Changes in Dispositional Empathy Over Time in American College Students: A Meta-Analysis

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Background

• Empathy: tendency to react to others’ observed experiences (Davis, 1983)
  - Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI: Davis, 1980)
  - 4 different 7-item subscales, different components of interpersonal sensitivity:
    - Empathic Concern
    - Perspective Taking
    - Fantasy
    - Personal Distress

• High scores on the IRI are related to increased prosociality and decreased antisociality. (e.g. Davis et al., 1999; Oswald, 2003)

Method

Meta-analysis: 72 samples with at least one of the IRI subscales, for a total of 13,737 college students (~63% female)

Procedure:
A literature search was conducted to collect articles citing the original sources of the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

Inclusion Criteria:
To ensure comparability, only data from articles containing the following criteria were used:
- Study had to report the sum or mean from at least one unaltered IRI subscale.
- Participants were undergraduates at conventional 4-year institutions.
- Participants were attending college in the United States.
- Participants were not selected for any specific criteria.
- No experimental conditions impacted IRI scores.
- 5 point Likert scale was used.

We emailed the authors of published articles who met all of the criteria outlined above, but did not report means in their papers.

Data Analysis:
The mean scores were correlated with the year of data collection. Means were weighted by the sample size of each study.

Results:
- We found declines in the Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking on the IRI, but no changes in Fantasy or Personal Distress.
- Results remain consistent when controlling for percentage of sample male.
- The decline appears to be most prominent in post-2000 samples.

Discussion

• Decrease in 2 scales, especially after 2000
  - No decrease in Personal Distress or Fantasy, but these two scales are less central to prototypical understandings of empathy
  - Decreasing empathy is troubling: prosocial (e.g. donating to charity) and antisocial (e.g. aggressive reactivity) correlates
  - Implications: helping behavior, cooperation, and other important real-world dynamics

• Future work:
  Declining in other countries or samples? Causes? Remedies?

Thank You!

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Twenge, J., Konrath, S., Foster, J., Campbell, K., & Bushman, B. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the narcissistic personality inventory. Journal of Personality, 76, 922-962.

Theory & Hypothesis

• Changes in IRI in American college students over time?
  Rising rates of:
  - Narcissism (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008)
  - Individualism (Twenge, 2006)
  - Agentic traits (Twenge, 1997)
  - Self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2001)
  - Positive self-views (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

• Hypothesis: IRI subscale scores have significantly decreased over time, especially Empathic Concern

• Decrease in Personal Distress? NO
  b = -.09, p=.55, k=46

• Decrease in Fantasy? NO
  b = -.19, p=.26, k=37

• Decrease in Perspective Taking? YES
  b = -.27, p=.03, k=64

• Decrease in Empathic Concern? YES
  b = -.38, p=.002, k=66