

Social Distance and Empathy: Is There Such Thing as Selective Empathy?

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Abstract

Being a part of groups is one major component of identity. However, while we can choose some groups to be part of, categories such race and ethnic—along with gender and religion to some extent—are something that we cannot choose. Even so, we identify ourselves as those assigned group, rather than our achieved ones. This paper would examine the relationship between social distance and empathy, especially in assigned group such religion. The total sample recruited to fill in an online questionnaire was 190-individuals (\bar{x} =18.5yo). We measure social distance in multiple categories as well as their level of empathy. Statistical analysis showed that social distance in religiosity and empathy are correlated positively (corr = .215, p = .003); however, there was no significant correlation found in other categories of social distance. There are two major point discussed in this paper: [1] whether or not empathy is based on their religious membership; [2] the significance of religious distance over the other categories. Future studies are aimed to elaborate this problem even farther.

Keywords: empathy, social distance, social identity.

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Introduction

As a social being, humans are equipped with the ability to think and feel from others perspective. This ability enables us to behave properly in our social interactions [see: Eisenber & Miller, 1987; Laible et al, 2004; Devety & Lamm, 2006]. For example, we would also feel somewhat sad when our friend is grieving from losing one family member. We would know that friend is most likely sad, or even devastated. Hence, we also know that we are not supposed to ask that friend to hang out with us when their family are arranging the funeral. The same mechanism also happens when we are watching a movie or reading a book. Sometime, we imagine ourselves in the story. Other times, we get so overwhelmed by feelings over what the characters are going through. That proves that those kind of feelings and thoughts we are experiencing from what happens to others are not limited toward our closest ones alone, but also strangers—and even things [Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004]. That was what empathy is about. Theoretically, empathy refers to individual's ability to experience from others' perspective [Mansfield, 1973; Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Wispé, 1986; Knight, 1989; Stueber, 2013]. It is often characterized by individual's capacity to understand and feel what others do in certain situations. In another word, individuals who are empathetic would be more likely to engage in more altruistic and tolerance behaviours [see: Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Batson et al, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007].

Despite empathy being a good thing, the complexity of the social world often makes it hard for us to empathize with others. To some extent, even if we claim to be empathetic, our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are not always synchronized [Harmon-Jones et al, 2009; Eisenber et al, 2010]. Using that previous example, we may know that one of our friend is grieving. But then our closest friends are inviting us for a party; we may post a lot of stuffs on social media, disregarding the feeling of our grieving friend. It shows that proximity plays a big part in empathy [Mencl & May, 2009]. In this case, we are more empathetic toward individuals who are closer to us, emotionally [Ghorbani et al, 2013]. Derived from that premise, it is possible that group membership will have its effect on empathy.

Individual's memberships in numerous group matters. It defines individual's identity, especially social identity [see: McLeod, 2008; Tajfel, 2010; Hogg, 2016]. This is how we say that we are students from certain universities, or coming from certain race or ethnicity, or so on. Some of these memberships are acquired or achieved while the others are automatically given [Faladare, 1969]. For instance, being Olympians, getting into dean's list, or having high social economic class are achieved. It demands certain effort to get into and keeping those kind of memberships. In this case, anyone can get those memberships as long as they can meet the requirements to get into those groups. This kind of mobility causes social stratification, in which some classes are better than others.

On the contrary, membership in race, ethnic, sex, and—to some extent—religions are given [Lenski, 1954]. More often than not, we cannot choose or change which categories we want to be a member of. We were born as a member of some categories and we stay that way. For example, a Caucasian cannot choose to be African-American, and vice versa. A Sundanese, doing all Chinese cultural activities, doesn't turn into Chinese. A man dresses up as woman doesn't become a woman, even if he

did a surgery to be a woman, it doesn't make him able to bear children. These kind of uniqueness make it impossible for other people to change their membership. This immobility creates a sense of equality in which diversity exists, but not stratification. In another word, no social categorization is superior than the others. No race or ethnic is better than the others, no sex is greater, and no religion is righter.

