Culture can and does effect widely discrepant interpretations of identical observations (Rogers, 1985). An example would be the idea commonly held in Western cultures that a person should act in accord with his or her own desires. This perspective is often viewed as extremely childish by adults in other cultures (Mills, 2001). Individuals without similar cultural interpretations of observed behavior are less likely to be empathetic and more prone to make inaccurate inferences.

The ability to make accurate inferences about others is also based on possessing the ability to both distinguish other people from oneself and to identify with them (Rogers, 1985). The values people are taught from childhood in their families frequently differ from one person to another, regardless of whether they are from the same culture; perhaps as the result of discrepant religious beliefs. For example, it is difficult to imagine that someone who came from an atheist family background, rather than a Catholic family background, would focus on and pay the same level of attention to the many potential subtle aspects of a Pope's encyclical announcement. That these two individuals would have exactly corresponding interpretations of such a communication would be even less likely.

Individuals learn at an early age that certain behaviors have particular meanings and appropriate responses which would not necessarily be shared within another culture or family (Gerdes *et al.*, 2011).

Over time, an individual's prior experiences are likely to become even more unique and discrepant. People who fail to recognize or who misinterpret the cues from another will be at a social disadvantage. In extreme circumstances, the punishment for such a lack of understanding may lead to social marginalization or being cast out of the community. Resistance to broadly understood and accepted values may result in the formation of subcultures within the larger community where some people are still able to share an understanding of another person's otherwise indiscernible behavior; for example, a youth subculture. Prior experience, in many cases, will therefore be strongly related to both age and gender (Hsiao *et al.*, 2013; Schwenck *et al.*, 2014). The older a person is, the greater the opportunity he or she will have had to share a similar experience in the past. For example, age and gender must co-vary to convey the unique experience of childbirth.

2.3. Integration of Empathetic Affect, Cognition, and Behavior

A number of different brain mechanisms and processes appear to have evolved individually or jointly to enable human empathetic understanding. The good news appears to be that empathy and a range of corresponding positive social behaviors can be taught using environmental cues (Lamm *et al.*, 2007). For example, Lamm *et al.* (2007) reported on a perspective-taking experiment. Participants were told of another person's plight and asked to imagine how that person felt. Empathetic concern among respondents was a significant result. Feelings of distress were elicited, however, when a different group of experimental subjects was asked to imagine how they would feel in the other person's place (p. 56). Such divergent outcomes can be expected to result in very different forms of knowledge acquisition and behavior (p. 56). Additional research also supports the idea that cognitive functions can be developed which mediate how we perceive others who are not like us (Gallese and Lakoff, 2005; Eklund, 2006; Lamm *et al.*, 2009). Button *et al.* (2012) specifically note that a model of empathy which integrates the findings regarding mirror neurons as the hardware of emotion in conjunction with the more cognitive aspects of communication would be very beneficial.

Empathy is a phenomenon that is both bottom up (automatic) and top down (cognitive) (Lamm *et al.*, 2007). One response informs and regulates the other. Automatic processes are faster, more emotive, and reflexive, and they dominate in early childhood (Adolphs, 2009). Cognitive processes are slower and more effortful; they often involve learned reflective thinking (p. 697). The reciprocal nature of the empathetic process is an important distinction. Empathetic understanding is often discussed in terms of just one of three related but distinct variations of interpersonal communication: the vicarious and often automatic imagining of another person's cognitive and affective states (e.g. emotional contagion); the deliberate evaluation and potential understanding of another person's emotions and thoughts (e.g. personal reflection); and the predisposition to somehow improve another person's perceived state of being (e.g. helping behavior). Gallese and Metzinger (2003) note that a variety of brain processes appear to be involved in empathy development but that a great deal of work still needs to be done to clarify when these processes occur and how they interact with one another. The balance of this paper investigates such empathy related elements and the consequences associated with empathetic understanding in order to postulate an integrated model of empathy. Communication takes place in a social community that is embedded with implicit context. The emotional, intellectual, and behavioral perspective each person brings to this environment will affect the degree of communication that can be achieved.

3. METHOD

Quantitative survey research presumes a number of things, not the least of which is that a researcher already knows a great deal about the nature of the phenomenon under study, enabling him or her to ask questions that cover the range of plausible responses (Simon, 2009).

Quantitative survey research also assumes that respondents are able and willing to choose among exhaustive response categories and in so doing inform or refine the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Neither expectation was met for this investigation of empathy. Rather, our knowledge of empathy development was deemed inadequate and I interpreted the implicit emotions, cognitions, and behavioral responses of research participants in the absence of explicit written or verbal responses. This study employs transcendental phenomenology, a form of qualitative inquiry, where a series of open ended question was used to increase our understanding of the empathy development process.

3.1. Participant Selection Criteria

Creswell (2013) suggests conducting phenomenological research with as few as 3 or as many as 10 participants. I chose to interview 10 people in order to ensure that this inquiry might reveal the broadest array of plausible empathy related processes and outcomes. I anticipated that many participant responses would be unique, but that some common factors which could affect empathy development would be discernable among the diversity of ideas and experiences that individuals described. Common empathetic themes often become discernable after as few as three interviews whenever the research participants share relatively homogenous empathetic experiences. A convenience sample of university students who attended the same school, and who had taken some courses from the same instructors, was selected in order to better achieve this homogeneity. The extent to which redundant themes were revealed and discussed in depth would suggest the themes relative importance.

The convenience sample of ten student participants was selected based on three criteria: successful completion of two years of college, experience with empathetic faculty, and familiarity with the researcher. The first criterion was met by ensuring that respondents had completed at least 20 three-credit college classes with a corresponding number of professors. The second criterion was met by participants having been recently enrolled in the classes of two faculty members who, in the opinion of the researchers, demonstrated several empathetic characteristics. Both of these professors regularly exhibited knowledge of and concern for students as individuals. For example, each professor identified and called on students by name, related to students how course materials could facilitate their personal and professional aspirations, and demonstrated a genuine concern for students' personal welfare. The third criterion was met by interviewing students with whom the researchers had previously established a personal relationship.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

Having obtained the explicit approval of the University Institutional Review Board, each student was approached separately and asked to participate in this inquiry. Potential respondents were asked to take part in an in-depth interview about their empathetic experience in their current classes as well as to discuss their empathetic experience in all the other college courses which they had already completed. During this initial contact, each potential research participant was given a brief description of the research in conjunction with an introduction and consent letter. This letter informed the students of the voluntary nature of the study and of the confidentiality accorded to their responses. Every student approached agreed to participate. Participants subsequently completed up to an hour long interview in the conference room of the Communication Studies department at Gonzaga University. At each interview appointment, every student was asked for and gave his or her permission to have their interview recorded.

