Children’s emotional responses to characters in stories

The emotional responses and choices of characters in stories can be used to analyze children’s emotional responses and choices in the same way. By focusing on the characters’ experiences and how they feel and react, children can learn to identify and understand characters’ emotions and motivations. This helps them to empathize with characters and to make connections between their own experiences and those of others. As a result, children can develop a better understanding of the world around them and become more compassionate and empathetic.

To explore a continuum model of empathy, let’s begin by considering how empathy can develop in young children.

**Empathy in Young Children**

Empathy in young children can be fostered through storytelling, role-playing, and other activities that encourage children to think about and feel the perspectives of others. By engaging in these activities, children can develop a better understanding of the world around them and become more compassionate and empathetic.

**Empathy in Older Children**

As children grow older, they can develop more complex forms of empathy and can begin to understand the perspectives of others in more nuanced ways. By engaging in activities that encourage them to think about and feel the perspectives of others, children can develop a better understanding of the world around them and become more compassionate and empathetic.

**Empathy in Adults**

As adults, we can continue to develop our empathy skills through ongoing education and practice. By engaging in activities that encourage us to think about and feel the perspectives of others, we can become more compassionate and empathetic.

**Empathy in Our Communities**

In our communities, empathy can be fostered through activities that encourage individuals to think about and feel the perspectives of others. By engaging in these activities, we can become more compassionate and empathetic.

**Empathy in Our Society**

As a society, we can continue to develop our empathy skills through ongoing education and practice. By engaging in activities that encourage us to think about and feel the perspectives of others, we can become more compassionate and empathetic.

**Empathy in Our World**

As a world, we can continue to develop our empathy skills through ongoing education and practice. By engaging in activities that encourage us to think about and feel the perspectives of others, we can become more compassionate and empathetic.
Crying to Laugh uses direct address, role-modeling, and theatrically fantastic devices to show youngsters that they should cry and get angry whenever they feel the need to release physical stress. Its story revolves around Mea (Me, the ego), a little girl who lives in a big adult world with its gigantic bed, mirror, and shower. She breaks “the fourth wall” immediately by introducing the audience to her best friend, Shado, her dog (a hand puppet). Yua (You, the superego), her smiling caretaker dressed immaculately in white, fakes his adult superiority on tall, theatrical stilts. When Shado accidentally drowns in his bath (initiating conflict), Yua admonishes Mea not to cry or she won’t grow up big like him (obstacle). However, Mea suffers from aches and pains until her Seluf (her Self, the id), her reflection, enters from a mirror and teaches her how to cry and get angry against Yua’s rules (goal). Seluf shows Mea how stress is like balloons stuffed inside her body which must be popped (solution). When Seluf removes Yua’s stilts (turning point), Mea screams at his hypocrisy (climax), cries, and releases her emotions by popping colorful balloons which fall from above (resolution). She learns that it’s okay to cry and to express herself, despite grown-ups who restrict her emotions and self-expression (theme).

Scenographic effects, inspired by Daniel Castonguay’s original designs (Beauchamp 1992, 16), were intended to induce audiences to imagine and enter into Mea’s fantastical world from her small perspective. A huge brown bed, mirror, and muslin-draped shower were built in proportion against an eight-foot tall Yua for a large proscenium stage (40’ x 31’). Black lines on the pale blue floor and raked platform helped to force a depth of perspective, and clear plastic billowing from the battens clouded Yua’s sterile and stifling environment. Lighting followed Mea’s moods by shifting from stark brightness in Yua’s presence to dimmer light whenever Mea tried to express her inner feelings. New Age music also underscored her emotions with piano and flute themes. Seluf’s yellow and orange jumpsuit, a reflection of Mea’s blue and green jumpsuit, stood out from Yua’s immaculately white suit. During Mea’s catharsis, the stage exploded into more vibrancy with flashing, saturated lights, colored balloons and pillow feathers, and a mirror ball.

Observing Behaviors During Performances

At each school performance, I took running notes of youngsters’ general behaviors from the back of the orchestra or mezzanine by observing and listening to whole group vocal responses. As audience members were seated, they marveled at the unusually large size of the setting. During the play, musical underscoring and lighting shifts seemed to control many group behaviors and moods.
to evaluate children's verbal responses in the group.

