

19

Is How Much You Understand Me in Your Head or Mine?

SARA D. HODGES

Despite most people's acknowledgment that the subjective border surrounding another person's mind can only be crossed in science fiction, it is a common belief that if two minds have independently experienced similar events, the "mental landscapes" of those two minds may also resemble each other more. This may in turn allow the two minds to know each other better. Perceivers assume they'll understand another person better if they've had similar experiences, saying things like "I've been in your shoes and know just how you feel"; and the targets of their understanding also express wishes that make the same assumption, such as "I wish I could talk to someone who's been through it."

Given the widespread assumption that having had a similar experience will help one person to understand another, embarking on a program of research that aims to investigate this correlation may seem ill advised: the findings would be replications at best, or potentially dismissed as obvious. However, it turns out that there aren't many studies showing that similar experience really does make people more understanding or empathic. Rarer still is work that examines *how* that similar experience helps, if it does indeed make a difference.

When others have investigated this question, the studies are often in the clinical realm, and they examine similarities between clients and

therapists that sometimes could be considered “similar experience” but are often better described as shared demographic characteristics. Furthermore, even when limited to the highly specific, ritualized set of interpersonal interactions that occur in the context of therapy, the case for similar experience is very weak. An informal qualitative review of this work suggests that the cases where there is no evidence of experience helping outnumber the studies where experience does seem to help (including some fairly poorly designed ones) by about a 3:1 ratio (see Hodges, Klein, Veach, & Villanueva, 2004, for a review of some of these studies).

In some ways, this lack of empirical evidence makes the question of similar experience all the more intriguing, because it adds another question: If there are few studies showing the advantages of similar experience, then what in our everyday experience leads us to think that someone who has “been there too” will be more understanding? In this chapter, I discuss the results of three studies of empathy and shared experience conducted in my lab, from which a still tentative yet interesting picture about the relationship of similar experience to empathy is starting to emerge.

One thing that seems critical in drawing valid conclusions about the effects of similar experience on empathic understanding is to study the kinds of potent life events for which people believe experience makes a difference. The ideal life events would be important and consequential and, at the same time, the kinds of things that some normal people experience every day (and other equally normal people do not). Thus, the life experiences examined in these studies—new motherhood (using a community sample; Hodges et al., 2004), alcoholism (drawing alcoholics from the community and nonalcoholics from a college student sample; Hallinan, 2000) and parental divorce (using a college student sample; Hodges, 2004)—are not the kinds of experiences that can be experimentally manipulated.

The studies had a number of other similar characteristics and used a largely similar methodology. In all three, the “targets” who had had the life experience (either women who were new to motherhood and had very young firstborn infants, male and female alcoholics who were members of Alcoholics Anonymous [AA], or college students of both sexes with divorced parents) talked about their experience while being videotaped. In the new-motherhood and alcoholism studies, targets answered the open-ended questions of an interviewer who was off camera, whereas in the divorce study targets talked about divorce and its effects on children growing up with another student who either also did or did not have divorced parents.

In all three studies, Ickes’s (2001) empathic accuracy paradigm was

used. Targets watched the videotape of themselves and were asked to stop the tape at any point that they remembered having had a thought or feeling. They then recorded the time and the content of the thought or feeling. Additionally, targets in the new-motherhood study completed a set of questions measuring new mothers' adjustment toward their new role—for example, whether they ever felt disappointed or proud (Warner, Appleby, Whitton, & Faragher, 1997). Targets in the divorce study completed a parallel questionnaire assessing their attitudes and beliefs about their parents' divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), as well as rating their emotions after talking about parental divorce.

The videotapes were then shown to "perceiver" subjects. In the new-motherhood study, perceivers fell into three categories: women who were new first-time mothers of infants, women who were pregnant with their first child, and women who had never been pregnant or raised a child. The three groups of perceivers were roughly similar in terms of age and educational level. In the alcoholism study, perceivers were either self-admitted alcoholics drawn from the same community AA groups as the targets or college students who self-reported that they were not alcoholics. In the divorce study, all participants served as both perceivers and targets, with each student in a pair getting a chance both to talk about their experiences *and* to try to understand their partner's experience.