The in-depth interview began with social conversation designed to create an atmosphere of trust and openness and to put student participants at ease. Participants were then asked to consider the concept of empathy and their experiences with empathy, if any, in their learning environment. An open-ended interview guide was prepared and followed to ensure that the same basic information was obtained from every respondent but which still allowed the researcher the freedom to pursue inquiries prompted by participant responses. Questions were first addressed in a

general form, after which participants were asked for elaboration as necessary in order to better understand each person's experience with empathy. The general form of these questions was as follows:

1. Tell me about a time when you experienced empathy in the classroom.
2. To what degree did you empathize with your teacher?
3. To what degree do you believe your teacher empathized with you?
4. What instructor characteristics, or incidents, are related to your classroom empathetic experience?
5. How did empathy, or a lack of empathy, in the classroom affect you? What changes do you associate with your experience?
6. Did your empathetic experiences affect other important people in your life?
7. What feelings were generated by your empathetic experience?
8. What thoughts stood out for you?
9. We've discussed your experiences with empathetic professors in the classroom. When did you have an experience that was the antithesis of empathy from a professor? Tell me a story about that experience. What feelings were generated by these experiences?
10. What bodily changes or behaviors were you aware of at the time of your experiences with empathy?
11. Do you have any other thoughts or feelings that you haven't shared regarding empathy in the classroom that you believe are significant to your experience?

The open-ended interview style was altered as deemed appropriate to answer related questions as each participant revealed his or her experience with empathy. Follow-up questions were driven by participant responses to the general questions all students were asked in common. For example, the question "How did empathy, or a lack of empathy, in the classroom affect you?" often led to discrepant responses and corresponding empathy-related probing questions. Someone who indicated that perceptions of empathy in the classroom motivated him or her to work harder would elicit questions like: "How did you work harder?" or "What were the consequences you associated with working harder?" Alternatively, someone who responded that perceptions of empathy in the classroom made him or her want to help others would be asked questions like: "Who did you want to help?" or "What specific prosocial behaviors did you pursue?"

A follow-up interview was conducted with each student. As mentioned previously, initial interviews were digitally recorded. Subsequently, those interviews were transcribed. Students were asked to review their interview transcription to verify that what they said was what they meant to say within the context of this inquiry. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the data acquisition process. Each interview transcript was coded with a unique number. Interview transcripts did not identify participants by name, nor could they be associated with the interview schedule. If someone inadvertently included his or her name, the transcriber substituted an assigned pseudonym. A pseudonym was also assigned to every professor named within a specific student's response. During and after the transcription process, I began to look for emerging empathy related themes.

4. FINDINGS

This inquiry investigates those factors which may induce empathy and how those empathetic perceptions affect communication related outcomes. The experience of all 10 research participants demonstrate a variety of commonality across their responses and reinforce the proposition that empathy is an important communication tool. Student participants revealed four internal themes that they believed influenced the development of their empathy perceptions and three externally perceived themes that affected the direction and magnitude of their empathy perceptions. The four internal themes were emotional sharing, positive relationships, mutual regard, and personal genuineness. The three external empathy themes were perceived similarity, relevance, and availability. In the following discussion, we discuss these internal and external themes as well as present a few representative responses from within the interview data we collected.

4.1. Internal Empathy Themes

The in-depth interviews conducted with the student participants suggested that a number of personal characteristics mediate the development and perception of empathy. Although these characteristics appear to be related, the sequencing and magnitude of the effects they exert on empathy development and empathetic perception are likely to differ across individuals and situations. The following discussion describes the four internal characteristics that research participants identified in empathetic instructors; it is by no means meant to be exhaustive. This discussion does, however, identify several attributes that people who wish to communicate most effectively may find helpful to develop in themselves and in others. Emotional sharing. Emotional sharing is experiencing and/or understanding how another person feels about them self and about how other people may feel when observing or openly interacting with that person. Emotional sharing requires acute observation and listening skills. Much of human social interaction depends on implicit cues. Tone of voice, individual mannerisms, and gestures of all sorts can elicit both conscious and unconscious emotional responses in another person. Emotional contagion, for example, is a form of unconscious mimicry in which people align with, or adopt, the perceived emotions of another. The tendency of people to automatically align their emotions with the emotions of another person is not only empathetic but may also be a critical feature of social interaction (Decety and Moriguchi, 2007). Van Baaren *et al.* (2004) describe, for example, how mimicked people were significantly more cooperative than research participants who had not been mimicked.

Perceiving another person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors can also be quite conscious and voluntary. Perspective taking is an example. People may understand each other through their perceived common experiences. Several studies demonstrate that the same areas of the brain are activated whether a person imagines himself or herself engaged in a behavior, imagines another person performing the same behavior, or imitates the behavior of another person (Decety and Chaminade, 2003; Decety and Grezes, 2006). To the extent that meanings for these behaviors are shared between individuals through perceptions, however accurate, of common experience, empathetic understanding is based on the activation of related neural networks in the observer. Of course, the either conscious or unconscious understanding of the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of another person will depend on both the listening and observation abilities of the observer regardless of his or her personal experience and/or knowledge. Such listening and observation skills were identified as a critical element of empathy and empathy development by several students. Grant's comments about his experience with empathetic teachers help illustrate this point. They listen, they respond, they are very thoughtful, they obviously put themselves in the other person's shoes, and they want to see things from your point of view. You might be stressed out, but even if they are relaxing, they see that and try to help you get through whatever you are trying to get through.

Sunny made comments that capture more of the perceived emulation of shared emotion. She had been previously informed that Professor A's father was terminally ill and consequently valued his willingness to listen to her tell him about her aunt's illness and to demonstrate his understanding of her feelings in a similar situation.

> Let's see, I think Prof. A was really great. Yeah, and he just, you know, my aunt also passed away at the end of the semester while I was in Florence and so I remember sitting in his office just crying, and he like listened to me. It was more that I would ever, you know, I wouldn't cry in front of the professor. So it was just, very understanding of him.

Shannon further expanded on how her experience with a teacher's emotional sharing had affected her own behavior. She expressed the opinion that she had become a more thoughtful and discerning person about what both her fellow students and her teachers might be going through because of that understanding.

