

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

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ABSTRACT

Social emotions like empathy and sympathy are essential tools to help navigate group-oriented and interdependent life structures. These emotions help to regulate group-related behaviour. This exchange is a bilateral process, where it is not just our emotions regulating our social surroundings but our social surroundings also play an essential role in influencing various aspects of emotions. Individuals are a total sum of self and social, all psychological constructs that manifest as an individual will also have a significant influence on both self and society. This study is done by taking unit constructs of both, social (SES socio-economic status) and psychological constructs (social-emotional state: empathy and sympathy). Empathy and sympathy are most often used interchangeably with subtle but prominent differences. This paper tries to maintain the difference and work along the line of those differences to conclude. Available literature suggests that different level of SES influences the extent of empathy and sympathy one possesses. In a population size of 200 adolescents of the age range 12-19 years, n=100 was taken from low SES and n=100 was taken from high SES. The variation in empathy and sympathy levels of the two groups was seen to be significant. The low SES group was found to have high empathy and low sympathy, whereas the high SES had low empathy and high sympathy.

Keywords: *Empathy, Sympathy, Socioeconomic Status (SES), Affective Empathy*

Certain affective states play an important role in mediating social relationships in society. This group of ‘social emotions’, helps group-oriented organisms like humans to mediate and maintain social relationships. As humans started evolving, the relationship between co-species started getting complex. Further down the road, industrialisation and globalisation have resulted in the boundary between in/out-group getting more and more blurry, creating an even more complex societal structure. As a result, social-emotional responses have also evolved with the need to fulfil a certain role in society. The development of complex affective states like empathy and sympathy is essential to develop and maintain social relationships with other co-species. It can either be a deliberate or automatic process, of reacting or resonating with the experience of others (Preston & De Waal, 2002; Esinberg et al., 2014; Singer, 2006).

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Received: June 20, 2023; Revision Received: June 27, 2023; Accepted: June 30, 2023

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

Empathy is an effective response that acknowledges and attempts to understand another's affective state through emotional resonance (Clark, 2010; Sinclair, 2017). It has two major components: a) cognitive perspective-taking and b) affective resonance. Cognitive perspective involves understanding and comprehending another individual's state of mind, whereas affective resonance refers to resonating with another individual's emotional state, i.e., experiencing the same emotions as displayed by another individual (Hoffman, 2001). Sympathy is also an emotional response that perceives the emotions of others (Vossen, et al.,2015). It is also a 'social emotion', as its main function is also establishing and nurturing interpersonal relationships, but sympathy is associated with feelings of guilt and remorse. Sympathy is also correlated with susceptibility to shame after being unable to help (Smith, 1992).

Empathy and sympathy are both affective responses, they are manifested as a result of evaluation of others' state of mind. Both processes need to have a certain level of theory of mind to elicit a response. They also have a common function, to establish and maintain social relationships (Vossen et al.,2015). Despite the similarities in certain components and functions these two affective states have two different neural pathways. Psychology also distinguishes these two emotional states to be two different affective entities (Boston, 2009; Decety & Michalska). Empathy is regarded as an effective response which resonates with another individual's emotional state. This resonance is characterised by emotional congruence, i.e., experiencing the same emotional state as perceived by the other individual, whereas sympathy lacks the component of resonance and emotional congruence. It is instead characterised by responsive feelings of concern, sorrow, remorse and even guilt about another's distressful state (Clark, 2010).

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a sub-component of the social structure of our society, which is used to categorise an individual or group based on their social standing. Socioeconomic status acts as an important element in our society, which determines the segregation of the most prominent group. Determination of SES is done based on the combination of income, occupation etc. In India, there are various ways of determining different SES groups. Officially, the government defines two groups 'BPL'(Below the poverty line) and 'APL'(above the poverty line), the group definitions are based on a certain marginal income of the entire household. According to a recent survey done by PRICE (People Research On India's Consumer Economy), clubbed seven groups according to their annual income. Three prominent ones were a) 'Distitutes', with an annual income of ₹1,25,000; b) Super rich, with an annual income of 2 crores or more and c) Middle class with an annual income between 5 lakhs and 30 lakhs (Shukla, 2022).

Social groups tend to follow a certain emotional pattern which shapes group norms and the individual behaviour of a group member (Van Kleef et al.,2016). Studies have shown how an individual usually takes reference from other group members for emotional expression (Heerdink et al.,2013). Some findings also reflect how group conformity and group acceptance are also based on the cohesion of emotional expression (Heerdink et al., 2013). Along with these, there are several studies which identify the importance of social context in holistic emotional processes. The regularity of emotional patterns is also associated with the level of identification with the group (Van Kleef et al.,2016).