Despite knowing that everyone—from any social backgrounds—are or should be equal, we don't always treat people equally. It is understandable that we are more empathetic toward our closest family and friends than we are toward strangers. We are built that way [see: Zaki & Ochsner, 2012; Panksepp & Panksepp, 2013]. Now, focusing on our empathy toward strangers, we can ask ourselves whether or not we empathize the same toward every stranger.

Strangers are strangers. Definitively speaking, anyone that we don't personally know are strangers; despite their race, ethnic, religion, sex, and so on. Given that everyone is equal; we should be treating all of these strangers the same. However, this does not always be the case. Many researchers proved that we do not treat others the same [see: Osman, 1999; Karakayali, 2006]. We are often prejudicial and unwilling to be involve or help others, simply because they are different than us [Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 2004]. It's as if we have different level of strangers, strangers who are similar than us and strangers who are not. The latter then become stranger than regular strangers; they are usually those with different race, ethnic, religion, and so on.

Related to our willingness to interact with strangers—with different social backgrounds, we have the concept of social distance [see: Bogardus, 1967; Wark & Galliher, 2007; Karakayali, 2009]. In many cases, some identities are seen to be more important than others. For example, individuals will identify her/himself as a Christian before as a Chinese, or vice versa. In this case, there is some degree of possibility that he/she would have different levels of distance across those social groups.

In general, being in the same group with others increased our perception of similarities with the in-groups. At the same time, the differences with out-groups will seem more obvious. This mechanism provides convictions regarding individual's belongingness in the in-group only [Dion, 2000]. When individuals feel belong in one particular group, the more loyal individual becomes toward the group and the more willing to do whatever it takes to stay in the group; including signifying differences, distancing, and eventually treating others differently [Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006]. On the bright side, however, this belongingness is also responsible for altruistic behaviours between the members of in-group [Stürmer et al, 2006].

This belongingness would give a sense of community as well as unity with the group [Wellman & Wortley, 1990]. In this case, it would be as if anything happens to the group or anyone in the group happens to us directly. In another word, we become more empathetic toward the members of the in-group. Meanwhile, differentiation between in-group and out-group can cause us to empath with in-group more than we do out-groups as well. Hence, the next question would be the cost of this differentiation on empathy. There are two possibilities on how empathy differ between in-group and out-groups; it's either we become more empathetic toward the

in-group or we become less empathetic toward the out-group. This study aims to get a better understanding on this.

We hypothesize that social distance and empathy should be negatively correlated. It would mean that individuals with high empathy would be less likely to distant themselves with others. This happens because as empathetic people are able to put themselves in other shoes, they would have better understanding on differences. This understanding is hoped to increase their tolerance and and to strengthen their belief on equality. However, despite theoretically the correlation should be positive, we cannot disregard the possibility of the opposite finding. It is possible to have positive correlation between social distance and empathy is negative, suggesting the importance of the group on individual’s empathy.

Method

This study used quantitative approach with survey as its method of data gathering. Generally, comparative and correlational analysis were conducted to make sense of the data. The data set included in this study were: social distance in multiple dimensions (ethnic, gender, and religion), empathy, and demographical data such age, sex, and religious belief.

The total participant recruited for this study was 190-individuals. They were all college students. They were given an online questionnaire measuring both social distance and empathy. The empathy measure was constructed using 1-to-4 Likert scale. Social distance was constructed using yes/no question asking whether or not they have friends from other social categories [ethnicity, religion, or gender] at some stages of their life [elementary school, secondary school, high school, and college]. Each “yes” response was given 1 value, while “no” a 2. Then all of the scores were summated by the dimensions of social distance and transformed into 1-to-4 index in which the higher their score, the more distance they have with others.

Result

With the mean of 18.5years-old for participant age, the table below (table 1.1) showed the mean for each variables measured.