> I think it makes you very much more aware of what people may be going through. The psychological factors behind them and learning to listen. I think that is also a key part of empathy. I feel like a lot of times in conversations, you are talking to somebody instead of really listening to what they have to say. You are trying to formulate a response to what they are going to say, because we all like talking, and we

all want to be heard and whatnot, so I think learning to close my mouth a little bit and just listen more. I feel like when you ask questions, kind of like good probing questions, like how was your day and getting more beyond that small talk element, I think people will be willing to reciprocate and do the same. I think it goes both ways. I've seen that, socially at least, with my roommates. How we want to say how we are doing and how we are actually doing.

Student participant experiences demonstrate that empathetic understanding is contingent upon understanding a person's own emotional state of being as well as the ability to share those emotions with others and elicit others' emotions reciprocally. Nonverbal cues such as attentively listening to another person are a distinguishing characteristic exhibited by empathetic persons that help facilitate the perception of emotional sharing. A person who listens attentively is therefore not only more likely to accurately discern the thoughts and feelings of others but may also respond in ways that are more meaningful to those individuals as a result. What a person shares or how he or she appears to feel when interacting with other people affects how that person is perceived and may lay the foundation for a more positive relationship.

Positive relationship. The presence of empathy and empathy development are dependent, to some degree, on a healthy relationship between individuals. A healthy relationship between individuals exists when each person exhibits a concern for and liking of the person with whom he or she interacts. This is not meant to suggest that an empathetic person must be good friends or buddies with every person whom he or she observes, although this could easily facilitate more accurate understanding. A positive relationship presumes that the empathetic observer values every individual for what that person is as well as for what he or she may become. Not surprisingly, and as the following excerpts from interviews suggest, people are more likely to attend to a person who exhibits a concern for them as individuals, and their enhanced attention becomes a mechanism for superior communication related outcomes.

Bob specifically identified his teachers' personal concern for him as a decisive element in his education that was responsible for transforming his learning experience.

> I've had key professors that I've absolutely loved. They are the people, similar to Professor F, that I could definitely feel some sort of emotion from. I've had professors who were just like "Here's the lesson, here's the test, see you next semester." But I've had professors like Professor R, I had her for Society, Professor J, I had her for Moral Civ before she went to Harvard, and all these professors were the same way. Like going to them with any question, any issue that I had and I could feel that they cared for me as an individual not just as a student. They cared that everything was going on my life, that I understood what was going on and was performing to the best of my ability. This made me more comfortable as a student, which made it easier for me to learn.

Bob made his point even clearer by describing his experience with a teacher who demonstrated the opposite type of behavior — a teacher whose perceived lack of personal concern for him as an individual had created a much less effective and efficient learning environment.

> I honestly, I think he was very self-righteous. In a lot of ways, he cared for the students but not about the students. He cared if they were there on time. He cared if they were doing professional good work. He didn't care about what was going on outside of the educational environment and it was something that you could feel. [He said], "Okay, class is over, if you have any questions, let me know." And, "Oh, I have a question about this." If it wasn't about the program that we were doing, it was kind of, "Why are you asking?" I could obviously feel the difference. I hated going to this class every day and it was a three or four times a week class. It was in the morning and I would wake up and ask, "Why do I have to go this class?"

Kathy took Bob's comments one step further by describing how having had an early positive relationship with a college teacher subsequently affected her educational choices and experience. Her retention as a Gonzaga

University student may not have depended entirely on having had such an early positive experience, but she suggested it certainly played a role.

> It really does feel good and I think it makes you a little bit hopeful. My first experience happened freshman year, so then I felt confident that there were teachers like that here. Now I am going into my senior year. I have met some great teachers that you want to take again, and those teachers are like, "You are in my classroom four times." "That's because I like you and you have been great." I think it does make you hopeful and feel that other people also are affected by those teachers as well.

Other students commented on easily discerned teacher behaviors that they associated with a teacher's personal concern for them as an individual. For example, Annie noted that something as simple as recognizing and calling on a student by name conveyed the perception of personal caring.

> When the teachers know you by name, it really makes you feel special, like they care about you, they remember you. You are not just another student in their class. When they do listen to you, when you are having stress or troubles and they do listen, and are there to help you, and make that known to you, it is really helpful.

Grant elaborated, suggesting more generally that anything a teacher did that communicated student uniqueness might have a similar effect. A student's perception that a teacher values and cares about him or her as an individual appears to lead to greater satisfaction and achievement regardless of whether those empathetic perceptions are accurate.

> Really, it made me like her more as a teacher and I was happy she was so accommodating and understanding. She treated me like a real situation rather than just some number going through the system.

Student participants indicated that empathetic understanding is facilitated by having a positive relationship with a teacher. People who demonstrate a concern for and liking of the individuals with whom they interact communicate a positive relationship. Concern and liking can be communicated in a variety of ways, for example knowing students by name or demonstrating a willingness to discuss issues beyond the classroom environment. Any person who demonstrates that he or she values and cares for individuals can do so, in part, by recognizing their uniqueness, which in turn enhances engagement. Having a positive relationship also appears to affect satisfaction and perceived achievement regardless of the information being conveyed. In addition, perceptions of a positive relationship may help facilitate better understanding in the future as the mutual regard for one another grows. Mutual regard. Mutual regard enables empathy development and empathy-related outcomes by fostering respect and openness between people. An empathetic person not only accepts that someone else may have something to contribute but also actively seeks to have the person do so. Mutual regard also explicitly recognizes the functional and/or procedural expertise that the other individual may contribute. The following excerpts from student interviews provide an illustration of the merit students found in mutual regard. Bob said:

> It's a reciprocal respect thing. It's like if they show respect to me, why would I not return that tenfold? Because they have that passion in them, I can see it whether they show it in their lecture or not. I can see what they love doing, why they love what they're teaching, and it makes me more comfortable in their classroom. I can ask questions, I can participate more, because I know whatever I say is going to be taken seriously and be something that will further the discussion. Not just like, "That was a weird question, why would you ask that?" It was something they would take seriously and understand the idea behind the question. It made it easier, like I said, for me to learn and apply it to everyday life.

Doug also mentioned that mutual regard had a similar effect on his empathetic perception and development. He stated that mutual regard not only fostered his respect for a teacher but also led to his being able to reveal his thoughts and feelings without fear of personal denigration or criticism. This openness created an opportunity for

dialogue and learning that would otherwise have not been available, allowing him to "feel much more respect" and to "be able to be much more open with professors" than would otherwise have been the case.

