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Research Paper

Human-Nature Connectedness: An Anchor for Environmental Predicament

Hashpreet Kaur[1], Adhyatam Singh[1], Pragya Thakur[1]*

ABSTRACT

The ongoing environmental destruction calls for our attention. Climate crisis and loss of biodiversity indicate the failing human-environment relationship. Even after intensive execution of the internationally agreed upon sustainable development goals government-regulated schemes, the situation does not seem to improve. Therefore, recognition of personal responsibility as a prerequisite for attaining these targets is essential. Human connectedness to the natural world can play an essential role in this regard. The current study aims to examine the relationship of empathy and big five personality with one's connectedness to the nature. The study was done on 60 participants in the age range of 20-40 years from India and United Arab Emirates who have been residing there for more than 2 years. Standardised measures of connectedness to nature, empathy, and big five personality were administered to the participants. The results indicated a relationship between connectedness to nature, empathy and agreeableness. No country-level differences were found. The findings provide an insight into an important way to culminate human-nature connectedness at the most personal front. The research provides promising opportunity for further investigation into the area of empathy as a variable amenable to training with a view of increasing connectedness to nature and tackling the current environmental crisis.

Keywords: *Connectedness to Nature, Cognitive Empathy, Affective Empathy, Big Five Personality*

***"Having land and not ruining it is the most beautiful art that anybody could ever want."* – Andy Warhol**

The decline of nature is headed at an unprecedented rate, never experienced before. Reports have shown that human activities have drastically changed the ecosystem, with about 75% of land areas and 85% of wetlands being significantly modified. As a result, nearly 1 million species, out of an estimated 8 million, are at risk of extinction (IPBES, 2019). United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) stated that the maintenance of our current lifestyle equals a utilization of 1.6 Earths and, as a result, our ecosystems are struggling to keep up with these demands.

[1]M.A. in Psychology, DAV College (Affiliated with Panjab University), Chandigarh, India
*Corresponding Author

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Sustainability is the need of the hour. We need to boost the quality of life, sustain the environment without hampering it for the future generations. The biophilia hypothesis by Wilson states that human beings have a natural inclination towards life, nature, and other life-like forms (Wilson, 1986). However, in the prevalent times of urbanisation and modernisation, the emotional engagement with the environment has been dwindling.

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature, the United Arab Emirates has the highest per capita environmental footprint worldwide, predominantly attributable to its unsustainable large-scale projects that began during the 1970s. The environmental challenges encircling the Emiratis include loss of biodiversity, pollution, land degradation, and desertification, amongst others. This points to an urgent need to initiate an action-oriented approach. Given the current situation, reconnecting the individual with the natural world could be a fundamental strategy to tackle the environmental crisis (Tam, 2013).

Dawson (2020), in his study on school children in Dubai, found that their connectedness to nature was essential for several reasons including fulfillment of physical and developmental needs, and appreciation of the natural world. Howell et al. (2011) found that nature connectedness and psychological well-being were positively correlated in a sample of undergraduate Canadian students. Nisbet et al. (2009) found that openness and agreeableness positively correlated with nature-relatedness in a sample of Canadian undergraduates and executives.

Connectedness to Nature

Schultz (2002) described connectedness to nature as the degree to which an individual's cognitive representation of self includes nature. It reflects a sense of belonging and a person's experience of emotional connect with nature (Mayer and Frantz, 2004). Zylstra et al. (2014) described connectedness with nature as a steady state that includes collaborative cognitive, emotional, and experiential traits reflected through consistent attitudes, behaviors, and continued awareness of one's interconnectedness with nature. They prefer the use of the term "connectedness *with* nature" over "connectedness *to* nature" to emphasize the idea that human beings are an inseparable part of nature and instill the notion of reciprocity and mutualism (Zylstra et al. 2014). An individual's attitudes and behaviors toward environmentalism are harmonized to a great extent by nature connectedness (Stern, 2000). Nisbet et al. (2009) used the term *nature relatedness* which incorporates the appreciation and understanding of the interrelationship between humans and other living organisms including a sense of significance of all elements of nature, including those that are not aesthetically pleasing.

