

Empathy and Feminist Attitudes

Honors Research and Exhibition Final Proposal

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Abstract

Empathy has been a topic of interest in the communities of psychology and popular media, especially in its potential connections to violent crimes. As the discussion surrounding empathy has grown, society has seen the rise of numerous problems in the progress of feminism, including the widespread recognition of the sexual assault epidemic on college campuses. In society's continued struggle to mitigate this issue, I am proposing a research study to examine the correlation between empathy and feminist attitudes in undergraduate college students. This project will speak to the relevance of empathy in addressing feminist issues, warrant further research into its relation to such issues, and identify a growing need to teach American youth the importance of empathy. This is a simple, low budget project with most costs concentrated in brief housing expenses and printing materials.

Introduction

“Well it’s no wonder, all these kids today and their violent video games.” We have heard it all before in contemporary discussions concerning violence in the United States. As American society has become more aware and fearful of events like mass school shootings (Lee, 2018), people constantly question whether this perceived increase in violence may stem from a lack of empathy in modern youth. In this examination of empathy, experts consistently point to video games, news pieces and other forms of media as sources of violence, and they constantly disagree on the relationship between exposure to violent content and empathy (Violent Video Games can Reduce Empathy in Players, 2018. Violent video games found not to affect empathy, 2017). Ultimately, there has not been enough conclusive research to make any serious claims connecting empathy to violent media or to suggest that discrepancies in empathy are closely related to acts of criminal violence. Still, this concept has only been recognized in psychological research since the late 1940s, first entering the English language at the start of the 20th century (Lanzoni, 2015). As empirical results remain inconclusive, the scientific community’s definition of empathy is constantly changing. When analyzing changes in the violent tendencies within our society, it is worth considering the role empathy plays in preventing common violent crimes.

Meanwhile, as the nation’s interest in empathy has grown, we have seen the rise of significant obstacles to the feminist movement. The 20th century was one of the most progressive eras in world history with incredible feminist achievements such as securing women’s right to vote, a number of reproductive rights, and a jump in female labor force participation from only 19% in 1900 to 60% in 2014, a staggering shift compared to men’s, which declined from 80% to 70% (The Civilian Workforce). Still, despite such progress, the 21st

century has already faced new challenges in the continued feminist movement. While radical feminism first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement has become increasingly relevant as feminist issues become increasingly pressing in our society and as internet access makes the spread of such ideas more effortless (Perceptions of Feminism, 2017), and the movement has created a strong negative connotation for feminism as a whole. Additionally, the recent rise of the #MeToo movement has shown the world that our societal efforts have not yielded acceptable results in the fight against sexual misconduct.

Background/Related Works

There is no universally accepted definition of empathy, nor is there a single school of thought in conceptualizing one. Researchers often examine the concept as an emotional process, others as a cognitive process, and many as both (Dohrenwend, 2018). In 1983, Mark Davis examined the nature of empathy in his publication of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which emphasized the multidimensional, complex, and learned aspects of empathy. Further, a 2016 study involving the EEG measurement of empathy-related neural potentials found that, while various assessments consistently measure women as having higher empathy than men, there is little to no difference in neural activity between men and women under typically empathy-evoking circumstances (Groen, Wijers, Tucha, Althaus, 2013). If these results are generalizable, there may be no biological difference between sexes in empathic potential, suggesting that men are socially conditioned to express their empathic inclinations differently and respond with less empathetic behavior than women. More importantly, this suggests the human potential to learn empathy.

On another note, in the discussion of obstacles to the progress of feminism and increasing awareness for the societal issues that necessitate the movement, one must consider the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses in the United States. Even beyond whether the phenomenon is as prevalent as it is portrayed, it must be considered why the individual case of sexual assault is in fact a feminist issue. Well, aside from the numbers, which indicate that women are more than four times more likely than men to become victims of sexual assault in college (Get Statistics), a number of studies indicate that feminist pursuits may actually help to mitigate the prevalence of sexual assault. For example, Kelly Rossetto studies the idea of “script theory” which claims that “sexual scripts” in society frame the way that people understand what sexuality should be. Rossetto examines whether a feminist shift in family dynamics could redefine these scripts for young people as they transition to college and adulthood, ultimately reducing the frequency of sexual assault. Further, a 2017 study analyzed campus sexual assault policies from a representative set of universities and found that they collectively exhibited significant shortcomings based on feminist models and expectations, particularly the expectation that policy promote the well-being, safety, and rehabilitation of victims (Richards, Branch, Fleury, Kafonek, 2017).

