

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

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

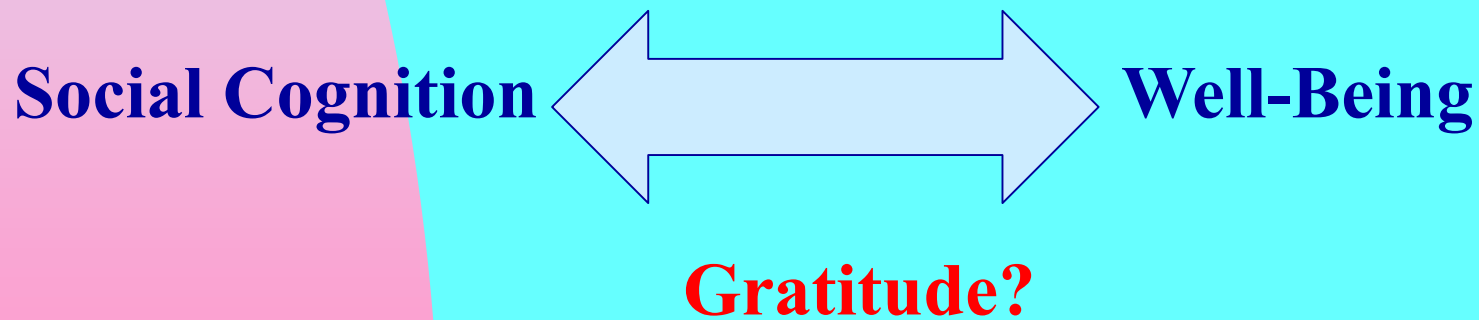
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# ABSTRACT

