

Empathy as an Antecedent of Social Justice Attitudes and Perceptions

Matthew Cartabuke, James W. Westerman, Jacqueline Z. Bergman, Brian G. Whitaker, Jennifer Westerman & Rafik I. Beekun

Journal of Business Ethics

ISSN 0167-4544

J Bus Ethics

DOI 10.1007/s10551-017-3677-1



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science+Business Media B.V.. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The final publication is available at link.springer.com".

Empathy as an Antecedent of Social Justice Attitudes and Perceptions

Matthew Cartabuke² · James W. Westerman² · Jacqueline Z. Bergman² · Brian G. Whitaker¹ · Jennifer Westerman¹ · Rafik I. Beekun³

Received: 19 September 2016 / Accepted: 23 August 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2017

Abstract At the same time that social justice concerns are on the rise on college campuses, empathy levels among US college students are falling (Konrath et al. 2016). Social injustice resulting from organizational decisions and actions causes profound and unnecessary human suffering, and research to understand antecedents to these decisions and actions lacks attention. Empathy represents a potential tool and critical skill for organizational decision-makers, with empirical evidence linking empathy to moral recognition of ethical situations and greater breadth of understanding of stakeholder impact and improved financial success. This study explores the potential relationship between empathy and social justice, using a multifaceted operationalization of social justice, which includes management actions (corporate social responsibility and socially responsible attitudes) and social sympathies

(distributive justice in US society and agreement with the goals of Occupy Wall Street). Results broadly support the positive empathy and social justice relationship and suggest higher education interventions to develop empathy in college business students.

Keywords Empathy · Social justice · Higher education · Business · Ethical behavior

In the wake of the financial collapse of 2008, many questions have arisen regarding whether contemporary business practices are ethically and socially just. Business leaders have been criticized for lacking compassion and not expressing remorse for the post-crash havoc that was created at both individual and societal levels. This perceived violation of social justice by business leaders has resulted in worldwide social justice movements like Occupy Wall Street, minimum wage protests, and enhanced concerns about excessive CEO pay (Milkovich et al. 2011, pp. 480–481). Market failures caused by externalities and information asymmetries have resulted in significant involuntary burdens and immense social injustice worldwide, including the tobacco industry's decades-long intentional withholding of safety information from consumers and regulators in the USA, the toxic residue of Texaco's operations in Ecuador, and the Gulf of Mexico BP disaster which devastated ecosystems in addition to the health and welfare of communities and small businesses. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a lack of justice in the internal and external distribution of the social costs of doing business, and the burden of such costs is being disproportionately borne by consumers and society (Christensen and Grinder 2001).

✉ James W. Westerman
westermanjw@appstate.edu

Matthew Cartabuke
matt.cartabuke@gmail.com

Jacqueline Z. Bergman
bergmanjz@appstate.edu

Brian G. Whitaker
whitakerbg@appstate.edu

Jennifer Westerman
westermanjh@appstate.edu

Rafik I. Beekun
rafikb@unr.edu

¹ Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608-2089, USA

² Department of Management, Appalachian State University, ASU Box 32089, Boone, NC 28608-2089, USA

³ Managerial Sciences Department, College of Business, University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89557-0206, USA

There exists a need to enhance sensitivity toward social justice among firms, their managers, and employees and to reflect such sensitivity in policy and practice. Empathy may represent a powerful tool in this regard, defined as a positive moral emotion that effectively broadens reasoning and perspective-taking (Pizarro 2000; Pizarro and Salovey 2002), and promotes interpersonal relationships (Hoffman 1990; Tangney 1991). It is through a compassionate concern for others that individuals are better able to reason and evaluate the adverse effects of their possible actions and decisions (Tangney and Dearing 2002), and make more informed and more ethical decisions to benefit the entire organization (Mencl and May 2009). President Obama may have been insightful in this regard in his appointment of Sonia Sotomayor as a US Supreme Court Justice. Obama discussed the current “empathy deficit” and that he wanted to choose a judge “with that quality of empathy, of understanding and identifying with people’s hopes and struggles” (Szalavitz 2009). The implication is that President Obama recognized that influential decision-makers need to possess empathetic qualities.

Research supports the potential of empathy to enhance social justice, as empathy has been linked to altruism and enhanced levels of prosocial and ethical behavior and decision-making (Batson et al. 1981; Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Mencl and May 2009; Toi and Batson 1982). However, there remains a significant gap in the literature—research has not specifically examined empathy as a potential tool to enhance social justice. Further, as empathy levels have been on the decline among US college students (Konrath et al. 2016), an examination of the relationship between empathy and social justice attitudes in our future business leaders (i.e., university students) is much needed. Thus, we must improve our understanding of the antecedents of social justice attitudes in order to provide the necessary guidance to firms in terms of the selection and training of our future business leaders. This research directly engages this question by empirically investigating the relationships between individual empathy and social justice attitudes, perceptions, and outcomes of university students.