SES being an important component of social division should be an important element in all of the emotional processes such as elicitation, precipitation, identification, and regulation.

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

There are several studies which reflect the importance of the SES of an individual in eliciting social emotions like empathy and sympathy. Individuals from low SES were associated with rate deceleration to a sad video relatively, whereas individuals from High SES exhibited an opposite reaction to the same video (Stellar et al., 2012), physiological response such as deceleration of heart rate as a reaction to the external social stimulus of distressing nature has been associated with physiological construct of empathy (Eisenberg et al. 1990; 1991; 1994; Preston & de Waal, 2001). There are also direct studies that show an association between low SES and high empathy (Kiang, Fulingi and Telzer, 2018). This association has also been evaluated and studied on a neural basis, where the findings were that individuals from high SES had reduced neural activity, in the regions involved with empathic responses, whereas people from low SES showed higher activity in the brain regions associated with empathy (Michael et al., 2015; Kishida et al., 2016). Individuals from low SES were also recorded to have more neural empathic activation to others' pain, this suggests that individuals from low SES are more attuned to others' pain (Telzer et al., 2015; Waytz et al., 2012). Few studies suggest that individuals from high SES had higher levels of self-reported distress during their affective response to other's situations (Michael, 2015; Kucukalsan & Gencoz, 2015) and affective response of distressing nature is categorised as sympathy, whereas empathy is linked with emotional resonance and congruence as the affective response (Sinclair, 2017; Clark, 2010; Preston & de Waal, 2001; Kraus, 2010).

This paper aims to go beyond to fill up gaps in the literature by comprehensively distinguishing between the social affective state of empathy and sympathy and studying the role of socio-economic status on 'affective empathy' and 'sympathy'. The study was purposefully designed to measure and compare only one component of empathy i.e. affective empathy with sympathy. This was done due to the similarity between the initial feature of sympathy and the other components of empathy i.e. cognitive empathy. Both of the states require a level of perceptual understanding of the other's state of mind to activate the response. This means that the theory of mind is an important component both of sympathy and cognitive empathy (Decety & Michalska, 2010). This could also be one of the reasons why empathy and sympathy are confused with each other and often used synonymously.

Objective

To compare the Affective Empathy and Sympathy of two groups from two different Socio-Economic strata (SES).

- **Null Hypothesis(a):** There is no significant difference in Affective Empathy of individuals from Low SES and High SES.
- **Alternate Hypothesis(a):** There is a significant difference in Affective Empathy and b) sympathy between individuals from Low SES and High SES.
- **Null Hypothesis(b):** There is no significant difference in the Sympathy of individuals from Low SES and High SES.
- **Alternate Hypothesis(b):** There is a significant difference in the sympathy of individuals from Low SES and High SES.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Participant

Two hundred healthy adolescents aged between 12-19 years took part in this research. N=100 was belonging to low SES, and N=100 were belonging to high SES. Participants belonging to Low SES were recruited from a government-aided school and NGO-aided school from all over India through purposive sampling.

Participants belonging to high SES were recruited from various sources through a mixture of purposive sampling from a private university and snowball sampling from all over India again.

Two groups were recruited based on their level of socio-economic status, which was based on the findings of a recent survey done by PRICE (People Research on India's Consumer Economy).

The groups were the following:

- Group A: 'Distutites' with an annual income of ₹1,25,000
- Group B: Upper Middle class with annual income between ₹10-30 lakhs (Shukla, 2022).

Occupation, salary, and standard of living were confirmed with the headmistress of both schools before proceeding with the task with the students. For individual participants, not affiliated to those schools, an unstructured interview was taken to make sure of their socio-economic status.

Tools

The measure of Empathy and Sympathy.

'Empathy' and 'sympathy' variables were measured with the help of a scale, 'Adolescent Measure of Empathy and Sympathy (AMES)'. This Scale was developed by Helen G.M. Vossen, Jessica T. Piotrowski and Patti M. Valkenburg. The objective of this scale was to measure sympathy and empathy as two different affective states. Making a clear distinction between elements of emotional coherence. This scale also differentiates between the two components of empathy a) cognitive and b) affective.

The entire scale has 12 items, all items are divided into three constituent sub-scale of affective state, a) cognitive empathy, b) affective empathy and c) sympathy. Each subscale contains 4 items which measure their respective affective state. The questionnaire is in the form of a Likert Scale so the five options given were: 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'Often' and 'always'.

