Gratitude, Social Cognition, and Well-Being in Emerging Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

As part of a 5-year longitudinal study on ToM development in emerging adolescents, this cross-sectional study involved 46 Grade 9 students (33 girls, $M=13.5$ years).

Participants completed standardized pencil and paper, self-report measures (self concept, gratitude, self-compassion, empathy, ToM, and perceptions of religiosity and spirituality).

Significant positive correlations were found among adolescents’ perceptions of gratitude, self-competencies, and emotional, spiritual well-being.

Different valenced patterns of associations were found among students’ perceptions of gratitude (appreciation for others and sense of abundance), self-compassion, and existential well-being, spiritual comfort, and omnipresence.

Results support multifaceted, psychocultural approach to studying emotional competence and social behaviour in adolescents.
OBJECTIVE

Describe the individual differences and the connections among young adolescents’ social-cognition (ToM, empathy, self-perceptions), well-being (emotional, spiritual/religious), and gratitude.

Social Cognition ↔ Well-Being

Gratitude?
DEFINITIONS

Higher Order, Interpretive Theory of Mind:

- Ability to label and explain mental and emotional states in self and other; usually emerges between 6 and 8 years of age (Carpendale & Chandler, 1996; Saarni, 1999)

Gratitude

- generalized tendency to recognize beneficence and respond with an emotion of gratitude to the actions of other people's benevolence (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

- “a life orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positive in life” (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, p. 891).

- a moral emotion that is other-praising, and related to other people's or society's welfare (Haidt, 2003).
DEFINITIONS

Moral or Self-conscious Emotions:

- Require:
  1) self-monitoring ability and a personal standard for one’s own behaviour
  2) awareness of social rules (Lewis, 1993)

Self Concept:

- Cognitive organizer consisting of one’s feelings and belief directed toward oneself (Damon & Hart, 1988)

Self Compassion:

- Ability to feel compassion for oneself without judgement (Neff, 2003)
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

ToM, Self, and Well-being in Early Adolescence

- Research shows that perceptions of self-worth and well-being may play a significant role in the development of advanced theory of mind (ToM) during early adolescence (11-14 years of age) (Bosacki, 2016; Devine & Hughes, 2016)

- Moral emotions and reasoning with knowledge about the self may be connected by underlying social, cognitive, moral, and emotional mechanisms but there is little research (Steinberg, 2014, 2015)
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

ToM, Self, Well-Being, and Gratitude

- Lack of research on relations among young adolescents’ social cognitive abilities (ToM, empathy), perceived self-competencies and well-being, and gratitude

- Past research suggests that social cognitive and moral emotional abilities may partially underlie the links between gratitude and personal well being (Otto et al., 2016).

- Religious, spiritual involvement, mindfulness, and gratitude → higher rates of psychological well-being among youth (Bosacki et al., 2017; Longo et al., 2017; McCullough, et al., 2000; Tucker, 2017), $g > b$ (Bosacki et al., 2017)
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Problem

- Lack of research on the gendered, developmental linkages between higher order, ToM and empathy, perceived self-worth and well-being, and perceptions of gratitude in emerging adolescents (Tudge & Freitas, 2018).

- Specifically, more research is needed to explore the social cognitive processes that may influence how young people experience gratitude and well-being (emotional/spiritual) within a school setting.

- Moral reasoning =/= moral and prosocial behavior, well-being/self-knowledge – role of motivation (self/other)?
1) Do individual differences and relations exist among ToM, empathy, self-competencies and well-being, and gratitude in young adolescents?
METHOD

Participants

- 46 mainly Euro-Canadian children from middle SES, semi-rural neighbourhoods (33 girls; 13.5 y)

Procedure

- Participants were group-administered within a school setting
- Measures included paper-and pencil standardized, self-report questionnaires on self-competencies, and well-being, gratitude, ToM, and empathy
MEASURES

1. Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test (GRAT, Watkins et al., 2003)
2. Perceptions of Self-Competencies Scale (PSCS; Harter, 1985)
3. Empathy (Interpersonal Reactivity Index) (IRI, Davis, 1980).
6. Children’s Spiritual Lives (CSL, Moore et al., 2016)
7. Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS; Bufford et al., 1991).
8. Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test 3rd Ed. (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001)
RESULTS

- Descriptive analyses showed 2 significant ($p < .05$) gender differences: $G > B$ in Empathy
  $B > G$ in Physical Well-being

- $G > B$ in ToM, Religious, Existential well-being ($p < .10$)

- $B > G$ in Self-Compassion and Emotional well-being ($p < .10$)

- See Figures 1 & 2
Figure 1: Mean Scores of ToM and Self-Compassion
Figure 2: Mean Well-Being Scores
RESULTS

- A median split was conducted on the ToM and self-compassion means, and participants were grouped into high and low ToM and self-compassion groups.