Social Justice

Social justice broadly refers to enhancing equity at a societal level. There are a wide range of definitions of social justice which take different forms based on one’s political, socioeconomic, and/or religious philosophy. As such, there is no universally accepted definition of social justice (Helmy 2013). However, when viewed from the lens of business and society, we see development of the modern concept of social justice as follows. It emerged

during the 1840s in Britain and France as industrialization began to take hold (Barry 2005). Injustices committed by employers against their employees were questioned, as were inequalities among social classes. Some of the fundamental principles of society were challenged; the idea of social justice emerged that suggested that society could be changed at its very core to become more equitable to all (Barry 2005). Early conceptualizations of social justice described it as the equitable distribution of opportunities, rights, and resources meant to correct systemic problems in major social institutions, including the business sector (Miller 1979). Rawls (2001) later expanded the definition of social justice to include the social contract and the obligation of nation states to ameliorate the plight of the least fortunate or disadvantaged.

Contemporary explanations of social justice focus on equity in society and attempting to reform institutions that are inherently unfair or biased. Social justice involves enhancing and restoring fairness for disadvantaged groups, including victims of ethical, environmental, and/or human rights violations. The critical role of social justice in business and society today is summarized in the work of Hofrichter (1993), who noted “justice is about social transformation directed toward meeting human need and enhancing the quality of life—economic equality, health care, shelter, human rights, species preservation and democracy—using resources sustainably” (pp. 4–5). These assertions are reflected by on-the-ground, applied community grassroots struggles for social, economic, and environmental equity (Leff 2000). These on-the-ground social justice movements include the campaign of the Ogoni people of Nigeria against Shell Oil, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa (Rowell 1996); the women-led Chipko movement in India protecting forestry (Guha 1989); the struggle of the Brazilian rubber tappers, led by Chico Mendes, which initially centered on trade union rights (Hecht and Cockburn 1990); and the Zapatista revolt in Chiapas which focused on land reform (Weinberg 2000). These struggles trace their roots to local circumstances of oppression and grew to engage wider environmental and economic justice issues (Hopwood et al. 2005).

Social justice is important and beneficial to society, as it attempts to correct broad issues including inequitable distribution of wealth, barriers to economic mobility, the erosion of safety nets and equal opportunity, and environmental degradation that disproportionately effects certain groups and can lead to political and economic instability. As noted by Stiglitz (2002), “The purpose of economic activity is to increase the well-being of individuals, and economic structures that are able to do so are more desirable than those that do not.” (p. 1) Stiglitz (2002) further notes that beyond economic efficiency concerns what is also at stake is the survival of a meaningful political

democracy, which necessitates the promotion of equitable, sustainable, and democratic development “...that promotes societal well-being and conforms to basic principles of social justice” (p. 27). Cross-national research by Easterly (2007) provides economic support for this contention, indicating that greater inequality suppresses economic growth. Social justice has the characteristics of a movement or force directed toward relieving the suffering of people, enhancing fairness and equity, and having the effect of greater societal and political stability—outcomes which should be broadly desirable in both higher education and management decision-making from both ethical and practical viewpoints.

Empathy

The ability to empathize with others may begin with infants as young as 18 h showing some responsiveness to other infants' distress (Martin and Clark 1982). As children reach the preschool years, significant development in empathy occurs, and these early dispositions toward empathy seem to be relatively consistent and stable over one's childhood (Eisenberg et al. 1999; Knafo et al. 2008). This ability to empathize seems to develop with contributions from both biologically and environmentally based factors. Research indicates these factors include genetics, facial mimicry and imitation, child temperament, parenting factors such as warmth and parent-child synchrony, the rise of online media and technology reducing interpersonal contact, and increasing expectations for success enhancing competitive over cooperative behaviors (Konrath et al. 2016). Empathy is important, particularly in adulthood, for motivating prosocial behavior toward others, including complying with social rules, engaging in altruistic behavior, and it facilitates the development of social competence and enhances the quality of meaningful relationships (McDonald and Messinger 2011). In contrast, empathy deficits have been linked to psychopathy (Blair 2007) and autism (Baron-Cohen 2004).

As noted previously, the role of empathy as a potential tool in enhancing social justice represents a profound gap or oversight in the business ethics literature. The literature indicates that the presence of empathy enhances one's moral recognition of an ethical situation (Vetlesen 1994), which leads to a greater awareness of the broader ethical implications and impacts on others of one's decision-making. This should be unsurprising in that empathy involves perspective-taking, valuing others, and an ability to react to another's emotional response with congruent feelings (Damon 1988; Batson et al. 1995; Hodges and Myers 2007).