As the perceivers watched the targets' videos, the experimenter stopped the tapes at the same places that the targets had reported having thoughts and feelings, at which point the perceivers were asked to guess the content of the targets' thoughts and feelings. Perceivers in the new-motherhood and divorce studies were also asked to guess how targets would respond to questionnaires about their respective experiences (as well as to guess how the target felt emotionally about the discussion in the divorce study). Participants in the new-motherhood study, who, as in the alcoholism study, never actually interacted in person with the targets, were asked to write a letter to the target whose video they watched, responding to her experiences, and these letters were later coded by the researchers. Perceivers wrote letters to targets in the alcoholism study, but these letters were only read by the targets.

The three studies also included a third phase during which targets evaluated the perceivers' empathy. Targets coded how accurately the perceivers inferred their thoughts and feelings, read the letters in the new-motherhood and alcoholism studies, and then answered questions about how well they thought the perceivers understood them.

Despite the similarities, the three studies differed in several notable ways. As previously mentioned, targets and perceivers played uniquely different roles and never met face-to-face in the new-motherhood and alcoholism studies, whereas in the divorce study participants had a chance

to converse in the first part of the study and both did exactly the same tasks in parallel, rather than one being designated “target” and the other “perceiver.”

Perceivers both with and without similar experiences were drawn from the same general population as targets in the new-motherhood and divorce studies, and thus both kinds of perceivers and targets resembled each other closely on many demographic dimensions. In contrast, in the alcoholism study, “experienced” perceivers came from the same source as targets (local AA chapters) and represented the demographic diversity of such groups, but nonalcoholics (those without the life experience) were drawn from a college student sample and were generally younger than the targets and much less diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and a variety of other variables.

Finally, the three life experiences (new motherhood, alcoholism, and parental divorce) differed markedly in the valence of emotions and attributions generally associated with them. Although all of these life experiences would clearly spark a whole range of emotions, with the particular mix of emotions varying widely across individual cases, the birth of a new child is stereotypically considered a joyous event, whereas the divorce of one’s parents or admitting alcoholism is generally thought to be negative, causing pain and sadness. Furthermore, although the last two events share a negative emotional valence, children are generally not considered responsible for their parents’ divorce (although convincing children of divorce that they are not to blame is often a challenge), whereas alcoholics are often held accountable for their role in abusing alcohol (a judgment that is contested by many).

Despite the differences, there was one clear and strikingly similar result across the three studies: an utter lack of evidence that shared experience improved empathic accuracy. We used three different groups of perceivers in the new-motherhood study, two different kinds of perceivers in the alcoholism study, and two different kinds of dyads in the divorce study (that is, matched pairs in which both participants had divorced parents and unmatched pairs in which only one participant had divorced parents), and collected four different measures of empathic accuracy (detailed below). Across this range of results, perceivers who themselves had experienced the life events that the targets described did no better at getting inside the targets’ heads than perceivers who had not had these experiences.

First among the results, there were no significant differences in “experienced” perceivers’ ability to infer retrospective thoughts and feelings using Ickes’s empathic accuracy paradigm, which utilizes objective coders to rate the accuracy of the perceivers’ inferences about the targets’ thoughts and feelings. Second, using a new variation on Ickes’s method,

in all three of the studies we asked the targets themselves to read over the perceivers' inferences and rate them for accuracy. Although targets were generally more generous in their accuracy ratings than the objective coders, their ratings resembled the coders' in that they rated perceivers with and without the experiences as achieving about the same level of accuracy.