Procedures for the Study

Participants were 33 first graders (mean age 7), 27 third graders (mean age 9), 11 boys and 14 girls (gender balanced) from three schools in various socio-economic class neighborhoods. The study was conducted over a period of two weeks, with each child being observed for a single 30-minute session, followed by an interview.
asked how they felt during six situations (i.e., OK/neutral, happy, sad, afraid, angry, surprised, or disgusted), how much (“a lot” or “a little”), and what made them feel that way (i.e., attributions). These chronologically ordered situations were selected from what actors reported as their six most intensely felt emotions during the play. Next, children were asked how targeted characters felt in these situations, how much, and how they knew these emotions to determine salient visual and verbal signs. They also reported their uses of imagination and whether and how they were like each character to determine perceived similarities or identification.

Analyzing Emotional Responses

Transcriptions from audiotaped interviews were coded by three raters for reliability which ranged from 89% to 100%. Responses were scored by the presence and frequency of core categories or themes which emerged from the data for descriptive statistical analysis (Strauss). For example, perceived similarities with characters were scored by the number of various physical, behavioral, emotional, and social traits mentioned.

Attributions for emotions were scored once per situation as either empathy, sympathy, distancing, or no attributions, and then added across the six situations to create respective scores. Using generally accepted definitions from psychology, empathy and sympathy represented reasons recalled from inside the characters’ perspectives, while distancing referred to personal reasons made outside the play’s fiction. No attributions indicated possibly contagious emotions, but the child repeated the situation as stated (e.g., “I felt sad because Mea’s dog died”) or was unable to verbalize reasons for his or her feelings.

Specifically, empathy was defined as identical matches with protagonists’ emotions and spoken reasons for each of the six situations. For example, when Mea’s dog drowned, “I felt sad because she lost her best friend”; or, when Mea saw Yuas stilts, “I was mad because she found out that Yua lied to her.” Sympathy was defined as plausible emotions with reasons different from the targeted characters as the following examples demonstrate:

Personal distress — “I felt sad because Yua didn’t care about Mea’s feelings.”

Projection — “If someone threw my dog away, I would be mad.”

Emotional contagion — “I felt happy because Mea was happy having fun jumping on the bed.”

Role-taking — “If I were Mea and my dog died, I’d be sad.”

Distancing was also defined as plausible emotions, but the child focused on him or herself, the staged event, or outside knowledge as in these examples:

Performance signs — “I felt happy because I laughed at her funny face” or “I felt OK because I knew it was a fake dog.”

Script expectations — “I was surprised because I didn’t think Yua was on stilts” or “I felt OK because I knew Seluf would come out of the mirror eventually.”

Personal associations or experiences — “I was happy because I like jumping on beds” or “I felt sad when my pet died.”

Moral prescriptions — “I was mad because I thought Yua should have buried Shado or taken him to the vet.”

Summarizing Results

Results confirmed other empathy studies by indicating how gender and grade level differences were based on cognitive developmental strategies, socialization, and individual expectations. Though girls had higher scores than boys on the Empathy and Drama Indices, which correlated highly especially with imaginal variables, there were no significant relationships between these scores and attributions or perceived similarities. For example, favorable evaluations of drama skills did not relate directly to uses of role-taking in attributions. In other words, individual personal traits, as measured by these indices, had little bearing on types of emotional and cognitive responses.

Most children (85%) identified actors’ emotions accurately with high intensities by relying on characters’ visual and aural behaviors (53%) more than on their verbalized thoughts (37%). However, most recalled the play’s central scenes and theme more than the actors’ most emotional situations (see Figure 1). In other words, comprehension of the play’s central dramatic events was more memorable than the actors’ interpretations of their most intensely felt experiences. Most children (60% to 74%) said they imagined and perceived themselves as the protagonists, especially Seluf, in this dramatic situation; though a few boys (27%) who imagined or perceived themselves as Yua tended to distance themselves most often.