To illustrate the power of empathy as a research construct in a business setting, Mencl and May (2009) found that empathy was significantly and directly related to principle-based evaluation of the circumstances (concern for the welfare of others) and enhanced moral intention in decision-making in a sample of human resource managers. Interestingly, the relationship between empathy and utilitarian evaluation was non-significant, indicating that managers who empathize were more concerned with responsibilities toward others than cost-benefit analysis. Their results indicate that the degree to which individuals take others' perspectives in reacting to events, the more likely they are to consider their responsibilities toward others and form highly ethical intentions that are more informed and likely to benefit the entire organization.

Research has also established empathy as an antecedent to a wide range of important social justice-related outcomes including altruism, prosocial behavior, and emotional intelligence (Batson et al. 1981; Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Toi and Batson 1982). Experimental research conducted by Batson et al. (1981) and Toi and Batson (1982) indicates that empathy induces an altruistic motivation to help, care for, and assist others. Empathy has also been associated with general prosocial behavior, defined as voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another (or society). Eisenberg and Miller (1987), using a variety of experimental induction procedures and manipulations, found positive relationships between empathy and prosocial behavior. In an examination of empathy and its relationship to emotional intelligence, Schutte et al. (2001) found that those individuals who scored higher on emotional intelligence also had higher scores on empathetic perspective-taking and self-monitoring in social situations, suggesting that empathy is also a component of emotional intelligence. Empathy leads to an individual placing higher value on the welfare of those in need, and those higher on empathy tend to be more altruistic and demonstrate enhanced levels of prosocial and ethical decision-making and behavior.

The concern for others demonstrated in the preceding review of the literature on empathy provides unique promise for its utility in predicting social justice attitudes and perceptions. The relationship between empathy and altruism indicates that those who are highly empathetic will be selfless, more likely to value others and help them, more likely to see a need for change, and perhaps embrace social justice issues. Conversely, less empathetic individuals will not be as concerned with social justice issues because they cannot easily identify or relate to others' perspectives or situations. If empathy leads to prosocial behavior, individuals higher on empathy may be more interested in promoting social justice, as social justice itself represents a form of prosocial behavior, and they will likely desire to

address inequalities that exist in society. Finally, social justice can also be considered an intrinsic component of the stakeholder model of ethical behavior (Freeman 1984). Empathetic business leaders may be more likely to model ethical decisions reflecting broader stakeholder profiles and engage in ethical behaviors that are more consistent with social justice issues. Further, if empathy is an antecedent for ethically and socially responsible behavior, this would underscore the importance of the potential for empathy as a selection tool and training opportunity for future business leaders, who may function as agents of social justice.

Although the preceding review of the literature suggests a positive relationship between empathy and social justice, research has not yet examined this. We address this gap in the literature by investigating the relationships between individual empathy and two paths of social justice perceptions: (1) management actions and (2) social sympathies.

Empathy and Social Justice

As noted previously, social justice is a broad construct without a universally accepted definition or measurement instrument. However, the core elements include a broader concern for society and the environment, and a desire for equity in meeting human needs and enhancing quality of life. To address the breadth of the construct of social justice, we utilize two broad conceptualizations (and related measures) in this manuscript. First we characterize as social justice-related *management actions* in regard to perceptions of what businesses and managers “should” do. As agents of an organization, managers and employees possess attitudes and make decisions in regard to the organization’s role in a broader society. We use corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a measure of individual perceptions of what business “should” do, as it is a multidimensional construct encompassing a firm’s ethical commitment to society, employees, customers, and the government. This framework understands the role of corporations as socially responsible actors and extends the definition of stakeholders beyond investors to include workers and the environment, for example. Due to their fundamental concern for others, we suggest that more empathetic individuals will express more positive attitudes and greater expectations for CSR.

Hypothesis 1 Empathy will have a positive relationship with attitudes toward corporate social responsibility.

We also examine socially responsible attitudes (SRA) as a proxy for perceptions of what managers “should” do. The socially responsible attitude scale is designed to discriminate between individuals with high or low socially

responsible behavior in managerial decision-making in regard to expanded stakeholder groups (Turker 2009). In other words, it discriminates between those who are willing to take responsibility for their actions and accept the consequences of their behavior, which may range beyond an explicit focus on firm owners and investors, and those who do not assent to an expanded definition of stakeholders. Those who are concerned with social justice are likely to feel a stronger sense of obligation toward disadvantaged groups, a stronger understanding of how their actions affect such groups, and a desire for their actions to affect these groups in a positive manner. We expect that more empathetic individuals will report more positive socially responsible attitudes.