As a third measure of accuracy, in the new-motherhood and divorced studies, we examined how well perceivers could guess how the target would respond to scales designed to measure adjustment to these serious life events. New mothers were not significantly more accurate at guessing how other new mothers would respond to the Maternal Attitudes Questionnaire (Warner et al., 1997) when compared to pregnant women or nonmothers (although the trend was at least in the predicted direction for this measure). College students whose parents were divorced were no better than college students whose parents had stayed together at guessing how other students with divorced parents would respond to a questionnaire assessing reactions to divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). As a fourth and final measure of accuracy, in the divorce study we asked perceivers to guess how the targets felt after the discussion of how divorce affects children growing up, using a series of emotion adjectives. Once again, "experienced" perceivers—that is, college students who been through divorce—were no better than inexperienced perceivers at guessing the emotional impact of these discussions on other students who had been through divorce.

Of course, finding no difference between groups constitutes null results, raising the specter that the findings are due to a lack of power. Although distinguishing whether one is dealing with a true case of no difference or merely insufficient power to demonstrate a difference is challenging, we think there are a number of factors pointing toward the former. Consider first that, of all the measures of empathic accuracy (eight different scores collected using four different methods across three studies), the only one for which the means were even in the right direction was perceivers' guesses about how targets would answer the maternal attitudes questionnaire. The scores from Ickes's traditional empathic accuracy paradigm in the alcoholism study were quite strongly trending in the direction that gave nonexperienced (i.e., nonalcoholic) perceivers the edge. If anything, more power in this study would have resulted in a statistically significant advantage for perceivers who had no personal experience being alcoholics!

Even more important, although sample sizes in two of the studies (20 targets and 60 perceivers in the new-motherhood study and 58 pairs of students in the divorce study) were not huge, they were large enough to show some differences between experienced and nonexperienced

perceivers on the other measures of empathic response that we collected. The results for empathic concern (i.e., feelings of tenderness, caring, and sympathy toward the other person; see Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997), as contrasted with accurately taking someone's perspective, revealed very interesting patterns. In the new-motherhood study, the empathic concern results produced a nice (and statistically significant) stairstep pattern: the more similar the life experience, the more empathic concern perceivers expressed for new-mother targets. New-mother perceivers reported greater empathic concern for targets than pregnant perceivers, who in turn reported greater empathic concern than never-pregnant perceivers.

However, this pattern was reversed for empathic accuracy results in the divorce study. Here, it was participants who did not have the experience (those whose parents were not divorced) who reported feeling the greatest empathic concern for targets whose parents are divorced. The group that expressed the least empathic concern for their discussion partners were the participants whose own parents were divorced but who talked with another participant whose parents were not divorced. (Of course, it could be pointed out that perhaps these participants showed less empathic concern because their partners did not need any—i.e., why work up any concern for someone whose parents stayed together?) The pairs of participants who both had divorced parents showed levels of empathic concern that were in between, but not significantly different from, either of the two extremes found in the unmatched pairs (which were significantly different from each other).

Finally, although experienced perceivers showed no differences on accuracy measures, they were perceived by the targets as differing from inexperienced perceivers. One critical piece of the puzzle that we were interested in examining in the new-motherhood and divorce studies was whether the targets of empathy felt better understood when they interacted with someone who had had the same experience as them.¹ The answer appears to be yes, as long as the targets *knew* that the perceiver had had the experience. In the divorce study, this was virtually always the case. Even though participants were not directly instructed to share their own status regarding parental divorce, in all but two of the dyads this information was revealed in the course of the conversation about divorce.²

In the new-motherhood study, perceived understanding was presumably based largely on what perceivers said in the letters they wrote to the targets, given that targets and perceivers never interacted face-to-face. At first glance, the pattern of results for how much targets felt understood appeared to mirror the stairstep results found for empathic concern: the more relevant experience that perceivers had, the more tar-

gets reported feeling understood (i.e., targets felt most understood by new-mother perceivers and least understood by women who had never been pregnant or raised a child). However, closer examination revealed that this result was moderated by whether new-mother perceivers also revealed that they were new mothers in their letters. When they did, they were seen as the most understanding of perceivers, but when they didn't reveal that they, too, were mothers, they were rated among the least understanding. For the other two groups of perceivers (pregnant and never-pregnant), revealing one's status had little effect.