Fido & Richardson (2019) found that connectedness to nature positively related to cognitive and affective empathy. In a sample of Canadian undergraduate students, Lee et al. (2015) found that openness to experience and honesty-humility are the key personality correlates of connectedness to nature. Barrera-Hernández et al. (2020) indicated that children who perceived being connected to nature engaged in increased sustainable behavior, which impacted their happiness.

Empathy

Titchner coined the term "empathy" in 1909 as an adaptation of the German word *Einfühlung* (feeling into) (Wispé, 1986). Barnett & Mann (2013) described empathy as a cognitive and affective understanding of another individual's experience that results in an

affective response consistent with the notion that people deserve respect, compassion, and inherent worth.

Rogers (1975) viewed empathy as an "as if" condition where another person's internal frame of reference is accurately perceived. The associated emotional elements and meanings are perceived as one's own, without losing the distinction between the "self" and the "other". It requires paying close attention to the mental and affective states of others, thus making it an essential component of emotional functioning and interpersonal cognition (Carré et al., 2013). Hoffman (2001) recognized the importance of empathy in the field of environmental psychology by emphasizing the difficulty human beings would have faced in survival as a species if we all were bothered solely with ourselves. Empathy for the non-human world would imply recognizing the demands of animals and nature in general, recognizing the significance of their survival, and displaying an interest in their well-being (Lithoxoidou et al., 2017).

Melchers et al. (2016) discovered that the most important determinants of cognitive and affective empathy are agreeableness and conscientiousness, with medium effect sizes for the relationship between empathy and personality in participants residing in China, Germany, Spain, and United States of America. Di Fabio & Bucci (2016) indicated a positive correlation between empathy and connectedness to nature among Italian high school students. Cheng & Monroe (2010) in their study with fourth-grade students in Florida found that connectedness to nature led to enjoyment of nature, empathy for the creatures with a sense of unanimity and responsibility.

Personality

Allport (1937) defined personality as the dynamic organization of the psychophysical systems within the individual that are the determinants of one's unique adjustments to the environment. The distinctive thought processes, feelings, and behavior are reflected through personality traits (Diener & Lucas, 2019). Weinberg & Gould (1999) described personality as the characteristics or combination of characteristics that distinguish a person. Fiske (1949) established a five-factor theory of personality and later it was expanded by other researchers and theorists such as Norman (1967), Smith (1967), Goldberg (1981), and Costa & McCrae (1987). However, Costa & McCrae's Five Factor Model (FFM) (1987) is the most prominent one, that includes factors namely, Openness to experience (O), Extraversion (E), Neuroticism (N), Conscientiousness (C), and Agreeableness (A). Known by the acronym OCEAN, this model provides a full portrait of individual personality. They show considerable reliability, validity and stability throughout adulthood (Costa & McCrae, 1994). Personality is construed in accordance with the five-factor model in diverse cultures using different languages (Church et al., 1997; Angleitner et al., 1990).

Hirish & Dolderman, (2007) found that in a Canadian sample, traits of openness and agreeableness are important determinants of pro-environmental behavior. In a study done by Brick & Lewis (2014) it was found that openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion strongly predicted emission-reducing behaviour in a sample of United States Adults. Wan et al. (2019) found that empathy was strongly correlated with the traits of conscientiousness and agreeableness and negatively correlated with neuroticism in a sample of nurses.

Purpose

To study the relationship of Empathy and the Big Five personality traits with connectedness to nature in residents of India and United Arab Emirates.

Hypothesis

H_1: A significant positive relationship is expected between connectedness to nature and empathy among Indian and UAE residents.

H_2: A significant positive relationship is expected between connectedness to nature and agreeableness among Indian and UAE residents.

H_3: A significant positive relationship is expected between connectedness to nature and conscientiousness among Indian and UAE residents.

H_4: A significant positive relationship is expected between connectedness to nature and openness among Indian and UAE residents.

H_5: A significant positive relationship is expected between connectedness to nature and extraversion among Indian and UAE residents.

H_6: A significant negative relationship is expected between connectedness to nature and neuroticism among Indian and UAE residents.