Sunny provided further insight on how mutual regard might affect communication related outcomes in her answers responses. In particular, she described how her increased respect for a professor led to an increase in her motivation to do well — not for her own sake but rather to avoid disappointing the professor whom she regarded highly and respected.

> But I think in some cases when I build that relationship for me it puts more pressure because I respect the professor more. There are plenty of professors that I really respect, and I know every professor at Gonzaga would not be teaching here if they were not qualified and had not done something. So, I think for me, it puts more pressure because I want to, like, not prove myself to them, but more like I don't want to let them down. I want to do better for them.

Other students identified how the attitudes teachers conveyed might empathetically communicate a lack of mutual regard. For example, Annie described how, when an instructor disseminates a long list of classroom rules to which students must conform, it can convey a classroom power structure in which the needs and desires of students are perceived as immaterial and not considered worth entertaining.

> Rules, rules between you guys, like we are going to agree upon these rules where some teachers are "Here is a list of rules, don't break them." So like, maybe in a classroom, both sides respect each other, let each other talk. Maybe with other teachers, it's "I am the teacher, I am the one in charge."

Student respondents believe respect and openness between people fosters perceptions of mutual regard. A teacher who appears open to student concerns in the classroom demonstrates to everyone that he or she is willing to consider their perspective and recognize the contributions that each student can make. The respect and openness associated with mutual regard encourages each student to take a more active role in and responsibility for their education. Of course, mutual regard also builds respect for the knowledge and unique experience that every person in a classroom can contribute. Mutual regard is therefore a basis for empathetic understanding which, when consistently applied, may lead to perceptions of personal genuineness. Personal genuineness. Personal genuineness is being true to oneself as well as to others. It first requires that the empathetic observer know himself or herself. How else can a person ever hope to engender trust in another? That is, a person who doesn't know his or her own values and beliefs is unlikely to present a consistent and trustworthy persona to others. What a person represents need not always be correct, but personal genuineness necessitates a certain degree of due diligence as well as a willingness to stand up and correct mistakes when they occur. Being honest with oneself and with others is a critical element in building trust. Personal genuineness does not require adherence to a generally accepted moral code. It does emphasize the need for self-reflection and awareness. For example, a person may adopt a moral code that is at odds with prevalent cultural strictures but still act in a genuine manner if his or her behavior remains consistent with his or her personal code. Several students described teachers who had acted in a thoughtful and genuine manner and, as a consequence, prompted them to reflect on their own interactions with people and act in a similar way. Annie explained:

> I guess it just makes you aware of how you interact with other people. When you are in a project you have to be more open and flexible, understand the problems that they are going through. Because that can be hard sometimes when you are just frustrated with other people, but you have to take a step back and realize what they have going on in their lives that may be frustrating them.

Sunny indicated that personal genuineness made her more aware of and "more open to emotion," while Grant noted that:

> It definitely changes how I try to interact with other people. I want to connect with people and create that open line of communication where people are comfortable talking with you and coming to you with problems, instead of being like that cold shoulder nobody wants to talk to.

Another comment by Sunny demonstrated how a conversation with a faculty member whom she trusted and regarded as personally genuine had caused her to be thoughtful and reconsider a decision she had already made:

> For me, the information felt repetitive and so I didn't know how much I was getting out of it. So Dr. B is my advisor and I went to his office a couple of weeks ago and said "I'm thinking about dropping beta alpha psi, I don't know how much I'm getting out of it." His response was, "Why do you know everything?" That kind of like, I thought it was good, I learned from that because it kind of put me in my place. I don't. There is still stuff that I can definitely get out of it, I've done service events through it, developed community through that; I think it made me see the positive things I wasn't seeing.

Other students described how the trust they had developed for a teacher helped them become more engaged in and out of the classroom. Kathy put it this way:

> I think trust is probably the biggest thing because I felt like I could talk to him, I felt like I had established a relationship with him, like we are friends we can talk about stuff. Now I talk to certain professors about things that don't even relate to school. It's kind of nice because my family is 4 hours away, and I know that is closer than most people who are here; I feel like I can come to my professors about things that don't relate to school. I can get advice from them, and I never would've thought going into college that would be, like a thing — at all.

Personal genuineness also appears to encourage students to emulate that behavior. For example, Annie said that she tried to be more aware and honest with other people because of her experience with faculty who were personally genuine.

> Not directly, but I guess it just influences you because you want to be like that person and you want to be that open and that helpful. Because you know how it is to be treated that way, you want to treat others that way.

Respondents credit personal genuineness with enhancing levels of empathetic understanding. Self-awareness is a critical element of personal genuineness. If a person acts in ways which indicate that understanding of his or her own motivation is lacking, it is difficult for others to discern what may be a true reflection of their beliefs. A person may, in fact, learn more from a teacher who has a discrepant perspective when the trust the student has developed in that individual causes him or her to consider other viewpoints. Students noted that consistency in behavior was an important determinant of perceptions of personal genuineness. Trust in a teacher was a consequence of personal genuineness that encouraged students to become more self-reflective as well as model behaviors consistent with their own values and the needs of those whom they observed. Emotional sharing, mutual regard, a positive relationship, and personal genuineness all appear to be fundamental building blocks of empathy and empathetic understanding. Each element must be present to some degree for empathetic understanding to occur. These four themes explain how students experienced teacher empathy as well as how they perceived the effects associated with empathetic understanding. For example, emotional sharing may be more effective as a means of developing empathy when the observer does not doubt the motivation of the person being observed due to a perceived lack of personal genuineness. Prosocial helping behaviors would then be much more likely to result. The internal empathy themes student participants revealed are caused, and in turn cause one another, because of these interrelationships. Although the four internal empathy themes together explicate intrinsic empathetic understanding, they do not, in and of themselves, explain how variations in persuasion or learning may arise due to situational differences.

4.2. External Empathy Themes

While the four internal empathy themes appear to directly affect empathy development and communication related outcomes, research participants also indicated that several external situations or factors could affect the direction or strength of the relationship between empathy and empathy-related outcomes. These constructs appear

to have the potential to interact with empathy or to exert a direct influence on the magnitude and direction of empathy and empathy-related outcomes. Those people who were interviewed identified three general categories of external stimuli that influenced their perceptions of empathy and empathy-related outcomes. These themes were perceived similarity, relevance, and accessibility. Brief interview passages that are, in part, the basis for advancing these three potentially moderating influences on empathetic understanding are provided in the following discussion.

