

THE DARK SIDE OF PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Rebecca Anne Bloom, Recipient of the UOIT Student Training Assistantship in Research (STAR) Award

Dr. Matthew Shane, Professor, Ph.D., Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,

University of Ontario Institute of Technology Oshawa, ON L1H 7K4 CANADA

ABSTRACT

Most see perspective-taking (PT) positively: those high in PT are thought to be empathetic while those low are often considered shallow and selfish. But is it really the case that perspective-taking always promotes prosocial behavior and concern for others? We sought to evaluate the link between PT and aggression, by seeing how levels of PT would influence aggressive behaviour towards a person who previously served as a source of frustration. Following empathy, psychopathy and personality questionnaires, the participant experienced a frustration manipulation where a confederate acted as a late participant and offered one of two excuses: 1) being in a minor car accident 2) sleeping through an alarm after a long party. The first was to be a reasonable excuse and the other be more frustrating. The participant was told they would have to reschedule because of the confederate. Next, a hot sauce paradigm provided an opportunity for the participant to aggress by giving hot sauces of varying intensities to the confederate. This paradigm has been well validated to evaluate aggressive tendencies in the laboratory (see Ayduk et al., 2008; Lieberman et al., 1999). Research has primarily linked PT with empathy and prosociality (eg. Richardson et al., 1994), however, we predict PT to mediate aggression, hypothesizing that participants higher in PT will aggress more in the bad excuse condition. If supported, this research would suggest that at least in some instances PT may correlate positively with antisocial characteristics.

PURPOSE

The present study sought to identify the relationship between perspective taking and anti-sociality.

Generally speaking, most people consider perspective-taking to be a positive characteristic: people high in perspective-taking are often seen as empathetic and able to consider another person's perspective. People low in perspective-taking are viewed as cold and callous. But is this actually the case? Our research looked to evaluate the possibility that people high in perspective-taking may use this skill in a negative way, thus demonstrating aggressive or antisocial behaviour.

METHODOLOGY/HYPOTHESIS

Following consent, participants completed the following questionnaires which served as our first independent variable and evaluated a variety of personality characteristics, including perspective-taking, empathy and anti-sociality:

- the empathy and perspective taking subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI),
- the Self-report Psychopathy Scale –II (SRPS-II)
- Big Five Aspects Scale (BFAS)
- In-house taste/sensory preferences scale
- Conformity scale
- Demographics questionnaire.

Following completion of the questionnaires, participants were exposed to a frustration-induction manipulation, during which a confederate played the part of a 2nd participant who had arrived late for one of two reasons:

GOOD EXCUSE

In the good excuse condition, the participant claimed to have been in a small car accident

BAD EXCUSE

In the 'bad excuse' condition, the participant claimed to have slept in after a big party the night before

Frustration was induced by telling the participant that because the second person was late, they would be unable to complete the full study today and thus would have to schedule another appointment to complete the study. The type of excuse given served as the other independent variable in the study.

The participant/confederate were moved to the hot sauce portion of the study, where the participant was allowed to choose which hot sauce the other participant would try. Previous research has demonstrated that providing really spicy hot sauce to another person can serve as a form of aggression (Ayduk et al., 2008; Lieberman et al., 1999). By measuring the hotness of the hot sauce chosen along with the amount of hot sauce, we could evaluate the extent to which the participant aggressed against the confederate. The amount of hot sauce given served as the dependent variable of the study.

This study sought to test two hypotheses:

#1: Higher levels of antisocial characteristics would correlate with higher levels of aggression. This could be tested by evaluating the relationship between scores on the anti-sociality questionnaire and the spiciness/amount of hot sauce the participant squeezed out.

#2: Levels of perspective taking would influence this antisocial/aggression correlation, depending on the excuse provided by the late participant, such that participants higher in perspective-taking would aggress more against the late participant in the "bad excuse" condition

RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptive Stats. and Frequencies

# of participants	Excuse Conditions	Avg. Hot Sauce Type	Avg. Hot Sauce Amount	Avg. Other Sauces Amount	Avg. Age	Gender
Sample size of 50 44 valid	Bad: 23 Good: 21	2	4.4950	4.7767	21.9	Female: 28 (63.6%) Male: 16 (36.4%)

Table 2. Summary of Correlations/Cross tabulations/ANOVA

Correlation	r	significance	Summary
HS Amount vs. Mean IRI Perspective Taking	.304	.045	There is a weak, significant, positive relationship between the amount of hot sauce and perspective taking scores. As the amount of perspective taking increases, the amount of the hot sauce given increases.
HS Amount vs. Mean IRI Empathic Concern	-.029	.853	There is not a significant relationship between the amount of hot sauce and empathic concern scores.
HS Type vs. Mean IRI Perspective Taking	.006	.968	There is not a significant relationship between the type of hot sauce and perspective taking scores.
HS Type vs. Mean IRI Empathic Concern	-.190	.216	There is not a significant relationship between the type of hot sauce and empathic concern scores.
HS Type vs. HS Amount	-.145	.347	There is not a significant relationship between the type of hot sauce and the amount of hot sauce.
HS amount vs. Mean Other Sauces Combined	.866	.000	There is a strong, significant, positive relationship between the amount of hot sauce and the amount of other sauces. As the amount of hot sauce increases, the amount of the other sauces also increased.
Crosstab	f	significance	Summary
HS Type vs. Excuse	.582	.870	There is not a significant relationship between the type of hot sauce given by the participant, and the excuse they were previously given.
Two Way ANOVA	f	significance	Summary
HS Type + Excuse + HS Amount	1.953	.083	There was no significant mean differences between the type of hot sauce and the amount of hot sauce given, the type of hot sauce and excuse, and there was no interaction affect. However, there is a significant trend, which could be affected by the N value.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- Results for this study are limited as it is still ongoing and only the first 50 participants were analyzed. Additionally, these results are excluding some of the personality measures, which we hope to look at after more data is collected.

Summary of Results

- With these results, our hypothesis thus far, has not been supported as previously thought. Perspective taking did affect the amount of hot sauce given, showing in a positive relationship. The majority of participants in the bad excuse condition (19/23 or 82%) gave a hot sauce with the spiciness level of 1-3. In only 2 of the bad excuse cases was a level 5 hot sauce given by the participant. This differs from the results of previous literature/past research.
- Perspective taking and empathic concern did not affect the type of hot sauce given by participants. Empathic Concern was also shown to not have a relationship with the amount of hot sauce. Additionally there was no relationship between the type and amount of hot sauce.
- Three other sauces were part of the hot sauce paradigm (BBQ, Spaghetti and Vinaigrette) and those amounts were compared to the amount of hot sauce to ensure that we were not assuming that a large amount of hot sauce implied aggression. People may have poured an equally large amount of the other sauces, so this controlled for that factor. On average, participants gave the same amount of hot sauce as they did for the other three sauce options.

Surprises/Future Considerations

- A section of the script had the confederate state "I do not like anything spicy"; the majority of participants picked up on this subtle detail and mentioned it as they chose a less spicy hot sauce, a demonstration of perspective-taking.
- One of the major surprises when conducting this experiment, was the participants reactions. Regardless of the type of excuse (good or bad), the majority of participants were not bothered with rescheduling. Since they were not overly annoyed, the majority of participants thus gave a less spicy form of hot sauce. Therefore, the aggressor excuse was not extreme enough to get the affect we were looking for, and may have to be altered in future trials of this study.
- Travel time was not taken into consideration originally; those that traveled farther were more annoyed with the rescheduling. Their aggression thus, may not have been a result of the excuse or a reflection on their personality and perspective taking abilities, but a reaction to their long commute.

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