Hypothesis 2 Empathy will have a positive relationship with socially responsible attitudes.

The second broad conceptualization of social justice that we utilize for the manuscript refers to *social sympathies*. This construct examines perceptions of justice in environments where businesses operate. We use two approaches to assess such perceptions (1) beliefs regarding the distributive justice of US policies and (2) attitudes toward the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Distributive justice is concerned with the interactions among people with respect to rights, positions, powers, and other benefits, and the desire that all of these are equitably distributed among all people. Social justice is related to distributive justice in that such actions work to confront and attempt to correct inequity in the distribution of rights and powers. When one makes a justice determination, one assesses how an alternative situation would have felt. The easier it is to imagine a more positive alternative to one’s situation, the more likely the discrepancy will cause distress and lead to attempts at corrective action (Folger and Cropanzano 2001). As a result, one must perceive deprivation or unfairness as the first step in activating any social justice-related action. We assert that individuals who are higher in empathy are likely to be more sensitive to the plight of others and thus are more likely to perceive inequities in how rights and powers are currently distributed in our society. We therefore hypothesize that there will be a negative relationship between empathy and distributive justice, as those who are more empathetic will likely perceive less equity in the current distribution of rights and benefits within society.

Hypothesis 3 Empathy will have a negative relationship with perceptions of distributive justice.

Occupy Wall Street is a social justice movement, the goal of which is to correct the perceived income gap between rich and poor. Their slogan, “we are the 99%,” represents the fact that the top 1% of the population in the

world controls half of the world's wealth (OXFAM 2014). Therefore, they are trying to promote equity by bringing attention to the need to reduce the current income gap. We hypothesize that more empathetic individuals will express *social sympathy* or support for this social justice group, and perceive the goals of Occupy Wall Street more favorably.

Hypothesis 4 Empathy will have a positive relationship with support for the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The participants in this study were 432 undergraduate students at a comprehensive state university in the southeastern USA. The sample was composed of students registered in classes taught by faculty in the business, psychology, and sustainable development departments (ranging from sophomore to senior undergraduate-level courses). Forty-eight class sections were used in the sample. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no extra credit was provided. Participants completed a survey, administered by a third party during class time, consisting of demographic information and several inventories representing the independent and dependent variables. The mean age of the sample was 21.4 years with a range of 18–47 years and consisted of 194 males (44.9%), 216 females (50%), and 22 participants who did not indicate gender.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Social Justice We used four different measures to more effectively assess attitudes toward and perceptions of the broad construct of social justice, the *management actions* orientation of CSR and SRA, and the *social sympathies* of perceptions of distributive justice and OWS.

Attitudes toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) Student attitudes toward corporate social responsibility were assessed using the corporate social responsibility subscale developed by Turker (2009). Students answered eight questions on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Items included “a company should contribute to campaigns and projects that promote the well-being of the society” and “a company should implement special programs to minimize its negative impact on the natural environment.” Scores

were summed, and higher scores reflected enhanced attitudes toward corporate social responsibility ($\alpha = .78$).

Socially responsible attitudes (SRA) Socially responsible attitudes were measured using three items from the socially responsible attitudes scale developed by Hunt et al. (1990), which focused on one's views on social responsibility in the practice of management. Students answered questions on a 1–9 Likert scale, ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 9 = “strongly agree.” A sample item included “a manager must occasionally place the interests of society over the interests of the company.” Scores were summed, and higher scores reflect more positive attitudes toward social responsibility. Cronbach's alpha for the measure was .60.

Distributive Justice of US Policy Outcomes This measure utilized the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2011) OECD comparative social justice data, which represent a comprehensive data source for social justice-related activities in the world's most developed free market democracies. We assessed student perceptions of the fairness of US policy with regard to these social justice issues. Students were asked to rate “the fairness or unfairness of the outcomes listed below in terms of how they are currently distributed in American society,” and specifically rated poverty prevention, labor market inclusion, access to education, access to health care, social cohesion and non-discrimination, and intergenerational justice on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “very unfair” to “very fair.” Using this scale, higher summed ratings indicate perceptions of greater social justice fairness in US society. Cronbach's alpha for the mean score measure was .81.

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) sympathies The OWS movement represents a US social justice effort that was created in the midst of this generation's coming-of-age, and has received a great deal of attention from the mass media. As a result, it is likely to be a well-known applied example of a social justice movement. Thus, to examine a more proximal measure of social justice, the authors created a measure to examine sympathies toward the OWS movement. The measure listed the goals of OWS as stated on their Web site and asked students to rate on a five-point Likert scale their responses to the following statements “I sympathize with the Occupy Wall Street movement” and “I agree with the goals of the Occupy Wall Street movement.” Higher scores on this scale indicated more support for the OWS movement ($\alpha = .73$).

