Children Perception of Parental Empathy as a Precursor of Children Empathy in Middle and Late Childhood

The aim of this paper is to study the development of empathy in middle and late childhood, and its origins, in part, in primary interpersonal relationships, especially with parents. Regarding this subject we are interested in analyzing whether children perception of parental empathy as a result of parental modelling can predict empathy in the child.

Empathy is the ability to participate in the feelings or ideas of others, to feel sad about their unhappiness and good about their joy. In order to develop empathy, a child must be able to feel attachment to another person and must care if that person is hurting. The development of empathy and of the corresponding guilt and shame when one harms or fails to help another person, guarantees pro-social behaviour and altruism, even and preferably in the absence of external rewards and punishments.

Empathy includes cognitive processes and emotional experiences, and implies a mainly cognitive response showing understanding of how another person feels as well as an emotional communion (Gallo, 1989). Haynes and Avery (1979) described empathy "as the ability to recognize and understand another persons perceptions and feelings and to carefully express that understanding in an accepting response" (p. 527). The response may be either verbal or non-verbal, or pro-social behaviour such as sharing or helping.

On the one hand, empathy can be defined cognitively in relation to perspective taking or understanding others. For example, Hogan (1969) described empathy as "the

intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind without actually experiencing that person's feelings" (p. 308). On the other hand, empathy has also been defined as emotional arousal or sympathy in response to the feelings or experiences of others (Caruso & Meyer, 1998). For example, Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) defined empathy as "the heightened responsiveness to another's emotional experience" (p. 526). Last, there is an integrative approach which employs both cognitive and emotional modes to the study of empathy. More recently, empathy has been conceived of as a multi-dimensional construct (Davis, 1983; Thornton & Thornton, 1995). Davis (1983) included cognitive and emotional components in his view of empathy, and he believes that it "can best be considered as a set of constructs related in that they all concern responsivity to others but are also clearly discriminable from each other" (p.113).

The development of empathy leading to guilt and shame when one's actions harm others is a crucial aspect of emotional development. Early parent-child interactions are an important influence on children's emotional development. Children initially learn to express and interpret emotions through interactions with primary caregivers. In infancy, caregivers influence emotional development through the extent to which they provide emotionally arousing stimuli at appropriate times, reinforce and encourage emotional displays, and respond to subtle variations in the child's expressions (Bronson, 2000; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Nagin & Tremblay, 2001).

Some studies have found a positive relationship between the mother's empathic caring and children's altruism (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979). Also, studies on preschool children have found that non-authoritarian and non-punishing

mothers have children with higher levels of affective and cognitive empathy, and pro-social behaviour. Eisenberg, Lennon, and Roth (1983) examined, using a longitudinal methodology, the relation between prosocial moral judgment of children since 4 to 6 years old and both prohibition-oriented moral judgment and maternal childrearing practices. They found level of prosocial reasoning was related to nonauthoritarian, nonpunitive, empathic, and supportive maternal practices. Also it has been noticed that parental modelling of empathic relationships towards their children and others in their presence, is strongly linked to the development of pro-social attitudes and behaviour in children. Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, and King (1979) examined maternal rearing behaviour in relation to 11/2-22/2 children's reparation for transgressions and altruism as bystanders to distress in others. Distress was simulated by mothers and investigators. Mothers' empathic caregiving was rating during home visits and was positively associated with children's reparation and altruism.

Nevertheless, surprisingly little empirical support exists for a link between parent and child empathy.

Strayer and Roberts (1989) find that although children's emotional empathy was associated with parental perceptions of the child as empathic, it was not related to parents' own empathy. Although mothers reported significantly higher levels of empathy than did fathers, neither mothers' nor fathers' empathy was related to the empathy of daughters or sons, either as assessed by Bryant's measure or by the parents themselves. Some years later, the same authors said that in contrast with earlier less comprehensive studies, they had found significant paths between parents' and children's empathy mediated by children's anger. "These countervailing pathways largely neutralized each

other, resulting in the low correlation usually seen when parents' and children's empathy are examined in isolation. Thus our findings are an important confirmation and extension of the theoretically expected link between parents' and children's empathy" (Strayer & Roberts, 2004, p.229). However, they still had to make use of other variables, especially emotional expression mediators.

