Task measures of empathy and their relationship with trait emotion dysregulation

Nicholas M. Thompson | Carien van Reekum | Bhismadev Chakrabarti

Introduction

- The ability to manage one’s emotions (emotion regulation; ER) is related to the capacity to understand/resonate with others’ emotions (cognitive & affective empathy, respectively).  
- Greater cognitive empathy (CE) is associated with more adaptive ER. Mixed findings for affective empathy (AE) – current evidence suggests it could hinder some ER processes but facilitate others.

Aims & Hypotheses

- Empathy and emotion regulation are multidimensional constructs. The interrelationships between their various component processes are not currently well characterised.
- Majority of previous studies have used only trait measures. This study examined how task-based measures of CE and AE are associated with trait emotion dysregulation (ED).
- Predicted: CE negatively related to ED; AE positively related to ED.

Methods

- N = 48 (31 female); 21.29 years (SD = 4.03)
- CE assessed using eye-tracking based perspective-taking task (Director Task)
- AE assessed using fEMG-based spontaneous facial mimicry (SFM) task.
- Trait emotion dysregulation assessed using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale, short-form (DERS; α = .89)

Results

Task Validation

- DT: RT longer for exp vs. control trials (p = .02).
- DT: Lower target/foil gaze ratio for exp vs. control trials (p = .002)

Relationship with Emotion Dysregulation

- DT shows negative relationship with DERS: rho(36) = -.47, p = .003
- Mean SFM not significantly related to DERS: rho(38) = -.26, p = .11

Discussion

- Further evidence that CE is positively associated with adaptive ER. Relationship may reflect overlap in cognitive control processes.
- Increased SFM of angry, but not happy faces, is associated with adaptive ER. SFM of angry faces may capture socio-cognitive processes beyond state-matching/emotion contagion.


Email: n.Thompson@reading.ac.uk