Similarity. Perceived similarities in appearance and common experience were often noted by students as external factors that influenced their perceptions of empathy and empathy-related outcomes. Ethnic origin, style of dress, age, gender, and native language are just some of the similarity judgments that students mentioned which moderated their empathy perceptions. For example, Bob viewed a teacher who was much older than he was as someone who was less likely to understand a student's circumstance and demonstrate empathy.

> It was frustrating. It was really frustrating. I feel like most people would not really go to talk to him about it but I did. He was just, kind of, he was older so he was stuck in his ways and he wasn't going to change. It was frustrating because studying for his final, it was one of those things where I didn't really have much hope. For the majority of my classes, if I study I do well. It's that cut and dried.

In addition, Doug described a particular perspective that illustrated how important it was to him to have the perception that a faculty member had similar work experience and interests before approaching a professor for advice.

> He used to work at Deloitte so I thought, hey, he would be a good professor to talk to and I think the fact that he was willing in class to share his past experiences with his previous job, like Dr. W who was a clinician, kind of in a different field than academia, something which you might be doing in the long run like a psychology major who wants to be a clinician, or accounting majors working for accounting, the fact that he could share some of those experiences whether they were funny or not and had an openness with us that created a comfortable environment, I think that made me feel that he would be a good person to talk to. He was, he was awesome.

Student perceptions of empathetic understanding were enhanced by several external situational factors that influenced students' judgments of similarity. Even when everything else was considered, for example, students perceived faculty who were closer to their own age, gender, or ethnicity as more empathetic. This suggests that empathetic understanding could be enhanced by something as simple as having a faculty member display characteristics that closely emulate those that the student population exhibits and/or those characteristics that the student population hopes to achieve, for example a faculty member with professional or leadership experience that matches student aspirations as closely as possible. The latter situation also highlights why the perceived relevance of the material presented could affect the relative magnitude and direction of empathetic understanding. Relevance. The perceived importance of a class topic to a student's endeavors enhanced empathy development and empathy-related outcomes. Students felt they could relate better to a teacher and what a teacher was presenting when they perceived a connection between course content and their lives, past, present, or future. For example, students reported more positive academic outcomes were associated with empathy when they perceived greater relevance of class content to their personal and/or professional lives. Doug found that the perceived relevance of a class motived him to exert greater effort and, as a consequence, to perform better academically.

> Like even in Professor B's class, we would be talking about a lot of his experiences with finance as opposed to just reading out of his book, which I really liked, and I know a bunch of my friends really liked. I thought I did better in the class because of it. I guess that experience in the philosophy class — I can't remember what I got out of philosophy class but I know it wasn't an A — I feel empathy motivates students to do better. Does that make sense, that it motivates students?

Doug also commented on the former professor's suggestion that Doug turn an interest in an academic field they both shared into a vocation. The initial result was that his encouragement prompted Doug to successfully pursue a prestigious internship that he would not have otherwise even considered.

> I know Professor B gave me a hard time about Econ a lot but I ended up snagging an internship due to it. I decided [on] maybe giving Econ a try and snagged an internship in Washington DC.

Bob elaborated on how one particular teacher whom he admired always found a way to make course material relevant to his and other students' lives. In doing so, he reinforced students' perceived importance of relating class subject matter to the present regardless of the topic being discussed. Bob opined that in so doing, his professor enhanced Bob's perceptions of empathy and his performance in the class.

> He is fantastic. I absolutely love him. Our classroom environment is incredible. We can ask him any question, it doesn't matter how dumb it may sound, and because it's like hypothetical: "If this was to happen then what would the result be?" He takes it and relates everything to everyday life, like what's currently going on now in media and whatnot. Just everything he says because he is so relatable to us and he puts himself when we are.

Bob went on to describe a method this teacher used to make sure students understood how relevant class topics were: using current examples. Bob found the subsequent learning environment quite stimulating and felt he learned more about a topic as a consequence. The person who enhances the perceived relevance of issues being presented in a class increases student empathetic understanding. Students also regarded teachers who demonstrated the relevance of course material as more approachable. Perceived relevance, as a consequence, highlights why it may be important to find out whether a person's perceived accessibility can lead to greater empathetic understanding.

Accessibility. Class size, structure, availability of office hours, and contact methods, such as e-mail, were all identified by students as having the potential to influence their perceptions of empathy and empathy-related outcomes. More specifically, instructors were perceived to be less empathetic when students believed they were less accessible. This perception affected student empathetic understanding and empathy-related outcomes regardless of whether or not the perceived remoteness was a function of an instructor's behavior or an artifact of the number of students in class or resulted from some other variable. Kevin disclosed how his experience as a student who had previously attended a large public institution framed his perception of teacher empathy among Gonzaga faculty and the relationship empathy has with smaller class sizes.

> You just get, you know, when you get a sense from people they had concerns for you. I guess, because I attended a public school also, and it's so much easier to see the empathy they have, where they have office hours. When you go from a public institution, where they do not really have office hours, they have 2,500 students: I had one class with 800 students so there is that factor. When you come here, and there are office hours, you go in there and at first you go, this is a little weird. But you get to know them and they get to know you, get to see your mistakes, and then when all the school stuff is done you get to start talking about what you want to do.

Doug discussed how the organization of a class affected his perception of empathy and empathy-related outcomes. For example, he spoke about how class discussion in small groups led to better conversations about, and solving of, topical problems. He also noted that an instructor who organized his or her class in such a manner demonstrated an understanding of students and that such perceived understanding led to higher levels of student performance.

> He will lecture but half the class is discussion. He'll split up people into groups, and do that kind of thing. I think by the first couple of weeks everyone was pretty comfortable with one another. It's not a huge class. Make it more conversational, definitely, and allowing students to share their own personal

experiences or even simpler than that, what to have for a problem. Do you have any questions about this problem, things like that.

The epitome of the lack of empathy some forms of class structure and organization can convey was described by Grant. He told how one class he had taken was so regimented that it required a mandatory seat assignment for every student in a class of 250 people.

> Freshman year at Marquette, we had a 250-person I think lecture class, and the teacher started out immediately with a seating chart, and TAs would take attendance every day; she had lined up everything we were going to do, and our first class was like our syllabus day. The attendance policy was super strict and the whole year was like that mentality. Obviously, with 250 people it's kind of hard to get to know the teacher, but even the TAs reflected her mentality, really strict and by the book.