The studies of Strayer and Roberts (2004) on the influence of parents' empathy over that of their children have assessed empathy as each one perceives it in him or herself. However, on the basis of social learning and social cognitive theories (Bandura, 1986), specific socialization mechanisms (e.g., observational learning, rewards) have been linked with the acquisition of new behaviors. According to Bandura (1986), children who are exposed to models of specific behavior will be more likely to emulate those acts (especially if the model is admired or closely identified with). In a similar vein, providing children with hands-on experiences in empathetic acts may facilitate future empathetic behaviors because such experiences provide rehearsal opportunities. Following these notions, one would expect that parents who model and encourage empathetic behaviors might promote empathetic behaviors in their children.

Moreover, Schaefer consider that "a child's perception of his parents' behaviors may be more related to his adjustment than is the actual behavior of his parents" (1965, p.413).

According to our work on the influence of parents' relationships and attachment over children coping, social skills, self-control and emotions (Richaud de Minzi, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010) based on Schaefer's model, we believe that rather than parents-self

perceived empathy, it is actually the empathy children perceive in their parents that could really influence the development of their own empathy.

Repeated evidence was been found about the difference in empathy between males and females, being the latter more empathetic (Garaigordobil & García, 2006; Litvack, McDougall, & Romney, 1997; Mestre, Frias, & Samper, 2004). In the particular case of Argentina, it belongs to the western Christian culture, although it is predominantly Catholic and Latin of Italian and Spanish origin. Parents' expectations for girls and boys differ, and girls are expected to be more nurturing and concerned with social evaluations of others, while boys are expected to be more autonomous. These different expectations probably influence the development of empathy in boys and girls.

In the present study, we hypothesize that: 1) there are differences in the development of empathy between boys and girls, being girls more empathetic than boys, 2) there are differences in boys and girls perception of their parents' empathy, both girls and boys will perceive more empathy in their mother than in their father, and only girls will perceive empathic qualities in their fathers, and 3) there is a difference in the influence of mother's and father's empathy over that of boys and girls. Boys' empathy will be mainly influenced by cognitive empathy perceived in their father and girls will be influenced by both kinds of empathy perceived in both parents.

Methods

Participants and procedures

We recruited the sample studied from three public schools in the city of Buenos Aires, where all the courses corresponding to 4, 5, 6, and 7 grade of primary school, participated

in the study. The schools were not randomly selected but assigned by Educational Authorities of Buenos Aires Town Council. The sample was composed by 387 Argentine children (190 boys and 197 girls), of 9 (n = 61), 10 (n = 108), 11 (n = 114), and 12 years (n = 104) (*M* = 10.96 years, *SD* = 1.26 years), middle social class. All of them lived with both mother and father. 25% of children were only child, 44%had one brother or sister, 21% had two brothers and/or sisters and the rest had more than two brothers and/or sisters.

We administered the instruments to children at each child's respective school, in groups of 20 children per session. Three psychologists administered the instruments to each group.

Ethical procedures

We obtained consent for this project at multiple levels. First, the researchers asked to discuss the project with the heads of schools at potential research sites. We provided them with a copy of the research proposal, and explained the characteristics of the research. Once heads of schools gave permission, we sent a letter to the household of each child explaining the aims of the project and procedures for administering measures to children. We expressly told them that participation was voluntary and anonymous. We obtained a written permission from each father and mother before data collection began. Last, we informed children of the purpose of the study. Then we instructed them in data collection procedures, and reminded that they could refuse to answer questions if they chose to.