- 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**



# 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)?**

# RESEARCH QUESTION

- 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**

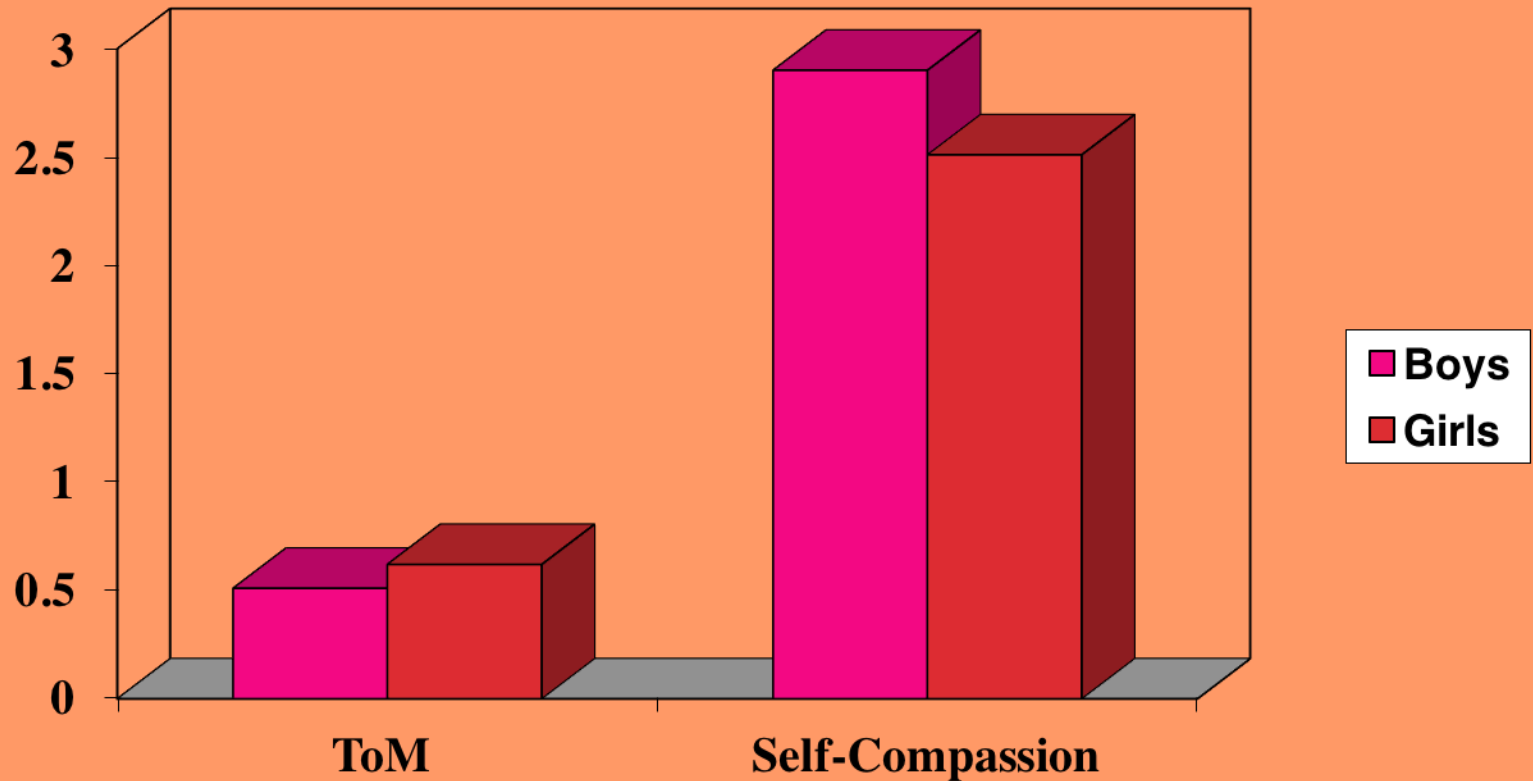
# MEASURES

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).
4. Self-Compassion Short-Form Scale (SCS-SF, Neff, 2003; 2016).
5. Social Desirability (Conway, Gomez-Garibello, Talwar, & Shariff, 2016).
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 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001)

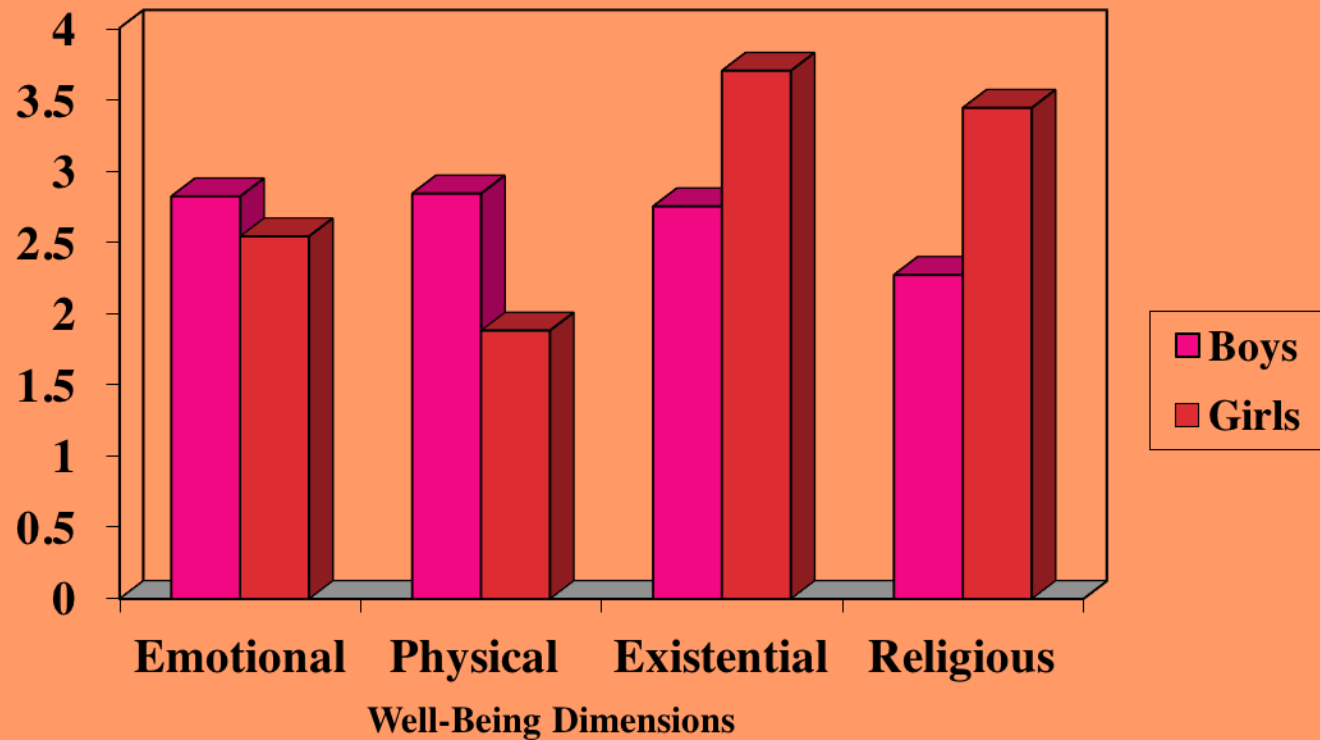
# RESULTS

- **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** ( $pr(41) = -.375, p = .013$ )

# DISCUSSION

- 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  $\neq$  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)  $\leftrightarrow$  **prosocial, cooperative** behaviour  $\leftrightarrow$  **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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