The studies done to test the validity and reliability of AMES suggested that the test was valid and reliable. The test-retest reliability score was $r=.56$ for affective empathy, $r=.66$ for cognitive empathy and $r=.69$ for sympathy.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, proper consent was acquired from the parents, guardians, and headmistresses for participants of age below 18 years. For participants above the age of 18 years, informed consent was acquired from all. Participants were informed that they were allowed to forfeit at any time while performing the research task at hand. It was made sure

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

that none of the participants were under any kind of psychological or physical distress, primarily due to the study, during or after the task. A proper briefing of the study was done for the participants after the data collection. The collection of data was done taking all ethical matters into regard.

After proper measures were taken, participants were instructed to fill up the two sub-scales, from the questionnaire, measuring affective empathy and sympathy. The participants had to read and understand the statements and mark any of the five options available for each item in the sub-scales. No specific time was given to fill up the questionnaire. Participants were advised to thoughtfully fill up the questionnaire and at the same time not to dwell on a single question for too long. They were asked to answer according to their own subjective experience, and a safe space for honest communication was provided during the task. Individual score for affective empathy and sympathy was calculated and recorded separately for two groups. Group A' was taken as the Low SES group and 'B' was taken as the High SES group. The distinction of the group was based on the findings of a recent survey done by PRICE (People Research on India's Consumer Economy). (Shukla, 2022).

SPSS was used as the primary software for further statistical calculations. Before selecting an appropriate statistical tool for Hypothesis testing, descriptive analysis was done. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test were that the samples were not following NPC (Normal probability curve). Therefore, a non-parametric test was deemed appropriate for this particular study, hence Mann-Whitney U test was used for the hypothesis test and mean comparison. As we were working with two sample groups and two dependent variables the tests were run twice for each variable (i.e., affective empathy and sympathy).

RESULTS

First result of the test on affective empathy, with **group A from Low SES** and **group B from High SES**, indicated that there was a significant difference between affective empathy of two groups ($U= 4129, p<0.05$). Group A had a median of 3.25 and group B had a median of 3.00, with $Z = -2.137$.

Table 1. Affective Empathy of Two Groups from Different Socio-Economic Strata.

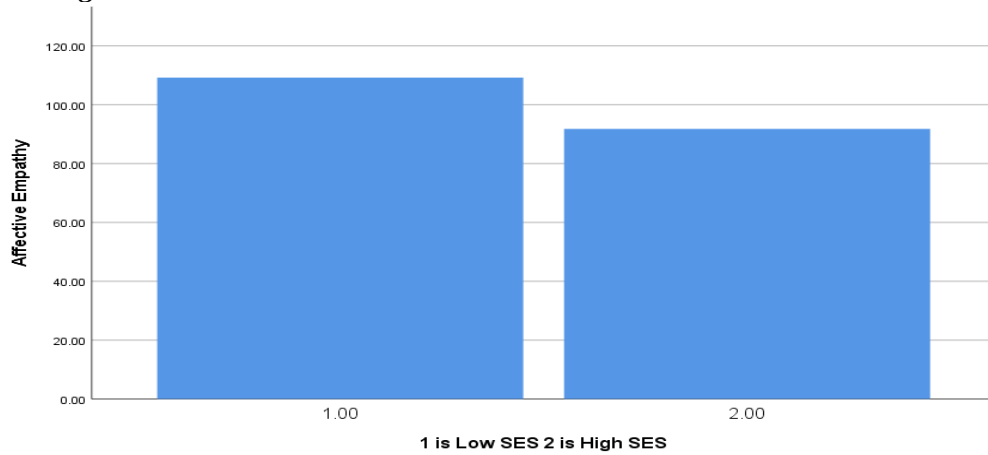
	<i>N</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean Ranking</i>	<i>Mann-Whitney U test</i>	<i>Z score</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig.</i>
Low SES	100	3.25	109.21	4129	-2.137	.033*
High SES	100	3.00	91.79			

Note: The significant differences in the Affective Empathy Score of two groups i.e., Low SES and High SES is represented above along with the comparison of median and mean ranking is the two groups. Where N = no of samples and Asymp. Sig. = asymptotic significance.

* $p<.05$

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

Figure 1. Mean Rank Comparison of Affective Empathy between two groups of Low SES and High SES.



Note: Mean Rank for Affective of Low SES = 109.21 and High SES = 91.79.

Second test was conducted for sympathy, where the results indicated that there was a significant difference between the two mean ranks with ($U=3470.5, p<0.01$). where Group A had a median of **3.875** and Group B had a median of **4.25**, with $Z = -3.765$.

