EMPATHY AND COMMUNICATION

A MODEL OF EMPATHY DEVELOPMENT
Study Focus
Empathy’s impact on:

- Human Interactions
- Consequences of those interactions
- Empathy Development
Study Purpose

to examine the empathetic perceptions of upper division undergraduate college students and integrate their lived experiences with empathy related factors discussed in the literature to develop a model of empathy development.
Why empathy?
Empathy is a fundamental way in which we comprehend and interact with the world around us.

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.
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.
Two historically dominant empathy theories compete as explanations of this critical communication process:

- theory of the mind
- simulation theory
Theory of Mind

The human ability to attribute mental states to other people using a controlled, thoughtful process (Adams, 2001)

- Cognitive
- Effortful
- Relies on language-related reasoning and common knowledge
- Can be time-consuming
Simulation Theory

When people replicate affective, cognitive, and behavioral states in themselves and mimic what they believe other people may be feeling, thinking, and doing (Gallese, 2005)

- Emotive
- Automatic
- Reflexive
- Faster
Methodology

- phenomenology, a form of qualitative inquiry, where a series of open ended questions was used to increase understanding of the empathy development process

- three to ten participants
Findings:

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.
Findings:

4 internal themes: emotional sharing
positive relationships
mutual regard
personal genuineness

3 external themes: perceived similarity
relevance
availability
The four internal themes participants suggested could mediate the development of empathy.

Each theme is supplemented by a brief description that represents the participants’ articulation of empathy mediators.
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.

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.

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.

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 my study respondents implied could affect the direction or strength of their empathetic understanding.
Similarity: is the perceived commonality of appearance and/or experience of the person being observed with the observer

Relevance: is the perceived importance to an observer of what is being communicated regarding that observer’s future endeavors by the person being observed

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

1. an emotional response to another person that may or may not include adopting that individual’s emotional state

2. a cognitive response that involves knowing what another person is feeling

3. an 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.
Antecedents:

Nature
A. Age
B. Gender
C. Health

Nurture
A. Culture
B. Prior Experience
C. Family
D. Environment

Empathy

Mediators:
A. Emotional Sharing
B. Positive Relationship
C. Mutual Regard
D. Personal Genuineness

Moderators:
A. Similarity
B. Relevance
C. Availability

Outcomes

Subjective
A. Confidence
B. Motivation
C. Engagement
D. Satisfaction
E. Self-awareness

Objective
A. Superior Assessment
B. Skill Mastery
C. Modeling
D. Leadership
E. Consistency
F. Awareness of Others
Future research opportunities

1. Develop of better measurement of empathy so quantitative studies can be conducted, e.g. add a multi-dimensional behavioral component.
2. Use measure of empathy to theoretically test the empathy development model.
3. Apply validated elements of this model in different environments, e.g. measure effects of empathy in social media interactions and outcomes.
“Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?”

— Henry David Thoreau
Thank you.