Table 1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Empathy	1.79	3.68	2.88	.26
Gender Social Distance	1.00	3.33	1.45	.55
Ethnic Social Distance	1.00	3.11	1.29	.54
Religious Social Distance	1.00	4.00	2.21	.91

Statistical analysis showed that empathy is positively correlated with social distance in religiosity (corr = .215, p = .003); there was no significant correlation between empathy and social distance in ethnic and gender category (corr = .137, p = .60 and corr = .075, p = .306 respectively). It meant that the less individuals willing to be involved with others from different religions, the more empathetic they tend to be.

Results also showed that not all dimensions of social distance actually correlated with each other. Only gender social distance correlated positively with the other dimensions with .181 for ethnic distance and .210 for religious ($p = .007$ and $.002$). Ethnic and religious distance did not correlate significantly (corr .016). This suggested that individuals can be distant on some dimensions but not on others. The mean differences between all three dimensions were significant (.000).

Discussion

Findings outlined earlier validated the hypotheses stated. First, there is indeed significant difference in mean between the dimensions of social distance. Second, there is significant correlation between empathy and distance in religious dimension alone. This discussion will explain the implications of the mean differences in distance and how empathy correlated with religious distance but not the others.

As shown in the previous section, the mean difference between each dimensions of social distance indicates that individuals tend to be distant in some dimensions, but not all. This suggests that there is no such thing as a general distant. This claim showed that some social membership is perceived to be more important than others and will affect their involvement with others differently as well. In this case, religious membership can be assumed to be more important than gender as well as ethnic. This happens because Indonesia, as a religious country, demands its people to have a religion. Hence, religious norms, belief, and acts are socialized to individuals since young age that it is even incorporated in daily living from education to law.

These do not happen in ethnic or gender dimensions. Even though there are efforts in socializing ethnic and gender roles, there doesn't seem to be any consequences in deviating from such roles. At the same time, Indonesians, especially those in urban area, tend to live in an ethnically diverse environment. In this studies alone, the participants are coming from over two dozens of ethnic backgrounds. That, compared to only six acknowledged religions, would affect the social interactions of people. One of many example of this that is proven by this study is regarding marriage. Only 6.3% of participant refused to marry individuals from different ethnic background; while 83.8% of the total participant refused to marry individuals with different religions.

Another interesting finding in distance is related to the gender dimension. It is correlated with both religious and ethnic distances when those two are not correlated with each other. In this case, we argue that distant in this particular category is resulted from the ethnic and religious norms as well as individuals' development. In some years of individuals socio-development, individuals tend to play with others with the same sex [Cheung, 1996]. As they get older, they will start befriending opposite sex and this is where social norms—such in religious and ethnic—affect them. Some religions, for instance, forbid their follower to be close to those of other sex. Some ethnics, implicitly or explicitly, would reinforce their youngsters to play with people with the same sex—while learning gender roles.

Now that we have seen how much more significant religiosity is compared to other dimensions, we can explain its relationship with empathy. So far, studies regarding religiosity and social interactions have been quite inconsistent. Some studies found

that religiosity correlated positively with beneficial social interactions such as altruism, tolerance, and lower prejudice [see: Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007]. However, other studies concluded otherwise [see: Johnson et al., 2012]. Unfortunately, we did not measure individual's religiosity, hence we could not determine whether or not it would contribute toward distance nor empathy.

In this study, the higher index for distance indicates lesser involvement or willingness to involve with others from outgroups. Logically speaking, there should be significant negative correlation between the two. Hence we predicted that people who are willing to befriend people from the outgroups should have higher empathy. However, our results showed otherwise in religious distance while none in others category. In another word, individuals who are not willing to befriend others from different religions tend to have higher empathy.

It is somewhat baffling that the relationship is significant in religious category in which all religions generally promote peace and tolerance. So, the question here is why it happens. In order to answer that question, we should first go back to the construct of social distance. As explain in the previous section, distance refers to individual's willingness and actual involvement with others—especially outgroups. Which means, this construct talks about membership; and when we are talking about membership, we are actually talking about identity. Membership is crucial for individuals, especially adolescents, because it gives a sense of directions and belongingness. In consequence, they would behave in a set of specific ways they believe they should in order to keep their membership [Brewer, 1999]. One of the common group *norms* is that individuals should treat the in-group better than they do the out-groups.