Independent Variable

Empathy

To assess individual empathy, we used the measure developed by Davis (1980, p. 85). This scale of empathy has shown acceptable levels of reliability and validity. Students answered seven questions on a 1–5 Likert scale, ranging from 1 = “does not describe me well” to 5 = “describes me well.” Items included “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me” and “Sometimes I don’t feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.” Cronbach’s alpha for the mean score measure was .77.

Control variables

We controlled for parental income (SES) and amount of student cumulative part-time work experience in this study to remove the potential effects of a student’s upbringing in a privileged socio-economic background and/or lack of work experience in regard to social justice attitudes. Prior research indicates that length of work experience is positively associated with concern for others (Arlow 1991), and that more affluent individuals express greater entitlement attitudes (Piff et al. 2012) and oppose policies that support low-income citizens (Callahan and Cha 2013). SES was measured using a self-report categorical variable with five responses on the latest yearly combined income of one’s parents, ranging from “less than \$25,000” to “greater than \$200,000.” Work experience was measured using self-report open response to “average hours of work per week” that a student devoted to an employment situation. We also controlled for gender, as it has shown significant relationships with social justice in prior research. For example, Zuniga et al. (2005) found that women tend to hold values more consistent with social justice. Further, Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) conducted a meta-analysis examining gender differences in the various measures of empathy and found gender differences in self-report scales.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on all scales as a preliminary analysis to demonstrate the empirical distinctiveness of our measures. In order to ensure model stability and identification, we formed parcels based on items within each subscale that should be expected to share meaningful covariance with each other (Hall et al. 1999; Williams and O’Boyle 2008). Three parcels each

were formed for empathy, distributive justice, and corporate social responsibility. We created two parcels for the social responsibility scales, and we let the two items pertaining to Occupy Wall Street serve as indicators of its respective construct rather than form parcels from these items. The CFA, performed in AMOS (Arbuckle 2006) using maximum likelihood estimation, indicated positive and significant factor loadings and demonstrated a high degree of simple structure, acceptable reliabilities, and adequate fit indices ($\chi^2(64) = 204.56$, $p < .001$; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .08; SRMR = .07). Given this support for the hypothesized measurement model and the divergent validity of the measures, we proceeded to hypothesis testing.

Empathy and Social Justice Variables

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated on ratings of empathy across students, by academic discipline. The analysis was not significant, $F(2, 429) = 1.42$, $p = .181$. Since empathy levels did not differ by academic discipline, the entire student sample was considered.

Table 1 presents bivariate correlations, means, standards deviations, and internal consistency for all study variables. Our hypotheses were tested using AMOS (Arbuckle 2006) and SPSS (IBM Corp. 2013). A path model was fitted to simultaneously test Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4; these predicted that empathy would be positively related to Occupy Wall Street, corporate social responsibility, and socially responsible attitudes and negatively related to perceptions of distributive justice.

AMOS (Arbuckle 2006) was used to fit the model to the covariance matrix, which resulted in acceptable fit as evidenced by fit indices; $\chi^2(6) = 37.56$, $p < .05$; CFI = .95; NNFI = .95; RMSEA = .07. Standardized paths are presented in Fig. 1, and 95% confidence intervals for standardized coefficients are included in Fig. 1 for focal variables in the model.

As shown in Fig. 1, controlling for previous employment, gender, and parent’s income, empathy was a significant predictor of OWS sympathies accounting for 12.32% of the variance, ($\beta = .35$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Using the same control variables, empathy was a significant predictor of attitudes toward corporate social responsibility accounting for 11.45% of the variance ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Empathy significantly predicted holding socially responsible attitudes, accounting for 3.8% of the variance ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$) when controlling for previous employment, gender, and parent’s income, lending support for Hypothesis 3. Empathy also had a significant negative relationship with perceptions of distributive justice accounting for 4.52% of the variance ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$) when controlling for

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables

Study variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Empathy	27.36	4.33	(.77)						
2. OWS sympathies	6.87	2.21	.35**	(.85)					
3. CSR	33.76	4.71	.35**	.41**	(.87)				
4. SRA	20.08	4.66	.23**	.40**	.44**	(.60)			
5. Distributive Justice	2.85	.78	-.26**	-.52**	-.35**	-.37**	(.79)		
6. SES	3.82	1.02	-.11**	-.19**	-.17**	-.09	.16**	(-)	
7. Work experience	.95	.22	.01	.11*	.10*	.15**	.00	.04	(-)