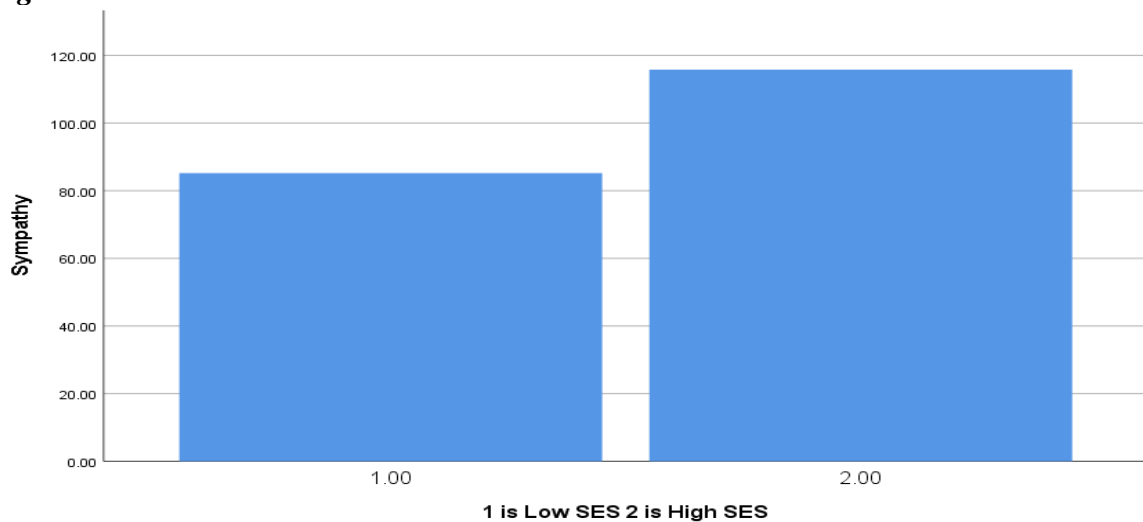
Table 2. Sympathy Of Two Groups from Different Socio-Economic Strata.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mean Ranking</i>	<i>Mann-Whitney U test</i>	<i>Z score</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig.</i>
Low SES	100	3.875	85.21	3470.5	-3.765	.000*
High SES	100	4.250	115.80			

Note: The significant differences in the Sympathy Score of two groups i.e., Low SES and High SES is represented above along with the comparison of median and mean ranking is the two groups. Where N = no of samples and Asymp. Sig. = asymptotic significance.

* $p<.00$

Figure 2. Mean Rank Comparison of Sympathy between two groups of Low SES and High SES



Note: Mean Rank for Sympathy of Low SES = 85.21 and High SES = 115.80.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to measure the subcomponent of empathy ‘affective empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ between two social groups, ‘high socio-economic status (SES)’ and ‘low socio-economic statuses (SES)’. As shown in Table 1. and Table 2., there was a significant difference in the level of affective empathy and sympathy between the participants from low SES and high SES. Furthermore, affective empathy was higher amongst participants from low SES as compared to those from high SES, which is represented in Fig 1, whereas sympathy was higher amongst participants from high SES as compared to low SES as represented in Fig 2. Additionally, sympathy had a significantly larger difference between the sample than affective empathy.

This paper is an attempt to tackle the synonymous outlook towards empathy and sympathy, to distinctly categorise and study them as two different affective states. Sympathy and empathy have two different sets of components and along with that they have two different neural pathways setting them as two different states but due to the similarity between the initial feature of sympathy and empathy i.e., cognitive empathy, the terms are often used synonymously. Empathy and sympathy, both require a level of perceptual understanding of the other’s state of mind to activate response. This means that the theory of mind is an important component for both sympathy and cognitive empathy (Decety & Michalska, 2010) therefore this particular study was conducted on sympathy and the subcomponent of empathy known as affective empathy to forego this initial similarity between the two states.

A functional similarity that both empathy and sympathy share is towards an individual’s social behaviour especially pro-social and altruistic behaviour, which are important components of human morality. These two affective states certainly influence one’s social behaviour. At the same time, like any other psycho-cognitive construct of the mind, the environment has an equal influence on the development of empathy and sympathy. In a way, social influences can be seen as a two-way street. Many studies have been conducted to analyse the influence of social context, where the findings have shown, how the intensity of emotional expression of an individual is affected by social influence (Fernandez-Dol & Ruiz Belda, 1997). Certain studies dedicated to the analysis of cultural influences have also demonstrated influence on the expression of emotions (Ekman, 1971, 1972). Analysis of dyadic level studies how the interaction with other individuals has on one’s emotional process (Van Kleef, 2009). Lastly, the group analysis is all about the effect one’s own in-group has on one’s emotional development, perception, regulation, interpretation and other processes. An emotional pattern in the groups also tends to shape group cohesion, goals etc.