Measurement tools

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980)

We have used the Spanish version (Mestre, Frias, & Samper, 2004) of Davis'

Interpersonal Reactivity Index. Spanish translation was carried out by a team of

researchers with experience in the study of empathy and was revised with the author of

the original questionnaire. This version was administered to a pilot simple of 174 children

to detect possible difficulties in items understanding (Mestre, Frias, & Samper, 2004).

It allows us to assess empathic disposition through four factors, two cognitive ones and

two emotional ones: Perspective taking (PT), ability to understand another person's point

of view (α = .74); Fantasy (FS), the tendency to identify with characters in films and in

literature; in other words, it assesses the subject=s imaginative capacity to place him or

herself in fictitious situations (α = .76); Empathic concern (EC), feelings of compassion,

concern and care towards others (α = .69); and Personal Distress, feelings of anxiety and

uneasiness shown by the subject upon observing other people's negative experiences (α =

.71). The Index includes of 28 items. For instance, "I sometimes try to understand my

friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective" or "I often have

tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me". Respondents indicated for

each question how well the item described them on a five-point scale anchored by 1 (does

not describe me well) and 5 (describes me very well). Total scores range between 7 and

35 for each sub-scale.

We administered the Spanish version to a pilot sample of 105 Argentine children

to check the correct items understanding. Psychometric properties of the measure in

Argentine population were assessed with an Argentine sample of 936 children, both

sexes, between 9 and 12 years of age, attending middle class schools in Buenos Aires. We obtained four factors, which could approximately be interpreted as those found by Davis, and Cronbach α varied between .69 and .72 (Richaud de Minzi, 2008).

Measure of children's perception of parental empathy

We studied the empathy that children perceive in their parents through two questionnaires, one for mothers and one for fathers, with 28 items each, corresponding to the IRI's 28 items but referred to parents. For example: "I am concerned and moved by people less lucky than myself." "My mother is concerned and moved by people less lucky than her." "I find it difficult to see things from another person's point of view." "My father finds it difficult to see things from another person's point of view." We studied these questionnaires in the same Argentine sample described above, resulting again in four factors in each case, defined similarly to those of the children. Alphas obtained varied in perception of mother empathy between .64 and .72 and in perception of father empathy between .66 and .72.

In order to avoid bias in the answers, we provided these questionnaires together with others, in three one-hour sessions, making sure that each one was administered in different sessions and days, with approximately one-week intervals.

Statistical procedures

We used MANOVAs to examine 1) differences in empathy between boys and girls, 2) differences in boys and girls perception of their parents' empathy. Multiple regression

analyses were used to study the relationship between perceived parents' empathy and boys and girls empathy.

We performed multiple linear regression *enter* method analyses for each of the four empathy dimensions to test the contribution of child's perception of father and mother dimensions of empathy to children's empathy. We performed the analyses for girls and boys separately. *A priori tests* of multicollinearity were satisfactory with all variance inflation factors less than 2.00 and tolerance of variables all near 1.00.

Scatter diagrams of regression standardized residuals and regression standardized predicted values appear as a point cloud totally randomized. This indicated that there were nor tendencies nor patterns in the plots and therefore the hypotheses of linearity and constant variance or homocedasticity were accepted. Because of the relatively large sample size, which results in increased power, alpha was set at $p \leq .01$.

Results

Differences in empathy between boys and girls

MANOVA where boys and girls were compared in all four empathy dimensions, indicated a significant overall effect of *Gender* (Hotelling's $F(4, 382) = 7.81$; $p < .000$, $\eta^2 parcial = .076$, *Observed power* $= .998$). When observing univariate analyses of variance, significant differences were found in Personal distress, Perspective taking, and Fantasy, with girls' scores being higher in all cases (See Table 2).

Boys and girls perception of their parents' empathy

MANOVA where we compared boys and girls according to their perception of their mothers' empathy dimensions indicated that, overall, there are no differences between both gender groups (Table 3).

Last, MANOVA where we compared boys and girls according to their perception of their fathers' empathy dimensions, indicated that, in general, there are significant differences (*F Hotelling's* (4, 312) = 4.86; *p* < .001, $\eta^2 parcial$ = .06, *Observed power* = .956) between genders.