These subjects have been particularly important to me personally, especially since beginning my career at LMU. The beginning of my first classes was followed closely by my introduction to LMU CARES, which first alerted me of the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses. Naturally, moving through college and hearing concerns surrounding Greek life sparks further concern regarding the issue. Finally, my feelings towards this issue escalated to their most intense as I learned about how sexual assault had affected people close to me. Just

as many people fail to see the prevalence of sexual assault in society, many people fail to see the sexism that persists amongst men today. Because we live in what some would call a “sensitive” time, sexists don’t speak their bigoted remarks loudly and freely, but these remarks occur in private. This language behind closed doors reflects the lack of feminist attitudes in society, justifying acts of sexual violence in so many minds and necessitating immediate action.

Another part of my interest is my own introspection as to why I care about this issue. The answer is my empathy. I can’t define it for myself but I know that I feel for other people’s pain. Because of my heightened awareness of the suffering of women, their oppression causes me the most pain, and leads me to question, why do others not feel this same pain? Why have we not made change? Empathy, to me, is the key to living out love. As a student of psychology, I believe in my community’s ability to change the behavior of mankind, to teach attitudes of empathy and love. In order to make tangible change for women, society must promote and instill values of feminism, and empathy may be a useful tool in this change. Therefore, in order to better understand the relationship between these two concepts, I propose the research question: Is there a significant correlation between empathy and feminist attitudes in undergraduate college students?

Method

To answer this questions, I will administer surveys to 250 undergraduate students over two days on the campus of UCLA. The study will be conducted during the month of May after the conclusion of the LMU academic year but before the end of UCLA’s third academic quarter. To assess empathy, I will utilize the Interpersonal Reactivity Scale (IRI; Davis 1983), which is

the most widely used empirical measure of empathy (Ilgunaite, Giromini, & Di Girolamo, 2017). The scores on the IRI will be compared to scores on a short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, Stapp, 1973), which has traditionally been one of the most frequently used measures of attitudes regarding gender in the social sciences (Bailey, Less, 1992). The data from these two assessments will be analyzed using SPSS software to find correlational statistics. Students will be incentivized to participate in this study with a chance to win one of ten \$25 gift cards to Amazon.

Expected Results

Naturally, I am expecting a strong positive correlation between empathy and feminist attitudes, indicating that those with higher empathy hold stronger feminist attitudes. An article explaining these results could be published in any number of gender studies, sociology, or even psychology journals. The work would warrant further, more complex research into empathy's role in feminist issues such as victim blaming, the wage gap, and ongoing debates surrounding reproductive rights. Further, this could lead to experimental research to determine causal factors contributing to both empathy and feminism, whether teaching empathy may cause stronger feminist attitudes, or vice versa.

Conclusion

Promoting feminism is unquestionably essential in the effort to end modern oppression of women. Putting an end to the horrible and all too common tragedy of sexual assault and other such violations of women's human rights starts with examining the current nature of feminist

attitudes in young people. I believe empathy has the potential to play a powerful role in shifting societal attitudes and the way we treat women in the direction of peace and love. While the proposed study is certainly a simple one, it opens up a conversation that may lead to profound changes in the way the people of the United States understand women and equality.

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Budget & Material

- \$250 for ten \$25 Amazon gift card incentives
- \$174 for two nights in a local hotel
- \$60 to print 600 paper assessments (300 IRIs, 300 AWS)
- \$39 for outdoor folding table
- \$36 for advertising poster
- \$25 for lunch for two days
- \$6 for pens

- \$50 for miscellaneous costs
 - Subtotal: \$640
 - Sales Tax (CA): \$42.78
 - Total: \$682.78

Timeline

- Day 1
 - Collect materials
 - Amazon gift cards
 - Printed assessments
 - Advertising poster
 - Folding table
 - Pens
- Day 2
 - Arrive to UCLA campus in the morning to set up
 - Begin data collection
 - Administer surveys
 - Pack up and check into hotel
- Day 3
 - Arrive to UCLA campus in the morning to set up
 - Administer surveys
 - Conclude data collection
 - Pack up and return to hotel

- Day 4
 - Check out of hotel
 - Return home to San Francisco to analyze data