The special effects and spectacle of the play’s resolution may have distracted young children from identifying the central theme. Just over half (57%) of the first graders (and 71% of the third graders) recalled or inferred either literally, that Mea learned to express her feelings (27%), or abstractly that “It’s OK to cry” (30%). Fifth graders (93%) inferred and applied the play’s theme (e.g., “You should express your feelings”) more than younger children in that they recalled more central actions than incidental activities. Children relied on visual and verbal signs equally when inferring what Mea learned “because Seluf taught Mea to cry.”

As shown in Figure 2, most children (88%) sympathized and distanced
Figure 2. Total percent of children attributing across situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Attribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
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Note: The diagram illustrates the percentage of children attributing across different situations.

References:
more than all boys combined. Similarly, more girls (75%) recalled the play’s obstacle (not to cry) more frequently than boys (50%), and they reported feeling sad more intensely for half of the situations. In contrast, first and third grade boys, in particular, tended to distance themselves more frequently than girls, primarily by associating staged activities with personal desires and by holding expectations about dramatic situations and Yua’s stilts. Third graders marked the developmental gender shift as first grade girls empathized nearly as often as fifth grade boys.

**Interpreting Results**

These results may be explained by performance and social cognitive factors which interacted interdependently to generate high sympathy and distancing and low empathy. If empathy determines subsequent helping behaviors, then empathetic tendencies and sympathetic strategies may have been thwarted and enhanced respectively by audiences’ conventional inability to assist Mea and Seluf directly on stage in this non-participatory production. The uses of direct address and “strange,” non-realistic objects (e.g., dog puppet and stilts) may have weakened empathy further by keeping audience members aware of watching live actors rather than fictive characters. The play’s surprising events, staged activities, and its expressionistic use of stilts, song, and spectacle, combined with the actors’ humorous exhibition of skills, triggered personal expectations or associations from social experience and knowledge.

Gender and age differences resulted from social cognitive factors, perhaps because adults tend to allow girls and younger children to cry more often than boys and older children who are socialized to suppress their emotions and to control themselves. First graders may have had less need to focus on the causes and consequences of Mea’s crying behaviors. Though many first and third grade boys did find that “It’s OK to cry,” girls were more likely to tell an interviewer about their sad feelings to release tension, just as Seluf advised Mea. The inability to express emotions freely and the loss and gain of female friendship figured highly in older girls’ attributions.

As found in my previous studies, children described or interpreted literal actions rather than grasping the symbolic significance behind theatrical signs, even though Crying to Laugh was written and designed from intrinsic metaphors. Few children applied the figurative meanings behind characters’ names and relationships to their own emotional lives. Few recalled how the balloons signified Mea’s physical stress, though Seluf demonstrated this metaphor explicitly; and no one reported that Mea’s balloon popping during the resolution signified her emotional release. Granted, interview questions may not have addressed such symbolic concepts directly, but these findings
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Academic freedom...

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[Signature]

[Date]
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NOTES


2. Unfortunately, I was not able to test another hypothesis that boys might empathize with a male protagonist as much as girls because it was not possible to cast a short male actor from the largely female talent pool.

3. Winner of the 1982 Canadian Chalmers Children’s Play Award, Pleurer pour rire was first produced by Le Théâtre de la Marmaille (now Les Deux Mondes) in Montreal in 1981. La Marmaille toured the play extensively in French and English throughout Canada, Europe, Australia, and the United States until 1988 when rights were released to other producing groups (Beauchamp 1985, 256; Klein 1986).

4. Reliability means how often different raters consistently agree that a respondent’s answer meets the definitions for a particular category. For example, if two people agree on one coding category but a third person disagrees, then reliability for that respondent’s answer would be 66%.

5. Twelve university students (eight women and four men) from a children and drama course answered an analogous questionnaire for this study. For most part, they responded much like fifth graders. However, unlike children, they reported feeling characters’ emotions less intensely, and they sympathized and distanced themselves more often with adult expectations about this children’s play. Only half the women and one man empathized with Mea, significantly less than fifth graders. Most perceived themselves “a little” like Mea because all the men and half the women reported that they did not express their emotions freely. All adults perceived they were like Seluf and most believed they were not like Yua.

WORKS CITED


