Empathy Unleashed: Exploring the Impact of Cultivating Unlimited Empathy Mindset on Engaging in Empathic Effortful Behaviors

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Background and Aims

Empathy is a skill that requires effort to execute, coined "empathic effort"[1].

Mindsets manipulating the motivation to empathize have been used to cultivate the skill[1-2].
- **Unlimited mindset:** the belief that empathy is an unlimited resource
- **Limited mindset:** the belief that empathy is a limited resource

Research Gap: An unlimited mindset has yet to be tested in cognitively taxing scenarios.

Hypothesis: An empathy intervention based on the mindset of unlimited empathy will increase participants' empathic efforts.
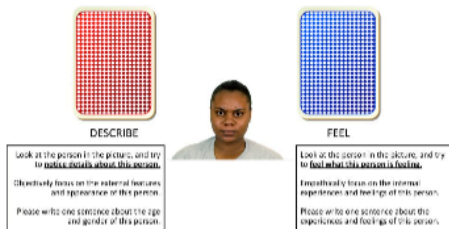
Design Overview

*Not reported in the results
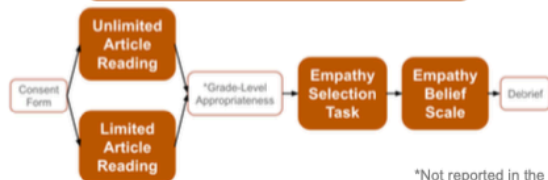
Methods

Participants: UT Austin undergraduate students in the SONA portal ($N = 153$, mean age = 18.74, age range = 18 to 22)
- Randomly assigned to unlimited group ($n = 81$) or limited group ($n = 72$)

Empathy Mindset (Independent Variable): Unlimited vs. limited article reading groups[1]

Empathic Efforts (Dependent Variable): Choose empathy ("FEEL") or non-empathy ("DESCRIBE") over 25 trials in the empathy selection task[3]

DESCRIBE

Look at the person in the picture, and try to notice details about this person.

Objectively focus on the external features and appearance of this person.

Please write one sentence about the age and gender of this person.

FEEL

Look at the person in the picture, and try to feel what this person is feeling.

Empathically focus on the internal experiences and feelings of this person.

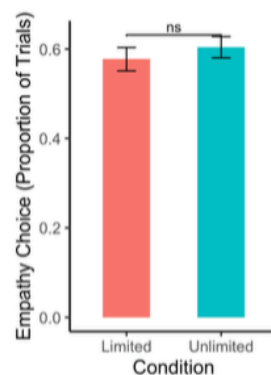Please write one sentence about the experiences and feelings of this person.

Scale of Belief About Empathy (Manipulation Check): A 4-item survey gauging beliefs on unlimited empathy (1–7 scale)
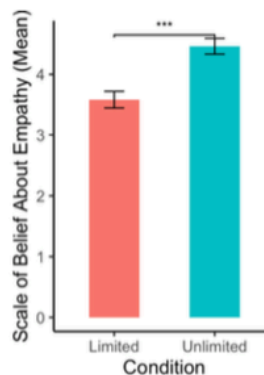
Results

Empathic Efforts

There was no significant difference between unlimited and limited conditions on empathic efforts.

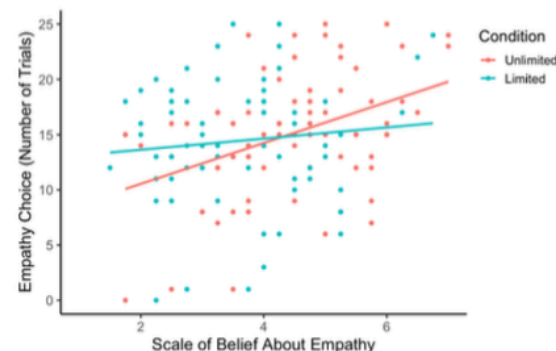*Data = M ± SE,* $^{ns}p = .45$

Scale of Belief About Empathy

There was a significant difference between unlimited and limited conditions on the scale of beliefs about empathy.

Data = M ± SE, $^{***}p < .001$

Scale of Belief About Empathy and Condition vs. Empathy Choices

The interaction of unlimited conditions and highly unlimited empathy beliefs influenced empathy choices.

Unlimited: $b = 1.64$, $p = .06$, limited: $b = .51$, $p = .35$; interaction $p = .07$

Random Effects

There was a greater variation across participants ($SD = 1.02$) than across stimuli (i.e. face on the empathy selection task prompt; $SD = .41$).

Summary

Reading about an unlimited mindset increased beliefs about unlimited empathy. However, contrary to expectations, there was no main effect of the condition: the manipulation did not significantly impact empathic effortful behaviors.

Nevertheless, in the unlimited condition, participants' beliefs about empathy were more strongly related to empathic choices compared to those in the limited condition.

Implications

This is the first study incorporating the unlimited mindset into an empathy intervention, tested in a cognitively taxing context.

It demonstrates the efficacy of the motivated empathy framework, offering a complementary tool and advocating for applicable interventions.

Limitations

Social Desirability Bias: Participants may have exaggerated empathetic beliefs due to societal expectations, affecting the accuracy of responses.

Pre-existing Beliefs and Intervention Impact: Initial empathic beliefs varied, potentially leading to different responses to the intervention.

Cognitive Costs in the Empathy Selection Task: The task's emotional challenge wasn't measured, affecting the reliability of the results.

Statistical Power: The study's limited sample size ($N = 153$ vs. $N = 270$) impacted its ability to detect significant effects on empathy choices[4].

Everyday Empathy vs. Task Realism: The empathy selection task lacks real-life context and identity details, limiting its generalizability to everyday situations.

References:
[1]Schumann et al. (2014)
[2]Hasson et al. (2022)
[3]Cameron et al. (2019)
[4]Edwards (1957)

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