Reliabilities reported in parentheses, where applicable. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

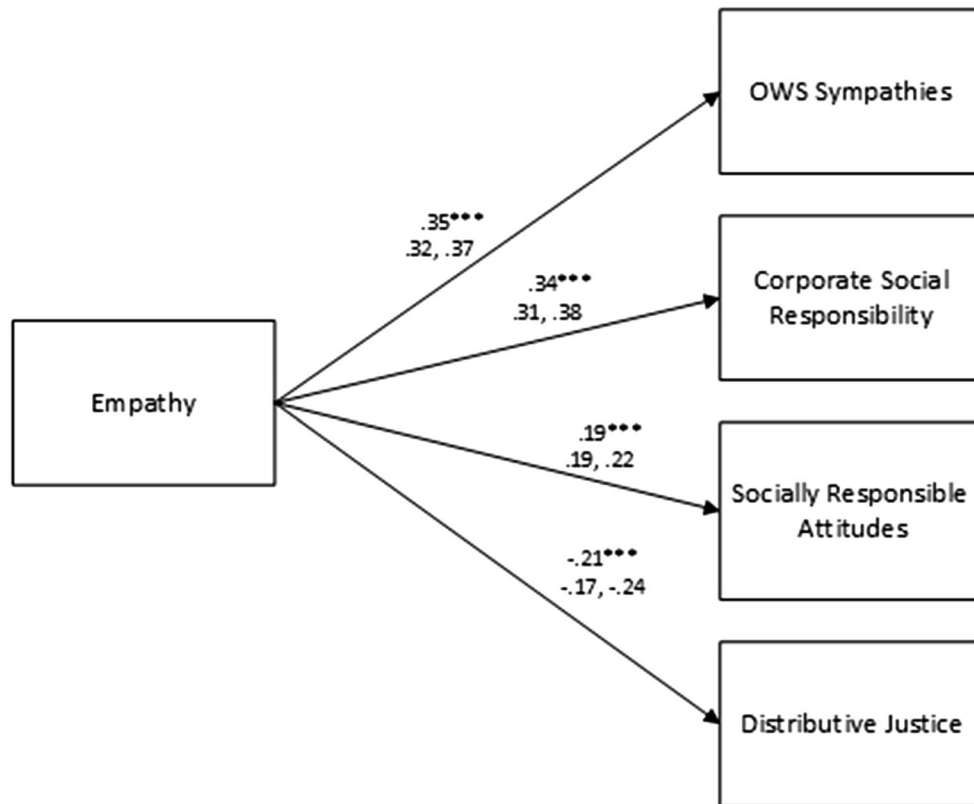


Fig. 1 Standardized path coefficients and confidence intervals. 95% confidence intervals listed below correlations. Control variables: previous employment, gender, and parent's income (SES). *** $p < .001$

previous employment, gender, and parent's income, supporting Hypothesis 4.

Overall, obtained confidence intervals did not span zero, giving further evidence that there is a true relationship between empathy and perceptions of social justice in terms of both management actions and social sympathies. This relationship occurred even when controlling for the individual variables of previous employment, gender, and parent's income. Based on these results, a significant relationship exists between empathy and social justice attitudes in that those who are higher on empathy are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward social justice.

Discussion

With prior research providing only marginal hope of influencing a sustainable change in the values and ethical behavior of college business students, the investigation of empathy as a more malleable characteristic and its potential link to behaviors promoting social issues offers prospective value in a world economy in need of greater sustainability, social entrepreneurship, and community engagement. Social justice decision-making often occurs in an environment where few legal regulations apply, and no organizational policy often exists. Yet, the societal consequences of organizational decisions can be dramatic.

Recent examples of the substantial externalities of these decisions include the creation of nutrition-deprived and inner-city food deserts due to grocery industry decisions and redlining practices and racial discrimination in lending and fees in the banking, finance, and payday lending industries. The presence of empathy enhances one's moral recognition of an ethical situation (Vetlesen 1994), and it is through concern for others that individuals are better able to reason and evaluate the adverse effects of their potential actions and decisions as opposed to strictly utilitarian considerations (Tangney and Dearing 2002). The hope is that future decision-makers with greater empathy will broaden their search for alternative solutions and partners with an emphasis on collaborative outcomes that consider broader stakeholders and include social justice considerations in addition to profitability.