Empathetic understanding appears to be situationally enhanced by perceptions of accessibility. Extensive office hours, small class sizes, interactive class structures, rapid communication, using student modes of communication, for example texts, and a teacher's physical presence were noted by respondents as factors that could influence their perception of empathy. Accessibility in conjunction with the external themes of perceived similarity and relevance may moderate intrinsic empathetic understanding and contribute to empathy-related outcomes.

The three external themes that students described — perceived similarity, relevance, and accessibility — each demonstrate that empathetic understanding is influenced by situational context as well as by any empathetic abilities an individual may have developed. Regardless of how empathetic a person is, he or she will not be as likely to demonstrate empathetic understanding when perceived circumstances are inconsistent with such an effort. For example, students would not be expected to be as empathetic whenever they perceive the teacher as unlike themselves, the teacher's presentation as unrelated to their life, or the teacher as distant, everything else being equal. Each of these three external themes are context based and subject to straightforward management. Class sizes can be limited, office hours expanded, and course content updated with more current examples, and younger teachers or teachers with related work experience can be hired, and so on.

4.3. Empathy Related Outcomes

What benefits, if any, do students and other people who experience empathy derive from such implicit interpersonal understanding? The people interviewed in this study suggest that a number of subjective and objective outcomes are products of empathetic interactions which reinforce empathy development and empathetic behavior. Subjective outcomes include all the internal perceptions of how an empathetic experience may have changed a person's outlook and behavior. For example, students spoke of becoming more motivated, having greater self-confidence, increasing their engagement with a topic within and outside of classroom, and achieving higher levels of satisfaction and self-awareness when they had empathetic instructors. Students also noted several objective empathy-related outcomes. Objective outcomes include those perceptions that other observers might also discern when an empathetic experience changes a person's outlook and behavior. More specifically, students indicated that they enjoyed significantly superior assessments; mastered complex skills; engaged in more leadership activities; had greater awareness of other people and their circumstances; exhibited more consistent behavior; and modeled empathetic behaviors such as listening, respect, reciprocity, and a concern for others. The following discussion delineates examples of both subjective and objective empathy-related outcomes. Subjective empathy-related outcomes. A subjective empathy-related outcome may be defined as the product of empathy perceptions where such an implicit understanding of another person causes a change in the observer of which only that individual may be aware. For example, the perception that a teacher is empathetic might make a student more self-confident and willing to ask questions either in or out of class. Mary described a situation that may help explain such increased student confidence. She disclosed how her feelings of inferiority, which were prompted by a teacher's lack of empathy, made her much less willing to participate both in and out of the classroom.

Just that I can't, they are not approachable. I, on the dark side, feel as if I can never be [on] their level. So really what is the point? So people that are empathetic make you feel good about yourself. And if they are connecting with you on a personal level, then you can feel like you are an equal with them. I like that, I love that.

Grant echoed Mary's concern that a teacher without empathy inhibits student confidence. More specifically, he stated that not only his participation but the participation of all students can be determined by the belief conveyed by an empathetic instructor that students will be successful.

I think that empathy in class helps the classroom become more open and everyone is more willing to share and participate in class. If everybody kind of has an appreciation for the teacher, and they are comfortable talking with the teacher, and you are able to raise your hand and talk, the kids in the class can see that the teacher is really responsive to you. Then everybody kind of participates.

A greater motivation to succeed also appears to be associated with empathetic professors. This may be one of the more important subjective consequences associated with perceptions of empathy. Almost all of the students noted that they became more motivated on the occasion of having had perceptions of empathy in the classroom. This may be a change that only an individual can discern, but it is a very important determinant of the amount of knowledge acquisition and communication that will take place.

Bob described how a teacher's engagement with the material being presented in a class affected his involvement with what was being covered. Bob reported that whenever an instructor is passionate about his or her discipline, it raises his interest and causes him to want to reciprocate.

You can tell, in those that are more empathetic, they have passion and they want you to have passion for it too. So you kind of try to do the mirror thing, they love this and I want to love it. You try harder. I think that is a big characteristic especially as you get further into the semester. The more I have them, the more I realize they absolutely love what they are doing. This is why they are professors or this is why they were in this field before they were professors because this is what they love and are passionate about. So I think this is a big characteristic for them.

Not surprisingly, students who are more confident, motivated, and engaged say they are also more satisfied with the classes taught by empathetic instructors. Mary probably best expressed her satisfaction with a class that had an empathetic teacher by describing how it made her feel: "happy definitely, energized, it makes me feel good about myself." She went on to comment on how her satisfaction affected her prosocial behavior around other people.

I think — I think happiness is contagious. So if someone makes you feel happy, I just want to spread this happiness, I'm in a good mood, I want to make other people feel good about themselves.

Each of the student comments cited communicates a degree of enhanced self-awareness. Students associated increased self-awareness with their perceptions of teacher empathy. Annie made this explicit when she described how having had an empathetic teacher influenced her: "You want to be like that person and you want to be that open and that helpful. Because you know how it is to be treated that way, you want to treat others that way." She confirmed that her experience with empathetic teachers made her a more sensitive person: "Yes, aware of how you treat others."

Objective empathy-related outcomes. Different observers should be able to discern and agree on objective empathy-related outcomes whenever an empathetic experience changes a person's external demeanor or conduct. The most obvious and presumably quantifiable outcomes associated with education endeavors are measures of achievement. The purpose behind most classroom assessment is to monitor students and ensure that they are making progress toward course learning objectives. Students who were interviewed left no doubt that they believed having empathetic professors resulted in both superior assessments of their classroom performance and greater skill development, even when difficult course material was covered. Bob related a specific empathetic

experience with one instructor that resulted in higher marks and that Bob thought was indicative of all the classes he completed with empathetic instructors.

> Yeah, absolutely, especially in that class. In all the classes that I like going to, I definitely have proof that I have higher grades. Media law is really easy, for example, because I study with a couple friends for every test. We all remember certain little snippets that he says in class. Like, "Do you remember this one really weird example that he gave?" "Oh yeah, and that relates to this." All of us end up getting higher grades on the test. On the first test, we all studied by ourselves because we didn't know. Overall, it was one of our lower scores and he said it was one of the easier tests that we had had. It was a lower grade, I think I got an 88 on it. So for the next couple we all started studying together. Three or four of us would bounce ideas off each other and on the last two, I think I got 105 and 100. So, it's like, that instant improvement because we understood: "Oh this is what he meant by this" or something because there was such great chemistry in the classroom. We felt like we could approach each other.