Thus, without revealing their special status, new-mother perceivers were not perceived as any more understanding than the other kinds of perceivers. Furthermore, in coding the letters on various dimensions, we found few differences in content among the three groups of perceivers. Similar quantities of advice, compliments, and encouragement were provided by all letter writers.³ Thus, although all perceivers were largely telling targets the same things in their letters, the targets appeared to interpret the content of the letters differently, depending upon whether the writer reported having had the relevant experience or not.

A related result was also seen in the divorce study, further supporting the idea that a perceiver's response can be viewed differently by the target, depending on what the target thinks the perceiver's experience is. Among target participants who had divorced parents, their partner's reported level of empathic concern differentially predicted how understood the target felt, depending on whether the partner had divorced parents or not. When both participants had divorced parents, greater levels of reported empathic concern on the part of perceivers was associated with the target feeling more understood. However, when divorced target participants interacted with partners whose parents were *not* divorced, these targets reported feeling *less* understood when their partners reported feeling greater empathic concern. The results suggest interacting with someone who feels sorry for you is only comforting when (you think) that person is in the same boat as you. Otherwise, the other person's sympathy can actually hurt the interaction.

Thus, it would appear that shared experience has a greater impact on how the *target* of empathy views the interaction than it does on the behavior of the person trying to be empathic (the perceiver). Experience doesn't make perceivers any more empathically accurate, and it doesn't consistently boost their empathic concern for others who have had the same experience ("experienced" perceivers expressed more empathic concern in the new-motherhood study but not in the divorce study or alcoholism study). Finally, as best we can tell, the effect that experience has on the levels of empathic concern that perceivers report appears to depend on the type of experience that is shared.⁴

The only empathic outcome that was consistently improved by having had a similar experience was the degree to which the target of empathy felt understood. However, our hunch is that a good part of this perceived understanding was driven not by actual differences in the behavior of “experienced” and “inexperienced” perceivers but instead by the targets seeing the perceivers’ behavior through different eyes, depending on whether they believed the perceiver had had the experience or not. In other words, the same behavior on the part of the perceivers may be interpreted differently by targets, depending on whether it’s coming from someone who has “been there too” or someone who “has no clue.” Specifically, partners in the divorce study who expressed greater empathic concern were seen as more understanding only if it was known that they had shared the target’s experience. Similarly, in the new-motherhood study, we know that the letters written by the perceivers were the same in terms of length, positivity, and the amount of advice they contained, regardless of which kind of perceiver wrote them. However, the writers of these letters were rated as more understanding when they mentioned in their letter that they had a similar experience: output that was roughly equivalent in objective terms appears to communicate greater understanding if it comes from someone who has had the experience.

It is notable that in the parental divorce study, where everyone was both target and perceiver, almost everyone provided information about their status regarding this experience, often because they were asked by the other participant. In the new-motherhood study, where revealing this information was entirely up to the perceivers, only about half the perceivers chose to do so. We can tentatively conclude that getting information about shared experience status is more important to targets than revealing such information is to perceivers.

The results of these studies suggest that knowledge of the other person’s similar experience has at least as much (if not greater) influence on the *target* of empathy as the actual experience has on the empathic response of the perceiver. Whereas past research has mostly focused on the *perceiver’s* empathic accuracy and empathic concern in social interactions, the present research on similar experience reminds us that the alignment between the two minds that characterizes empathy goes both ways.

What are the practical applications of these findings? First, and obviously, there appear to be sizable benefits in letting other people know when you have had similar life experiences. This should come as no surprise to social psychologists—who have known for years about the importance of similarity in creating positive social regard (Byrne, 1961)—or presidential candidates—who spin their upbringing a dozen ways in

order to always be able to claim that they have come from the same background as their constituents. Given that the benefit seems to come largely from simply being perceived as having had a similar experience, unaccompanied by other apparent changes in behavior, if ethical concerns are set aside, there may well be advantages to merely claiming to have had a particular life experience.