The results of this study are promising in regard to the strength and breadth of the empathy and social justice relationship. They indicate that individual empathy is significantly related to social justice attitudes and perceptions. Results supported all four hypotheses: Students who were more empathetic reported greater concern for social justice issues in terms of both management actions and social sympathies as measured by four different business variables, corporate social responsibility, socially responsible attitudes, distributive justice perceptions, and Occupy Wall Street sympathies. The breadth of the results indicates that those higher on empathy are more likely to hold a range of positive attitudes toward social justice issues, rather than being parochial or limited to one area. The enhanced sympathy for the Occupy Wall Street movement may suggest that those higher on empathy have a desire to close the income gap in the USA. Perceptions of distributive justice suggest that empathetic individuals are striving for a fairer distribution of rights, privileges, and opportunities in society than currently exists. A broader view of stakeholders is likely a result of an enhanced concern for corporate social responsibility. This expanded view of stakeholders may help promote social justice, as leaders who are higher on empathy consider how their actions affect not just their own organizations, but society as a whole. Further, prior research has demonstrated that organizations who take this broader stakeholder view have achieved financial success and return on their investment (Ayuso et al. 2007; Eccles et al. 2012; Margolis et al. 2007; Porter and Kramer 2006; Preston and O'Bannon 1997). Furthermore, our results indicate that those higher on empathy also hold socially responsible attitudes and have a better understanding of how their actions as managers will affect society as a whole. This may lead to more socially just decision-making and expanded social justice initiatives in their organizations.

Implications

If we are concerned about enhancing social justice in society, this study raises the idea that universities may want to consider building empathy education into their core curricula. Individuals who can empathize are more likely to form highly ethical intentions (Mencl and May 2009). If we can improve the abilities of managers to empathize with employees and a more diverse range of stakeholders, it is likely ethical decision-making will be enhanced. A meta-analysis by Butters (2010) found many empathy training interventions are effective in increasing empathy with an overall large effect size. Higher education classroom-based approaches utilized by Goodman (2000), Davis (1990), and Monroe (2006) provide some instructional models for building empathy in higher education students and deserve additional scrutiny and research in light of our results. By including empathy in the classroom, the leaders of tomorrow may be more likely to demonstrate compassion and embrace social justice attitudes. This, in turn, will help improve the situation of not only their colleagues and employees, also society and the environment as a whole.

Our results also suggest that organizations should consider adding empathy to employee selection, development, and/or performance management processes to increase the salience of one's actions on not only the organization, but society as well. Firms can model empathy skills training from programs that have been incorporated into training for physicians and clinical psychologists. And organizational norms could also be established to build concern for others' perspectives into the decision-making process. Indeed, social justice will be increasingly important as organizations move toward sustainability and green initiatives. As firms develop their triple bottom line (environmental and social results, in addition to traditional economic measures) and increasingly pursue B-Corporation status and certifications, employees will be needed who possess and can effectively implement a multiple stakeholder orientation that includes social justice concerns.

Finally, prior to one's university experience, empathy has been shown to be teachable in children and young adults (Feshbach 1983; Feddes et al. 2015; Feshbach and Cohen 1988; Gordon 2003; Hatcher et al. 1994). Effective interventions have employed multiple structured interactions designed to enhance their prosocial behavior including sharing, perspective-taking, helping other children, and enhancing self-esteem and resiliency (Konrath et al. 2016). Early intervention may take on increasing importance, as some scholars (including Twenge et al. 2008), have speculated that recent technology and social media trends may be significant contributors to empathy deficits in university students. Encouraging one's young family members to spend time each day personally interacting with their

parents while encouraging perspective-taking may be an approach worthy of longitudinal research and experimentation.

Limitations and future research

It should be noted that the current study has several limitations. First, we relied on a convenience sample. Future research should examine the generalizability of the findings to other student populations, including examining international student attitudes and perceptions, as countries differ in levels of trust and in national culture dimensions such as collectivism and feminism, which may be related to empathy (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). Indeed, Bae and Kim (2013) found out that the more collectivistic and long-term oriented South Korean respondents were, the greater the importance they would place on corporate social responsibility—often associated with philanthropy and empathy. Similarly, Nordic countries, which are feminine cultures, may have less social inequity because they are higher on empathy. We call for future research for the study of empathy of, among, and between race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation to extend the current findings. The results of this study could also be examined in applied organizational settings. For example, employees of non-profit organizations may differ in their levels of empathy or social justice attitudes from those of for-profit organizations.

Second, a social desirability bias may influence the self-reporting of participants. Expressing positive attitudes toward social justice issues may be seen by college students as socially desirable, although this is debatable given current and recent political events in the USA. We further attempted to mitigate social desirability response bias through the use of anonymity in the administration of the survey (to reduce the extent to which a subject feels directly or personally involved in the answers being provided), by choosing measures which present questions that are worded in a neutral fashion, and through the use of forced-choice responses.