When observing univariate analyses of variance, the most important differences we found were in Perspective Taking and Empathic concern: girls perceived more perspective taking and empathic concern in their fathers than boys did (See Table 4).

Relationship between perceived parents' empathy and boys and girls empathy

Since we have found that the influence of parental styles differs according to the gender of both children and parents, and since we have proved a difference in boys' and girls' empathy, we have studied separately the influence of mothers' and fathers' empathy over that of boys and girls.

When analyzing the relation of boy's perception of parents' empathy dimensions with those of boys, we found that the parents' multidimensional empathy accounts for 37% of variance in boys' Personal Distress (*R* = .61), 43% of variance in boys' Perspective Taking (*R* = .66), 36% of boys' Fantasy (*R* = .60), and 26% of boys' Empathic Concern (*R* = .51). The analysis of standardized regression coefficients indicates that the parents' empathy dimension with the greatest influence on boys'

emotional sensitivity is father's Perspective Taking -that is, the ability to place oneself in another person's place and understand their feelings- ($\beta = .39$; $p < .000$), on boys' Perspective Taking it is father Perspective Taking ($\beta = .45$, $p < .000$), on boys' Fantasy, is father Fantasy ($\beta = .50$, $p < .000$) and on boys' Empathic Concern is mother Empathic Concern ($\beta = .41$, $p < .000$).

As for the relation between girl's perception of parents' empathy dimensions with girls' empathy, we found that parents' multidimensional empathy accounts for 42% of variance in girls' Personal Distress ($R = .64$), 39% of variance in girls' Perspective Taking ($R = .62$), 28% of girls' Fantasy ($R = .53$), and 42% of boys' of Empathic Concern ($R = .65$). The analysis of standardized regression coefficients indicates that the parents' empathy dimension with the greatest influence on girls' Personal Distress is mother Perspective Taking ($\beta = .46$, $p < .000$), that on girls' Perspective Taking is mother Perspective Taking ($\beta = .41$, $p < .000$) followed by father Perspective Taking ($\beta = .27$, $p < .004$), on girl' Fantasy is mother Fantasy ($\beta = .32$, $p < .003$) followed by father Fantasy ($\beta = .28$, $p < .005$), and on girls' Empathic Concern is mother Empathic Concern ($\beta = .49$, $p < .000$) and father Empathic Concern ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

In the first place, we have found significant differences between boys' and girls' empathy, girls being more empathic than boys, especially in the cognitive aspects of empathy and in the affective aspect of emotional distress. These results coincide with those of all previous studies on the subject (See between others, Broidy, et al., 2003; Carlo et al., 1996; Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible, & Meyer, 1999; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983;

Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001; Mestre, Samper, Frías, & Tur, 2009; Toussaint & Webb, 2005).

On the other hand, when comparing boys and girls in their perception of mother and father empathy, they agree in their perception of their mother's empathy, and differ in their perception of their father's; girls perceive more perspective taking and empathic concern in their father than boys. Also these results coincide with previous studies on the subject (Drevets, Benton, & Bradley, 1996; Harter, 1990; Siegal, 1985) which indicate that both girls and boys perceive more empathy in their mother than in their father, whereas girls perceive more of their father's empathic qualities. Not only are women more empathic, they are also more largely perceived as empathic and, at the same time are more capable of perceiving empathy. Therefore, there is clearly a connection with gender, which is probably due to cultural factors (Richaud de Minzi, 2006, 2010). Gender differences in attachment and related behaviors as empathy are to be expected due in part to differences in parents' expectations for girls and boys (Kerns & Barth, 1995). In general girls are expected to be more careful and concerned with others' needs and paying attention to social evaluations of others, while boys are expected to be more independent (Blehar & Oren, 1999; Ruble, Greulich, Pomerantz, & Gochberg, 1993). Families develop ways of interaction with their children based in part on the beliefs and values of their cultural environment (Reebye, Ross, & Jamieson, 1999).

