Research Article

Does A Family Size Have an Effect on Empathy Level?: Filling the Gap in Empathy Literature

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to scrutinize the effect of a number of family members on empathy level. A sample of 67 students in 2-year program in accounting who registered in strategic management course was gathered for data collection. An adjusted version of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was employed to assess empathy level among students. Findings indicated that the average number of students’ family members was 4-5 people. The empathy level of students was reported at a high level (M = 2.85, S.D. = .345). Analysis of linear regression analysis designated that a number of family members could explain 7.1% of variance to empathy level among this group of students. Results also found that a number of family members significantly predicted students’ empathy level (β = .266, p < .05). In conclusion, the more family members a student had, the more empathetic he/she was.

Keywords: Family member, Empathy, Empathy level, Empathetic skill

Introduction:

Empathy is considered as an essential dimension of social reasoning that individuals should possess in order to understand and react flexibly to others’ feelings and emotions leading to enhancing in a strong relationship development between two parties. The term “empathy” derived from the German word “Einfühlung”, which literally means “feeling into” (Wispé, 1987). Empathy alludes to acknowledge others’ emotions and feelings, the roots of these emotional states, and ability to respond in other’s emotional experience without becoming part of it (Keen, 2007).

Empathy has been perceived and considered as an important skill for child’s success (Price-Mitchell, 2017). Some researchers have studied the importance of empathy in children and teenagers for several years and suggested that empathy is the major factor that fosters children’s success (Borba, 2016) and improves relationships in the family (Hanks, 2012). To help children enhance their empathy, family is a key factor that needs to take this responsibility to socialize them to become kinder and more empathize. Development of empathy starts at babyhood through family establishment. Children have been socialized with empathy through love and care of their parents in which fundamental needs of youths are fulfilled and children are given a chance to express their own sensations and feelings (Swick, 2005). Demonstration of empathy in family occurs when family members have emotional attachment to other members (Cabeen, 2017). The existence of empathy in family displays the sense of engagement between family members. Parent or caregivers are responsible for providing a model and direction to other members to make them emotionally recognized the connectedness leading to the development of empathy in a family.

Past research reported the linkage between empathy and social support within family (Paleari, Tangliabue, & Lanz, 2011). Recent research also showed that having siblings can help individuals become more empathetic and generous (Jambon, Madigan, Plamondon, Daniel, & Jenkins, 2018). In addition to people in family who help enhance children’s empathy, school teachers and college instructors can help their challenging students (youths) through the development of empathetic relationships with students’ parents (Venet, 2016). Although the previous research indicated the importance of family support for empathy development in youths, no studies mentioned the effect of the family size on development of empathy in adolescences. The researcher hypothesized that the number of family members should have an impact on individuals’ empathy. If there were too many members in a
family, an individual needs to have more empathy in order to happily get along with other members in their family. With the gap on this research assumption, this present study, therefore, aimed at investigating the effect of a number of family members on empathy level. However, as past research attempted to place an emphasis on children and youths, this study had some difficulty collecting data from children and adolescents as the permission from the caregivers and parentesis required. Instead of gathering data from children, this study paid its attention on undergraduate students in universityto examine the association between family size and empathy level and fill the gap in empathy literature to create a body of knowledge in this field.

**Literature Reviews:**

Lam, Solmeyer, and McHale (2012) scrutinized the development course of empathy in youths from age 7-14 and the within-individual connections between sibling cordiality and conflict and children’s empathy. Data were collected from 201 parents and the two oldest siblings from white and middle income families on three times across two years through a questionnaire. This study controlled some variables such as children’s adolescent status and parental education. Findings revealed that girls increased their empathy during the alteration to adolescence and then declined while boys maintained their lower level of empathy and unchanged. Results of this study underlined gender differences in development of empathy and the unique role of siblings in determining each other’s social-emotional characteristics during puberty.

Stone (2015) conducted a longitudinal study to explore the relationship between communication in the family on empathy development in young children. Three stages of collecting data through questionnaires involved 12-month old children and mothers, 24-month old children and mother, and 36-month old children and mothers. After the third wave completion, additional wave was conducted through the 60-month old and mothers. This study found that family emotional expressiveness predicted empathy in young children through the observation in an empathy-provoking testing. Finding concluded that the greater family emotional expressiveness, the more empathetic children were. The research also described that the correlation between family emotional expressiveness and empathy was based on openness and acceptance in family.

Jambon et al. (2018) studied 452 Canadian families with aged between 18 months and 48 months and their mothers for a period of 18 months to scrutinize the duplex impacts of younger and older siblings on later empathy development. At the beginning of the study, researchers make a visit to children’s homes to evaluate their baseline empathy level by pretending to hurt themselves or break a beloved object. The researchers observed and communicated children’s behaviors and facial expression when they pretended to be distressed or hurt and recorded how children responded. Eighteen months later, they returned to find out how a year and a half of existing with younger sibling and an influence on these children. With the effort of controlling some influential variables such as parenting styles, demographic characteristics, within-child stability in empathic concern, and sibling relationship quality, this study discovered statistically significant increase in empathy after eighteen months. This study also found that both older and younger siblings positively contributed to each other’s empathy over time. This study emphasized the vital role that siblings performed in increasing their development of care and concern for others.