This study extends onto some similar studies but also expands the present work but categorising the componential part of the variables. It is an associative study between a sub-component of social environment i.e. socio-economic strata (SES) and affective states of sympathy and affective empathy. The study explores the relationship between SES and affective states of sympathy and affective empathy by comparing the measure of it in the two groups of different economic strata (Table 1. and Table 2.). Results indicate that participants with high SES have lower affective empathy as compared to low SES (Figure 1.). Some studies have suggested an association of high SES with higher prejudice towards a particular group (Foster et al.,2018). This could be the reason why individuals from high SES might have difficulty resonating with other individual’s emotional states and emotional resonance is an integral part of empathy and what sets apart empathy from sympathy. The presence of this low affective empathy is not the entire summation of an individual from

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

high SES, as it has been seen that people from high SES are more likely to demonstrate pro-social behaviour (Sun et al., 2019), but empathy alone does not have to be the link between pro-social action, there are other affective tools like sympathy which could guide a person towards pro-social behaviour. From this study, there is evidence that there is a presence of higher sympathy amongst high SES (Figure 2.), and this higher sympathy could have an association with such pro-social behaviour. Revelations like this leave future scopes of exploring these multifaceted social emotions and how they facilitate the manifestation of various moral behaviour like pro-social and altruism.

There is a gap in the literature on studies associating SES with affective empathy and sympathy. This study is an effort towards filling up the gap in the literature for a comprehensive understanding of empathy and sympathy as two different constructs and the influence of socioeconomic status on these affective states. In the real world, no behaviour is singularly manifested by one psychological construct, it is always a manifestation of different constructs interacting with each other in various degrees. To study these psychological constructs, we need to work sensitively with the subtle differences between these constructs and their association with other variables. This paper adds to a cross-cultural study of constructs already studied in other cultures. Culture is again an important component of the environment which has a significant role in developing one's psychological constructs. According to one's country and culture, the standard of living is different and socio-economic standard varies according to the country one is in so does its classification, and stability of certain findings regardless of one's culture or country suggest an important role of SES, which again leaves a big scope for future exploration.

This study was limited only to a certain age group (adolescents), which limits the finding to be based only on a specific age group. Another main limitation was the use of AMES (Adolescents Measure of Empathy and Sympathy) to measure the variables of affective empathy and sympathy. The scale has differentiated items for three constructs a) cognitive empathy, b) affective empathy and c) sympathy. The availability of the scale was limited only to the English language, and as the scale was language based and consisted of various statements, which the people had to understand first to subjectively relate to it. This posed to be a great difficulty as certain participants in the sample group were not quite proficient in the English language. Although all measures were taken to verbally explain and translate certain portions, participants were seen to be having difficulty in comprehension, shortcomings regardless of precautions are inevitable. Cultural difference is another limitation that was observed as the scale is based on a Western culture, but this study was conducted in India and there is a drastic difference between the two cultures. It is possible that for certain items participants found it difficult to relate to certain items.

From the limitations, we see that there is also a need to construct effective scales to measure differentiated affective states of empathy and sympathy, specifically catered to study populations from India. The lack of such a reliable scale poses a great difficulty in understanding and studying individuals in India, who have their own unique identity and social constructs. Studies like this are important to understand, how the lack and presence of certain social resources affect the development of empathy and sympathy, which are very valuable assets of an individual. Entire social interaction of various levels intimate levels is directly mediated by such affective tools. After comprehensive understanding, one can understand specific shortcomings for the proper development of empathy and sympathy, and

Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

accordingly, measures can be taken to effectively handle the shortcoming for holistic development by making Individuals more empathetic and sympathetic towards each other.

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Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all of the participants, for being the biggest contributors to this study. I also want to extend the same gratitude to all of my friends Prakriti, Siwani, Supriya, Uden, Rainy, Komal, Osenro and Zuali for helping me in big and small ways not just through this research but the big journey of life. Lastly to my father, Gautam Lama for always supporting my dreams.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Tamang, S. & Basu, A. (2023). Presence of Different Levels of Empathy and Sympathy in Two Groups of Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Strata. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(2), 2767-2776. DIP:18.01.268.20231102, DOI:10.25215/1102.268