Future research may identify moderators that can change the general conclusions that we have drawn from these three studies. One possible moderator is valence of experience. We found that shared experience increased the perceiver's empathic concern when the experience was new motherhood (generally considered a positive experience) but not when the experience was parental divorce (generally considered a negative experience). Does valence of experience consistently moderate empathic concern results in this way? Another variable that may affect results is whether the experience is something people are seen as having brought on themselves (e.g., alcoholism) or something that happens to them (e.g., parental divorce).

In addition, there may be other circumstances not covered by these three studies which *do* produce consistent effects of experience on accuracy and other measures of empathy. Our participants had very constrained interactions with each other (limited to about 5 minutes in the divorce study and limited to non-face-to-face communication in the other two studies). Less structured and more extensive interactions may produce different results. For example, with more in-depth interactions, the wisdom that comes with experience may start to pay off in terms of empathic accuracy. Another possibility is that, with more contact, *other* measures of empathic response will grow to look more like accuracy does under limited contact—that is, these measures will also be leveled. For example, empathy targets may come to revise their initial assumption that “experienced” perceivers understand them better; perceivers may start to feel levels of empathic concern that are based on the details of the target's story (and how the target tells that story) rather than simply on whether the target has had an experience or not.

Perhaps most importantly, future research needs to consider both the actual and the perceived range of variation in the experience. Shared experience may have more powerful effects when the experience is thought to be one that is the same across people, whereas these effects may be dampened for experiences that are thought to vary greatly from person to person (e.g., one's first plane ride). Additionally, it may matter whether people can clearly agree whether they have both had a particular life experience or not. For some experiences, such as being the victim of abuse, two individuals may not agree that they have had a common

experience (e.g., what one person may think is spousal abuse may be considered a normal part of marriage to another person). In the case of new motherhood and parental divorce, agreement is likely to be higher, but even with experiences such as these, where the distinction between those who “have” and those who “have not” is clear, the range of participants’ supposedly “similar” experiences was striking. New-motherhood experiences in our study ranged from the newly single mother who discovered she was unexpectedly pregnant right after she and her husband had decided to divorce to the woman whose new-motherhood experience came right out of fairy tale, finding that a desired and planned pregnancy brought her even closer to the husband she already adored. Divorce tales included a touchingly dazed college freshman whose parents (married for over 20 years) told him during the fall term of his first year of college that they were divorcing, but also a student whose parents divorced before she was born and who acquired a much beloved stepfather in her preschool years. Both experiences were different from the several targets who experienced a lot of parental fighting before seeing their parents divorce in their early teens.

With such variations, we might very well be able to find someone in the group of students with still-married parents who had more in common with each of these two examples than the two had in common with one another. In other words, variation within a particular experience category—at least for some life experiences—may be as great as or greater than the variation across categories of experience. I would argue further that the level of within-category variation may have a greater effect on the empathic perceiver than the target of empathy. Why? Because only the perceiver has to face the “other minds” problem; the target of empathy does not. When people find themselves trying to know what is going through another person’s mind, they can’t directly comprehend his or her subjective experience. They have to try to construct a mind from a set of incomplete and sometimes fuzzy clues. One possible resource for filling in the blanks is “self” experience—one’s own experience (Dawes, 1990; Hodges, Johnsen, & Scott, 2002). Thus, we might expect that variations in selves will carry over into variations in comprehension of the other.

However, when someone is the target of empathy, he or she can just skip the problem of trying to comprehend the ever elusive “other mind” (although people who are particularly attributionally complex, highly neurotic, or fascinated by social psychology are probably unable to do this!). A target can simply look within and ask, “Do I feel understood?” In answering this question, people may consult shared beliefs or expectations, such as the (apparently!) ingrained idea in our culture that shared

experience makes others more understanding. Another possibility, one that I think merits future research, is that targets may give the benefit of the doubt to someone else who has had a similar experience because that experience makes that person a member of the target's ingroup.