METHODS

Sample

A sample of 60 individuals (males=15 and females=15 from India; males= 9 and females=21 from UAE) participated in the study. They were between 20 and 40 years old. A majority of them were from Chandigarh, Mohali, and Dubai. Eligibility criteria included participants' ability to understand English language. Moreover, individuals residing in UAE for more than 2 years were eligible to participate in the study.

Measures

The present study relied on following standardized tools to assess key variables:

- **Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS)** was developed by Mayer and Frantz (2004). It is a 14-item questionnaire scored on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher connectedness to nature.
- **Basic Empathy Scale in Adults (BES-A)**, the English version of Basic Empathy Scale developed by Jolliffe & Farrington (2006), was validated by Carre et al. (2013). It is a 20-item scale scored on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) that assess cognitive empathy and affective empathy. A sum of these two components gives a total score, higher the score, higher the empathy.
- **Big Five Inventory (BFI)** was developed by John et al. (1991). The 44-item instrument measures the individual on the Big Five personality traits, that are, Openness to experience, Extraversion, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. Each item is rated on a 5- point Likert scale, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 5 represents strong agreement.

Procedure

The participants were administered standardised psychological tests through google forms. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from each participant. Their responses were kept confidential and anonymous to obtain honest answers and to eliminate chances of social desirability or hesitation.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the N, mean, and standard deviation of the sample

	Comparative group	CNS	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy	Empathy (total)	Extraversion	Agreeablenes s	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
N	India	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	UAE	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Mean	India	54.3	34.8	39.7	74.5	26.0	34.5	31.8	25.6	36.9
	UAE	51.5	34.0	39.1	73.1	26.6	34.6	30.0	23.3	36.4
Standard deviation	India	5.12	4.00	4.78	7.22	5.09	5.27	4.57	4.25	3.42
	UAE	6.92	4.77	5.75	8.29	5.86	5.31	7.13	7.61	5.19

Table 2 shows the t-Statistic

	Group		Statistic	df	p	Mean	SD
CNS	India	Student's t	1.824	58.0	0.073	54.3	5.12
	UAE					51.5	6.92
Cognitive empathy	India	Student's t	0.733	58.0	0.466	34.8	4.00
	UAE					34.0	4.77
Affective empathy	India	Student's t	0.415	58.0	0.679	39.7	4.78
	UAE					39.1	5.75
Empathy (total)	India	Student's t	0.698	58.0	0.488	74.5	7.22
	UAE					73.1	8.29
Extraversion	India	Student's t	-0.471	58.0	0.640	26.0	5.09
	UAE					26.6	5.86

Agreeableness	India	Student's t	-0.122	58.0	0.903	34.5	5.27
	UAE					34.6	5.31
Conscientiousness	India	Student's t	1.143	58.0	0.258	31.8	4.57
	UAE					30.0	7.13
Neuroticism	India	Student's t	1.466	58.0	0.148	23.3	4.25
	UAE					36.9	7.61
Openness	India	Student's t	0.499	58.0	0.619	36.9	3.42
	UAE					36.4	5.19

[a] Levene's test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the assumption of equal variances

Table 3 shows the correlation between Connectedness to Nature, Empathy, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness in the Indian sample

	CNS	**Cognitive empathy**	**Affective empathy**	**Empathy (total)**	**Extraversion**	**Agreeableness**	**Conscientiousness**	**Neuroticism**	**Openness**
CNS	—								
Cognitive empathy	-0.005	—							
Affective empathy	-0.007	0.346	—						
Empathy (total)	-0.007	0.784**	0.854**	—					
Extraversion	0.245	0.079	0.187	0.168	—				
Agreeableness	0.290	0.300	0.013	0.175	-0.052	—			
Conscientiousness	0.152	-0.057	-0.050	-0.065	0.357	0.266	—		
Neuroticism	-0.019	0.030	0.583**	0.403*	-0.187	-0.204	-0.306	—	

Openness	-0.130	0.439 *	0.104	0.313	0.089	0.183	0.050	-0.018	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 4 shows the correlation between Connectedness to Nature, Empathy, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness in the UAE sample