**Methodology:**

This exploratory study gathered data from a sample of 67 students in a two-year program accounting who had taken strategic management class with a researcher using a self-administered questionnaire. An adjusted version of Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) developed by Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, and Levine, (2009) was employed to measure students’ empathetic skill. Students were asked to fill out the questionnaire on the online platform. This modified version of empathy measurement scale contained 16-item of 5-point rating scale ranging from 0 = never to 4 = always. There are eight negative questions needed to conduct a reversed score for data analysis. An adapted version of this scale measurement was conducted a content validity and reliability with Cronbach’s alpha test to ensure the internal consistency of the scale. The alpha score of 0.628 indicated acceptable reliability (Griethuijsen et al., 2014). To scrutinize association between family members and students’ empathetic skill, Pearson correlation and linear regression analysis were used to determine the effect of a number of family members on empathy. Linear regression analysis was appropriate to use for data analysis because two
variables in this study were measured at the continuous level.

Results:

For socio-demographics of respondents, the majority of them was female (88.1%) with the average age of 21.07 years. Findings also reported that the average monthly income of these participants was 3,726.86 THB. For the family members, the minimum of respondents’ family members was 2 whereas the maximum was 11. The average of respondents’ numbers of family members was 4-5 members. To assess students’ level of empathetic skill, descriptive statistics included mean and standard deviation were computed. Results indicated that this group of students had a high empathy level (M = 2.85, S.D. = .345).

Table 1 showed the association between a number of family members and empathy among accounting students using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Results designated the positive significant relationship between a number of family members and empathy (r = .266, p = .029). A number of family members was significantly correlated with empathy in a low level.

Table 1: Correlation Coefficient between a Number of Family Members and Empathy (N=67)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Number of Family Members Correlation Coefficient</td>
<td>.266*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at 0.5 level

To determine whether or not a number of family members had a statistically significant effect on student’s empathetic skill, linear regression analysis was calculated. To make sure the suitable of using linear regression analysis, basic assumptions were tested. Since the sample size of this study was more than 50, Kolmogorov-Smirnov was checked to ensure normality of variables. The value of .200 indicated that the dependent variable of this study was normally distributed. Q-Q plot and Histogram were also checked to determine normality and homogeneity of variance. The plot displayed no significant deviations of residuals from the line and the line was not curved indicating that normality assumption was met (Statistics Solutions, 2019). Table 2 indicated the R value, which represented the simple correlation (R = .266) indicating a low degree of correlation. The R2 value designated how much of the total variation in the dependent variable. In this study, a number of family members could explain 7.1% of variance to empathy among this group of students. Results also found that a number of family members significantly predicted students’ empathy level (β = .266, p <.05). The regression equation was presented as: Empathy = 2.564+.060

Table 2: Linear Regression Analysis of a Number of Family Members on Empathy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficient</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficient</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.564</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>18.792</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Members</td>
<td>.600</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.266</td>
<td>.029*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 67, df = 1, R = .266, R2 = .071, Adjusted R2 = .057

Table 2: Linear Regression Analysis of a Number of Family Members on Empathy

*Significant at 0.5 level, **Significant at 0.01 level.

Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations:

This study aimed at exploring the effect of a number of family members on students’ empathetic skill. Data were collected from 67 students of two-year program in accounting who enrolled in strategic management class through a modified version of Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. Results demonstrated a positive significant relationship between a number of family members and empathy with a low degree of correlation. Analysis of linear regression analysis indicated that a number of family members had an influence on students’ empathy level. The more family members a student had, the more empathetic he/she was. This can be described that an enhancement of students’ empathy is developed through the family socialization including parental socialization and siblings relationships. This finding partly supported previous studies of Lam, Solmeyer, and McHale (2012) and Jambon et al. (2018). Individuals who live in a big family that has an open and emotional communication (Stone, 2015) and social support within family (Paleari, Tangliabue, & Lanz, 2011) learn how to understand and respond to the feelings of other family members, which is the key factor to the development of...
empathy. The most important skill to increase their empathetic skill is active listening skill. It might be interesting to find out whether the role and siblings order of students in their family such as the youngest or the oldest child in family has the effect on empathy level.

As this study focused only on the number of family members as the independent variable to predict empathy level of students, other dependent variables relating to students’ families should be added in a further study in order to extensively explain the effects on empathy development. Moreover, this study placed its emphasis on undergraduate students who aged approximately 20 years old, which might not have represented a robust connection to the development of empathy. Thus, the next study should conduct the replication study with children or adolescences to confirm whether family size plays an important role for empathy development. In addition, the sample size of this study was undersized and needed to be extended for a future research. Also, as the original version of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) reported a high internal consistency, the modified translated version should be revised and assessed convergent and content validity to ensure the quality of instrument as the alpha score of this version was below 0.7.

The university can apply findings of this study into practice by providing a basic knowledge of empathy to students and improving their active listening skill. For those who have a small number of family members, they should be encouraged to learn how to become more empathetic on other people through the teachers’ socialization.

Acknowledgement:

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