In sum, I started out with what I thought was a simple, easy-to-answer question: Does experience affect empathy? The attempts by my colleagues and me to answer this question have yielded results that are surprising, inconsistent, and incomplete. Our only solace is that researchers like us who have explored this tricky domain will *surely* understand our frustration and fascination!

NOTES

1. There were no significant differences in perceived understanding (or empathic concern) in the alcoholism study, quite conceivably due to small sample sizes. Interestingly (and consistent with the results that follow in this section), the alcoholic targets rated the alcoholic perceivers as (nonsignificantly) most understanding overall.
2. The revelation tended to come sooner rather than later as well. In 25% of the dyads, both participants had shared their parental divorce status in the first 12 seconds of the interaction, and 30 seconds into the interaction both participants had revealed their status in 50% of the dyads. There were only two dyads (both pairs of males) in which both participants did not reveal their status. In one, the interaction took the form of one participant with divorced parents revealing this information fairly early on and the other participant (who never stated that his parents weren't divorced) asking questions about the first participant's experience. In the only other dyad, neither participant revealed their parental divorce status early on. Even after one finally did, the conversation continued to be among the most—if not *the* most—awkward and stilted in the entire study, in which conversations were generally smooth and animated.
3. Where differences occurred, they centered around numbers of comments about how similar or different the perceiver was to the target, which often included the revelation of one's own motherhood status (e.g., "I believe when I have my first child I will be completely frazzled," or "[My baby] is almost sleeping through the night"). Interestingly, new-mother perceivers made notably more comments about both how similar to, *and* different from, the targets they were.
4. Dan Batson and colleagues (1996) have also examined the relationship between experience and empathic concern and found an interesting sex difference: women, but not men, reported greater empathic concern with shared experience. Similarly, in the new-motherhood study (involving only female participants), we also found experience producing greater empathic concern. In the divorce study, neither men nor women showed greater empathic concern with experience.

REFERENCES

- Batson, C. D., Early, S., & Salvarani, G. (1997). Perspective taking: Imagining how another feels versus imagining how you would feel. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 751–758.
- Batson, D. C., Sympson, S. C., Hindman, J. L., Decruz, P., Todd, R. M., Weeks, J. L., et al. (1996). “I’ve been there, too”: Effect on empathy of prior experience with a need. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 471–482.
- Byrne, D. (1961). Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62, 711–715.
- Dawes, R. M. (1990). The potential nonfalsity of the false consensus effect. In R. M. Hogarth (Ed.), *Insights in decision making: A tribute to Hillel J. Einhorn* (pp. 171–199). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hallinan, B. (2000). *Experience, empathic accuracy, and alcoholism*. Unpublished honors thesis, University of Oregon, Eugene.
- Hodges, S. D. (2004, January). You just can’t understand: Shared experience and parental divorce. In J. A. Simpson (Chair), *The perils of accuracy and inaccuracy in relationships and social interactions*. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology, Austin, TX.
- Hodges, S. D., Johnsen, A. T., & Scott, N. S. (2002). You’re like me, no matter what you say: Self projection in self-other comparisons. *Psychologica Belgica*, 42, 101–112.
- Hodges, S. D., Klein, K. J. K., Veach, D., & Villanueva, B. R. (2004). *Giving birth to empathy: The effects of similar experience on empathic accuracy, empathic concern, and perceived empathy*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Oregon, Eugene.
- Ickes, W. (2001). Measuring empathic accuracy. In J. A. Hall & F. J. Bernieri (Eds.), *Interpersonal sensitivity: Theory and measurement* (pp. 211–241). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Laumann-Billings, L., & Emery, R. E. (2000). Distress among young adults from divorced families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14, 671–687.
- Warner, R., Appleby, L., Whitton, A., & Faragher, B. (1997). Attitudes toward motherhood in postnatal depression: Development of the Maternal Attitudes Questionnaire. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 43, 351–358.