- Results of 2 X 2 ANCOVAs controlling for social desirability (Self X ToM) revealed adolescents in High ToM/Low Self-Compassion group:
  - reported less feelings of gratitude, religiosity/spirituality, and happiness
  - scored highest on empathy (fantasy)

- 2 (Hi/Low ToM) X 2 (Hi/Low Self-Compassion) ANCOVAs showed:
  - Hi ToM/Hi Self-Compassion group scored highest on gratitude
RESULTS

- Controlling for social desirability, correlational analyses showed a marginally significant positive partial correlation between gratitude (appreciation for others) and emotional well-being ($pr(41) = .303, p = .061$).

- Significant positive correlations were found between self-compassion and gratitude (sense of abundance) ($pr(41) = .439, p = .003$).

- In contrast, significant positive correlations were found between empathy and gratitude (social appreciation) ($pr(41) = .363, p = .017$) and simple appreciation ($pr(41) = .530, p = .000$) but no correlations with a sense of abundance.
RESULTS

- Significant positive correlations were found between self-compassion and self-worth or emotional well-being ($pr(41) = .525, p = .01$) and physical self ($pr(41) = .641, p = .000$)

- Significant positive correlations were found between ToM and gratitude (simple appreciation) ($pr(41) = .343, p = .032$) and total empathy ($pr(41) = .485, p = .003$)

- Significant positive correlations were found between self-compassion and self-worth or emotional well-being ($pr(41) = .525, p = .01$) and physical self ($pr(41) = .641, p = .000$)
RESULTS

- Significant positive (+) correlations between ToM:
  - gratitude (simple appreciation) \( pr(41) = .343, p = .032 \)
  - total empathy \( pr(41) = .485, p = .003 \)

- Significant positive (+) correlations between self-compassion:
  - self-worth or emotional well-being \( pr(41) = .525, p = .01 \)
  - physical self \( pr(41) = .641, p = .000 \)

- In contrast, significant negative (-) correlations between self-compassion:
  - ToM \( pr(41) = -.337, p = .036 \)
  - existentialist \( pr(41) = -.588, p = .000 \)
  - religious orientation \( pr(41) = -.352, p = .026 \)
  - empathy \( pr(41) = -.375, p = .013 \)
In summary, the present results suggest that the participating youth reported that they were happier with themselves, and felt most worthy when they also felt a sense of gratitude (social appreciation), self-compassion, and a spiritual sense rather than a religious or existential orientation.

In contrast, ToM, empathy, religious and existential orientations were negatively (-) related to self-compassion.

ToM and an existentialist orientation positively (+) related to gratitude only in the sense of simple appreciation of everyday pleasures in life available through nature.
DISCUSSION

- Thus, given the negative links between social cognitive abilities and well-being and self-compassion, perhaps how young adolescents think and feel about themselves may not always be applied to how they think and feel about others.

Self =/= other?
CONCLUSIONS

- Results support past research that suggests constructs of social cognition, well-being (emotional and spiritual), and gratitude are multifaceted and complex (Hughes, et al., 2016)

- Youth who scored high on ToM but low in self-compassion experienced less well-being and gratitude.

- Results provide empirical groundwork for curriculum development in the following ways:
  - Personal and social skills areas aimed to promote socioemotional literacy and compassion.
  - A gratitude-focused curriculum aimed to foster emotional well-being, and prosocial, socially responsible goals.
NEW DIRECTIONS

- Examine links between perceived self-worth and ToM particularly regarding the moral or self-conscious emotions (e.g., gratitude, pride, embarrassment, shame, envy)

- Focus on sociocultural factors that may influence social cognition and emotional competence, particularly the role of language (expressive and receptive), gender, and family background (financial/cultural)

- Educational implications include the development of curriculum aimed to foster well-being and prosocial actions through moral and psychological language (self and social)

- Adapt a psychocultural approach to research on the development of children’s social cognition and prosocial behaviours (Bruner, 1996)
NEW DIRECTIONS: Moral Health

- Compassion and ethically-focused growth mind-set and compassionate curriculum, schools (Dweck, 2017) — promote dialogue and cooperation
- Focus on social moral reasoning (ER, decision-making, coping) ↔ prosocial, cooperative behaviour ↔ compassion, respect, humility, integrity
- Promote humble, honest, compassionate, prosocial behaviours via role-modelling and mindful, reflective language and dramatic art activities in the classroom (Bandura’s social learning research – 1968) 50 yrs ago!
- Teachers: ‘Do what I do.’ vs. ‘Do what I say.’
Point to Ponder…

“If you want others to be happy, practise compassion. If you want to be happy, practise compassion.”

(The fourteen Dalai Lama)
Thank you!

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