The students I interviewed also described trying to emulate the behaviors that their empathetic teachers displayed. For example, Grant told me how he attempted to really hear what people to whom he was talking were trying to say and then respond thoughtfully in a way that they would find meaningful.

> I would say so in just like normal life, if I am talking with someone and I see that they are actually actively listening and engaging and respond to what I am talking about, instead of just being like cool, and leaving it at that, if I am talking with someone I would much rather have them listen than leave it as is and I would do the same for them. I'm going to listen and respond the best that I can.

Grant went on to explain how his experience with an empathetic instructor had led him to act in a selfless way. He determined that the circumstances he encountered when he got home necessitated that, for the benefit of those around him, he refrain from pursuing his personal desires and act instead to assist them in every way that he could.

> Yeah, when I got home I realized what a special situation I had come home for so I really didn't try to hang out with friends or anything. I didn't really do anything that I wanted to do; anything that my parents needed help with I was always there to do.

The previous excerpts regarding objective empathy-related outcomes rely on the development of an enhanced awareness of other people. Without this awareness, students did not believe they would have been as successful. For these empathy related benefits to be sustained, however, the mentioned outcomes need to become habituated. Consistency is required before these outcomes are most useful and extend the benefits of empathetic understanding to the daily lives of other people. Annie provided an interesting example of how she applied her enhanced awareness on a consistent basis to make herself a better preschool teacher.

> Especially because I am in the 1-year-old room, there is crying and a lot of emotions. You can't just tell them to stop. That's not going to help. You have to, you know, show them love and care. Show them that you are aware of their emotions. "You mentioned that you are sad, let's fix it or let's talk about it" or something like that rather than just suffering. Which is sometimes what I want to do but you can't because they are not going to learn from that.

The previous discussion describes how internal and external themes influenced respondent empathy perceptions and empathy related outcomes within and across situations. The four internal themes that affect intrinsic empathetic understanding are emotional sharing, positive relationships, mutual regard, and personal genuineness. The three external themes that affect the magnitude of empathy perceptions within a situation are perceived similarity, relevance, and accessibility. Participants said that these seven themes in combination not only affected their empathetic understanding but also led to a number of beneficial empathy-related outcomes such as enhanced educational performance and prosocial behaviors.

5. CONCLUSION

The 10 university students who agreed to participate in this study were selected because they had experience with a variety of teachers over their lifetimes and because they had also been a pupil of two instructors whom the author regarded as empathetic. The respondents' personal stories are the foundation upon which this exploration of empathy development is based. After reading all participants' stories several times, in order to better assimilate their lived experiences at an aggregated level of comprehension, the following seven themes emerged. These themes represent common features of empathy that were elements of almost every participant's story. These common themes suggest a number of internal and external factors may mediate empathy development or moderate the effects of empathy.

The four internal themes participants suggested could mediate the development of empathy are provided below. Each theme is supplemented by a brief description that represents the participants' articulation of empathy mediators:

1. Emotional sharing: is experiencing and/or understanding how one feels about self and about how other people may feel when observing or openly interacting with them,

2. Positive relationships: reflect a healthy rapport between individuals where each person exhibits a concern for and liking of the people with whom he or she is interacting,

3. Mutual regard: is respect and openness between people fostered by accepting that each person may have something to contribute and actively seeking to have them do so, and

4. Personal genuineness: is being true to oneself as well as to others and requires that the observer know himself or herself.

Student participants also suggested three external themes could moderate the magnitude of empathy effects. These external themes are perceptually based on qualities or situations outside observers that our study respondents implied could affect the direction or strength of their empathetic understanding. Those three external themes are:

1. Similarity: is the perceived commonality of appearance and/or experience of the person being observed with the observer,

2. Relevance: is the perceived importance to an observer of what is being communicated regarding that observer's future endeavors by the person being observed, and

3. Availability: is the perceived access an observer believes he or she has to the person being observed.

A transcendental phenomenology approach was used to discern and explore the previous themes. Phrases that alerted us to empathy-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors included references to such things as stepping into someone else's shoes, reflecting on similar experiences, and presuming reasons for the observed behaviors of others. Participants' unique lived experience with empathy in the classroom also led to an exploration of the consequences which participants perceived empathy conveyed to them or to the communities of which they were a part. Their combined stories allowed me to explore the nature and extent to which intervening variables might exist and influence empathy development.

These personal stories regarding respondent experience with empathy in the classroom provide insight into the nature of empathy, the process of empathy development, and the many benefits that may be associated with empathetic communication. More specifically, the lived experiences of student participants demonstrated a tremendous amount of commonality and suggest that empathy is a critical component of effective learning that students both recognize and appreciate. Respondents clearly believe that empathy is a multidimensional construct which can be developed by those who wish to do so, not simply a personality trait that someone either has or does not have. Every research participant indicated that he or she felt empathy was an important element of faculty–student interactions that should be cultivated by instructors and students alike.

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5.1. Empathy Development Model

Empathy themes were linked to empathy-related outcomes in a manner that suggests there may be a variety of processes that can reinforce or develop the empathetic ability of any person. Recall that empathy is a broad construct that includes all the phenomena related to discerning another person's feelings and thoughts as well as behaviorally responding to those perceived feelings and thoughts. This multidimensional construct is the product of a dynamic process which will vary across situations. Emotional contagion, feeling a concern for another person's situation, and internalizing the perceived emotions of another person primarily reflect the emotive dimension of empathy. Perspective taking, discerning and accepting other people's motives or intentions, adopting what others are perceived to believe or be thinking, and acting in a manner consistent with the perception of another person's motives or actions are consistent with the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of empathy.