Gender differences in Argentinean parenting and child outcomes can be attributed to larger societal norms. In Argentina, the mother is the central figure in family life, probably due to Argentina's Latin and Catholic tradition. As Facio and Batistuta (1998) assert, there is a belief in the moral and spiritual superiority of women

as opposed to men. The catholic devotion to Virgin Mary places a high importance on motherhood: it is expected that women sacrifice themselves on behalf of their children and the rest of their families, and in exchange they are greatly venerated and exercise a considerable amount of power at home. Boys and girls tend to forgive their mothers' faults more than their fathers', and the relationship with her deteriorates only as a consequence of very serious circumstances. Girls are socialized to be more involved in domestic chores and less involved in jobs than boys (Facio & Resett, 2006). Children, especially boys, perceive that their fathers spend little time with them (Richaud de Minzi, 2002, 2005). Children's perceptions of parental support and availability, within their own unique cultural niche, are likely to affect related social-emotional outcomes such as empathy

As for the relationship between parents' and children's empathy previous studies showed little correlation in this regard, despite similarity in parent and child empathy measures (Kalliopuska, 1984; Bernadett-Shapiro, Ehrensaft, & Shapiro, 1996; Strayer & Roberts, 1989; Hunter & Schmidt, 1990). However, in this study, when considering the perception children have of their parents' empathy, we have found interesting meaningful connections.

We have worked on the premise that rather than parents' "objective" behaviour, what matters in this process is the child's perception of its parents. On the basis of this premise, we found not only that the empathy that children perceive in their parents explains much of the development of their own empathy, but also that this influence varies greatly according to the gender of both parents and children.

Thus, the perception that boys have of their father's perspective taking is related to their personal distress and perspective taking; father fantasy with boys' fantasy, and mother empathic concern with boys' empathic concern. That is, boys do not perceive emotional empathic qualities in their father, only cognitive ones.

As to girls, mother perspective taking influences girls' personal distress and perspective taking, mother fantasy influences girls' fantasy, and mother empathic concern influences girls' empathic concern. However, in the case of girls we also find the influence of father perspective taking, fantasy and empathic concern. That is to say, boys' empathy is mainly influenced by cognitive empathy perceived in their father whereas girls are influenced by both kinds of empathy perceived in both parents. Once again women's higher empathic perception is underscored.

Implications of the present study

The results of this study suggest that, without leaving aside the dispositional roots of empathy, the influence of social interactions, in particular with parents, is very important in its development. Although children are active in the development of their own emotional self-regulation, they have to be helped and leaded for their caregivers and culture (Sroufe, 1995), and especially they have to observe hands-on experiences in empathetic acts from his parents (Bandura, 1986). Thus, it is necessary to study the children's perception of parental empathy that, we hypothesize, reflects parents' modeling, because probably there is a gap between what the parents inform and what the parents really do. On the other hand, this work have once again found that women are more empathetic that males. As a result, gender was an important consideration when

examining how the parents' empathy influenced in child's empathy, especially when taking into account cultural patterns that influence gender roles of children and parents. Cultural norms, which establish the role of each parent in children's socialization, are different from one culture to another. Therefore it is essential that in developmental studies of empathy we examine separately the patterns of relationship between children's perception of mother and father empathy and son and daughters' empathy. This is particularly important for identifying patterns between perceived parental empathy and children empathy that are unique to the father-child, and to the mother-child, especially in middle and late childhood.

Limitations and future research directions

A limitation of the present study is its correlational nature, which does not allow exploration of causal relationships. It was carried out within a specific cultural niche and in a specific age range: middle and late childhood. At the same time it was studied only the influence of parental empathy in children's empathy in families where children lived with two heterosexual parents. Future research efforts directed at studying mother and father empathy in the prediction of children's empathy development within a variety of cultural groups, and in families with only one parent, same sex parents, and/or separated parents, will be necessary. The importance of different kinds of families to establish universal and specific pathways to children's empathy development cannot be understated.

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