Of course, especially in our modern and multicultural world that promotes diversity, that norm is not explicitly stated. However, as a social being, we cannot ignore the effect of social identity. Individuals may state that they see everyone as equal or they want to be friend everyone regardless the social background; and yet their behaviours may be otherwise. Our social identity often leads to in-group biases in which this is seen as more favorable than out-group. Especially in times of conflict, social identity would affect our view in which we tend to attribute it toward the outgroup [see: Dion, 1973]. These biases, combined with the diversity of our social construct, affect our interaction with *strangers* through contact.

In this case, individuals seem to categorizing strangers using religions. Others with different beliefs are considered strangers; and for many people, interactions with strangers are not quite as often. Let's see college as an example. Despite college in general are more diverse than high school, most colleges in Indonesia are usually dominated by one religion alone (e.g Christian college will be dominated by Christian students). Even though there will be others with different religious belief, they are usually not as many. Hence, the amount of contact with *strangers* they could potentially have would be less. Hence, the contact experiences from the previous education level—that are even more homogenous than college—would still be applicable in this situation. Eventually, they will befriend mostly those with the same social background with less interactions with *strangers*. On that case, their lack of interactions with out-group could make it easier to empathize with others.

In this first scenario, their empathy level static—and relatively high—because they have no other group to compare it to. From self-enhancement perspective, it is possible that we only see the good thing about ourselves while omitting the negative ones [see: John & Robins, 1994; Robins & John, 1997; Kwan et al, 2004; Elgar et al, 2005]. Hence, when filling in the empathic survey, participants answered the items with the best possible outcome or the best thing they could do. For example, they may imagine their friends or families, in which those are not religiously diverse. In conclusion, because participants have less diverse interactions, they would just imagine others from the same social backgrounds and empathize with them alone—disregarding the *strangers*.

However, that scenario alone does not tactfully explain the positive findings. The other scenario we would find is that we empathize with others regardless their social background. However, when facing in social dilemma in which social categories involved, it would be different. For example, if we only have enough resources to help one group—we would more likely to help the in-group than out-group. The same happens when we are trying to understand other's position in a problem. Our familiarity with the norms of our groups would make it easier for us to put ourselves in our in-group member's shoes. At the same time, it would be harder for us to do so for others out-side our group because we are not entirely familiar with their norms.

We cannot conclude that people with high empathy tend to be distant. But we can say that people with less diverse friends will be more empathetic because of their bias. They don't need to spend more mental effort for figuring out others motives because they believe that in-groups are good. Hence, they would easily empathize with those in-groups. And this only happens in religious category because it is the most important one so far.

The third scenario possible would be related to our feeling of belongingness. Initially, we would offer to use the terms such *fanaticism*. On fanatics, the feeling of belongingness is complemented by a sense of exclusiveness and often superiority [see: Firman & Gila, 2006; Yack, 2010]. In this case, fanatics would intentionally have different level of empathy toward in-group and out-group. Especially in religious settings, this happens because they believe to be the only religion that is right; hence, others are wrong for not conforming to their beliefs.

From those three possible scenarios, we can see that there are many reasons on why empathy and distance can be positively correlated in religious dimension. In another word, we cannot actually pin point which causes which. We also do not know whether we simply become more empathetic toward our in-group or we become less empathetic toward the out-group.

Finally, should we be able to draw a line between in-group and out-group empathy, we would be able to look at the theoretical implications of empathy. If there is, indeed, a significant difference between empathy toward in-group and out-group, would it be possible that the empathy is not a trait, but instead a situational behaviour? Or another possibility is that we need a new concept of empathy that goes beyond individual's differences.

Next studies should address other categories of distance. In addition, we should try to incorporate those categories and empathic scale to get a clearer picture on whether or not group membership affects empathy.

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