	CNS	**Cognitive empathy**	**Affective empathy**	**Empathy (total)**	**Extraversion**	**Agreeableness**	**Conscientiousness**	**Neuroticism**	**Openness**
CNS	—								
Cognitive empathy	0.453 *	—							
Affective empathy	0.124	0.237	—						
Empathy (total)	0.347	0.739 **	0.829 **	—					
Extraversion	0.184	0.100	-0.225	-0.099	—				
Agreeableness	0.273	0.147	0.266	0.269	0.272	—			
Conscientiousness	0.106	0.150	-0.039	0.059	0.275	0.476 **	—		
Neuroticism	-0.158	0.080	0.191	0.178	-0.331	-0.206	-0.375 *	—	
Openness	0.272	0.218	-0.204	-0.016	0.217	0.458 *	0.378 *	-0.016	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 5 shows the correlation between Connectedness to Nature, Empathy, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness on the Indian and UAE sample

	CNS	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy	Empathy (total)	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
CNS	—								
Cognitive empathy	0.291*	—							
Affective empathy	0.085	0.285*	—						
Empathy (total)	0.222	0.760***	0.840***	—					
Extraversion	0.187	0.084	-0.055	0.010	—				
Agreeableness	0.266*	0.213	0.150	0.222	0.122	—			
Conscientiousness	0.150	0.090	-0.034	0.028	0.288*	0.379**	—		
Neuroticism	-0.067	0.080	0.314*	0.258*	-0.284*	-0.197	-0.317*	—	
Openness	0.151	0.299*	-0.090	0.108	0.164	0.341**	0.286*	-0.004	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

DISCUSSION

The results found out that there is no significant difference between Indian and the UAE sample with respect to Connectedness to Nature, Empathy, and Big Five personality traits. A significant positive correlation was found between Connectedness to Nature and Cognitive Empathy. Therefore, H_1 is accepted. Connectedness to Nature and Agreeableness were positively and significantly correlated in the total sample. Therefore, we accept H_2. A significant positive relationship was found between Neuroticism & Affective Empathy and Openness and Cognitive Empathy. Since no significant relationship emerged between other variables, we reject H_3, H_4, H_5, H_6.

Di Fabio & Kenny (2018) found a significant positive relationship of Connectedness to Nature with Agreeableness and Openness in Italian participants. Neumann et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between personality traits and empathy and found a positively significant relationship between personal distress, a component of affective empathy and

neuroticism in a Chinese sample. Metz (2017) elaborated upon the relationship between nature relatedness, empathy, and narcissism amongst the millennial in which she found a significant positive relationship between empathy and nature relatedness.

Limitations

The present study has some limitations that provides venue for further investigation. Firstly, the sample size is less. This hinders the representativeness of the sample, thus limiting its generalisability. Secondly, owing to time constraint, the data was collected online through google forms based on convenience sampling. Thirdly, the standardised tools used to obtain data were self-reported scale. This may introduce the factor of social desirability and hamper the collection of honest responses. Another potential limitation could be the use of English language in data collection. Research participants might have language fluency issues.

CONCLUSION

The current research studied the relationship of Empathy and Big Five Personality traits with Connectedness to Nature in residents of India and the United Arab Emirates. The study was conducted on 60 participants (India = 30, UAE = 30) in the age range of 20-40 years. Standardized measures of Empathy, Big Five Personality traits, and Connectedness to Nature were administered to the participants. Results suggest that there was no significant difference between the samples from the two countries in regard to the variables. This indicates that lack of direct access to nature or urbanization, as in the case of UAE, does not influence connectedness to nature. A positively significant relationship was discovered between empathy and connectedness to nature among the participants from UAE and also between empathy and neuroticism among the Indian participants. For the purpose of achieving sustainable development goals, one must begin by engaging in the inner development goals, that is, inculcating the quality of empathy since childhood. Environmentalists look upon empathy as a key ingredient for conservation efforts (Tam, 2013). Musitu-Ferrer et al. (2019) discovered how indulgent and authoritative styles of parenting are strong determiners of empathy and connectedness to nature. Thus, empathy training must be emphasised in the familial and educational sphere. The positive relationship between empathy and neuroticism brings to light how emotional engagement in others can hamper one's emotional stability in a collectivistic society. It is in line with the notion of how an individual's irritability, nervousness, and apprehension could exacerbate, owing to their sensitivity to the surroundings, when brought in touch with the harsh realities of nature crisis.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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