Empathy simply reflects the degree of interpersonal understanding based on the induced thoughts, feelings, and perceived motives of observed behaviors in other people. Consistent with this perspective, empathy as a construct should reflect three distinct components either individually or in combination: an emotional response to another person that may or may not include adopting that individual's emotional state, a cognitive response that involves knowing what another person is feeling; understanding why he or she may feel that way; and/or engaging, or having the intention to engage, in an appropriate behavioral response. The following model of empathy development incorporates these affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements, all of which may be activated by the observed behavior in others and expected to differ in magnitude and direction across individuals.
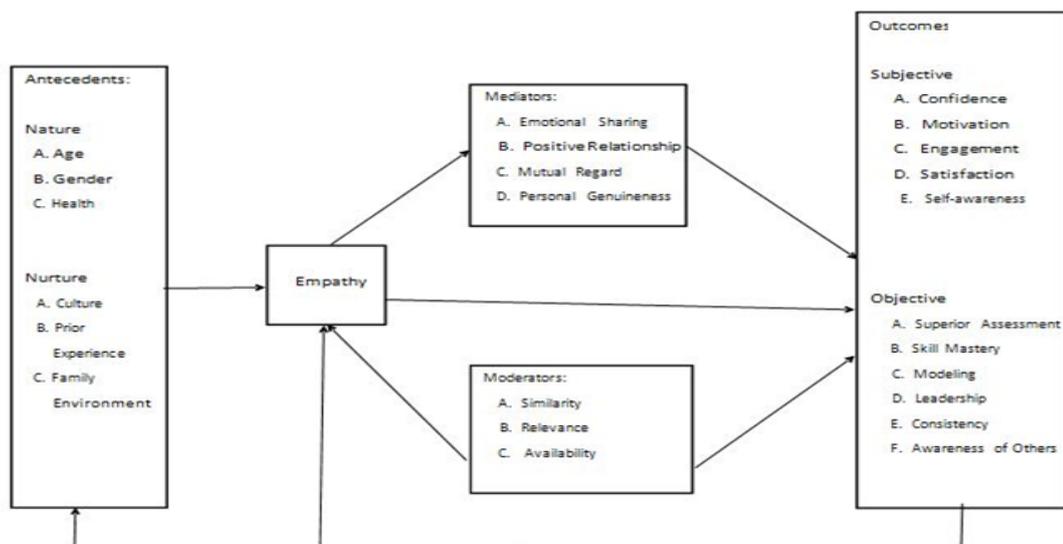

Figure-1. Empathy development model

The relative contribution of emotive, cognitive, and behavioral elements to empathy is likely to vary a great deal at any given moment due to the stage of a person's empathetic understanding. Empathy development is contingent upon the current state of empathetic understanding in an individual as well as any new understanding induced through observing others. The Model of Empathy Development proposed in Figure 1 incorporates the antecedents of any current state of empathetic understanding (nature and nurture) as well as any communication activated by observation. Physiological factors, such as age, gender, and mental or physical health, precede a particular empathy state as well as influence the development of empathy over time. Environmental factors, such as culture, family background, and prior experience act in a similar manner. The subjective and objective outcomes people associate with their empathetic observations provide either positive or negative reinforcement of empathetic responses and subsequent empathetic development. This model of empathetic development could have relevance across a broad variety of learning and communication environments.

Empathy reflects a continuum of interpersonal understanding based on one person's implicit or induced thoughts, feelings, and motives about the behaviors observed in another person or in other people. Empathy may be activated automatically or through cognitive appraisal. Empathy and empathetic processes evolve naturally over time in most people and continue to develop throughout their lifetimes. As such, empathy cannot be regarded as an innate trait that is immutable to change. What empathy is, how empathy develops over time, what benefits are associated with empathy, and how those subjective and objective outcomes may be encouraged should be subjects of intense interest to communication educators as well as practitioners.

5.2. Suggestions for Future Research

This study was by necessity qualitative in design. The results are not generalizable to a particular population; nor can I say with any degree of statistical confidence that the findings reflect the true state of how empathy develops. The results are instead an initial exploration intended to increase knowledge of the issues associated with developing empathetic understanding. All of the results are subject to interpretation, and my interpretation should be viewed with a degree of skepticism until similar findings are reported by other researchers. For example, the idea that smaller classes, which would be an easily controlled component of the external theme of availability, might have a favorable effect on student empathy perceptions and empathy-related outcomes is a conclusion that needs to be verified by other studies. Empathy is, however, a critical element of human social development and as such certainly justifies a great deal more attention.

Because of the discrepant nature of the views surrounding empathy's composition and development, I surmised that phenomenology would provide the best approach to gain insight about the phenomenon. Existing definitions of empathy in the literature are often incompatible. Not surprisingly, there is no generally accepted and empirically tested empathy measure on which to ground more quantitative studies. Clearly defining and operationalizing empathy and empathy related constructs such as mutual regard, emotional sharing, personal genuineness, and positive relationship would be an important first step to further our understanding in the future. Such an effort would lay a foundation upon which many fruitful empathy inquiries could be based.

I believe these research findings warrant empathy-related research that goes well beyond theoretical understanding. A validated model of empathy development could have many valuable practical outcomes. For example, empirical research could develop and test components of an integrated empathy model which would provide a clear explanation of the neurological mechanisms related to emotional sharing and how such sharing extends to more complex, higher order empathetic responses such as motivation. People often rely on their ability to motivate others when they are unable to perform a desired behavior themselves, e.g. eliminate carbon emissions. Similarly, a study could be conducted to determine whether the age antecedent of empathy has any relationship with the onset of autism. Automatic mirroring in autistic babies might, according to this analytic framework, be less obvious or not present at all in very young children. If this conjecture was found to be accurate, such a result could suggest an early autism diagnostic that would lead to more effective treatment for at least some forms of early onset autism. Families, and babies with autism, would not be the only beneficiaries of more effective treatments. Every community with an autistic member incurs real costs providing care for that individual as well as experiences the lost opportunities that this person might have otherwise successfully pursued.

Of course, I hope and expect that any validated model of empathy development will include many of the themes that have been identified and discussed. A test of the elements contained in this empathy development model could provide useful applications only so far as its theoretical propositions are confirmed. A theory of empathy development should provide useful insights for any individual who wishes to enhance the quality of his or her interactions with other people. Discerning how undergraduate college students experience empathy in the classroom and how those perceptions affect their behavior offers an incremental contribution toward this goal.

Much more research, however, is needed before we fully understand how empathy perceptions arise and influence human social interactions.

Investigations could, and should, be carried out for every proposition statement within the model of empathy development as well as for the model as a whole. Such research efforts need not be restricted to purely theoretical development. Although theoretical inquiries have merit in and of themselves, the effects of whatever may be learned is of far greater importance when the lessons can be applied to improve the lives of people. Enhancing the welfare of an individual, and of everyone else who is a member of their community, demands that practical applications of empathy-related knowledge be developed and disseminated for the benefit of all.

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