Third, our sample was limited to three majors (psychology, business, and sustainable development). Although this study found no differences across majors, perhaps students in other majors may be higher on empathy or hold increased social justice attitudes. A broader array of demographic factors could also be considered to extend this research, including examining the effects of race and religion of student subjects.

Finally, our study did not distinguish between emotional empathy (“the ability to respond with an appropriate emotion to another’s mental state”) and cognitive empathy (“the ability to diagnose another’s mental state”) (Khanjani et al. 2015), and their relation to different age groups.

Since emotional empathy increases with older age groups while cognitive empathy tends to suffer from deficits (Khanjani et al. 2015), future researchers may need to differentiate between these two types of empathy and study how these affect different age groups’ attitude toward social justice.

Conclusion

Traiser and Eighmy (2011) note that with the weakening of moral character and diminished importance of social values, educators may have cause for concern about the moral and ethical behaviors of business graduates when they enter the workforce. Those involved in business higher education need to understand the antecedents to social justice perceptions to effectively address such substantive concerns. The results of this study suggest one such antecedent—demonstrating a positive relationship between empathy and social justice attitudes. Those higher on empathy are more likely to hold positive attitudes related to social justice. This relationship was consistent across different measures of social justice, including Occupy Wall Street sympathies, distributive justice, corporate social responsibility, and socially responsible attitudes. These relationships were robust, even when controlling for the individual differences variables of previous employment, gender, and parent’s SES. Contemporary organizational scholars argue that social justice will become an increasingly important topic in the future as governments, citizens, and organizations explore ways to work together to build a more socially just society. We have pressing needs in confronting the challenges of increasing barriers to economic mobility, inequitable distribution of wealth, erosion of social safety nets, and continued environmental degradation that disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, each of which can lead to political and economic instability. The results of this study indicate that empathy might represent a critical, yet under-researched, construct in the extant social justice literature.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

References

- Arbuckle, J. L. (2006). *Amos (Version 7.0) [Computer Program]*. Chicago: SPSS.
- Arlow, P. (1991). Personal characteristics in college students' evaluations of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics, 10*, 63–69.
- Ayuso, S., Arino, M. A., Garcia, C. R., Rodríguez, M. A. (2007). *Maximizing stakeholders' interests: an empirical analysis of the stakeholder approach to corporate governance*. Working paper no. 670, IESE Business School. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=982325>.
- Bae, J., & Kim, S. (2013). The influence of cultural aspects on public perception of the importance of CSR activity and purchase intention in Korea. *Asian Journal of Communication, 23*(1), 68–85.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (2004). The cognitive neuroscience of autism. *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry, 75*, 945–948.
- Barry, B. (2005). *Why social justice matters*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Batson, C. D., Duncan, B. D., Ackerman, P., Buckley, T., & Birch, K. (1981). Is empathic emotion a source of altruistic motivation? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 40*, 290–302. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.40.2.290.
- Batson, C. D., Turk, C. L., Shaw, L. L., & Klein, T. R. (1995). Information function of empathic emotion: Learning that we value the other's welfare. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, 300–313. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.68.2.300.
- Blair, R. J. R. (2007). Empathic dysfunction in psychopathic individuals. In T. F. D. Farrow & P. W. R. Woodruff (Eds.), *Empathy in mental illness* (pp. 3–16). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Butters, R. P. (2010). A meta-analysis of empathy training programs for client populations. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 71*(4), 169. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses: Full Text (UMI No. AAT 3398227).
- Callahan, D., & Cha, J. (2013). *Stacked deck: How the dominance of politics by the affluent and business undermines economic mobility in America*. Available at <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Demos-Stacked-Deck.pdf>. Accessed 23 May 2014.
- Christensen, S. L., & Grinder, B. (2001). Justice and financial market allocation of the social costs of business. *Journal of Business Ethics, 29*(1), 105–112.
- Damon, W. (1988). *The moral child*. New York: Free Press.
- Davis, M. H. (1980). A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy. *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology, 10*, 85.
- Davis, C. M. (1990). What is empathy, and can it be taught? *Physical Therapy, 70*, 707–715.
- Easterly, W. (2007). Inequality does cause underdevelopment. *Journal of Development Economics, 84*(2), 755–776.
- Eccles, R., Ioannou, I., & Serafeim, G. (2012). The Impact of a Corporate Culture of Sustainability on Corporate Behavior and Performance. *Harvard Business School Working Paper*.
- Eisenberg, N., Guthrie, I. K., Murphy, B. C., Shepard, S. A., Cumberland, A., & Carlo, G. (1999). Consistency and development of prosocial dispositions: A longitudinal study. *Child Development, 70*, 1360–1372.
- Eisenberg, N., & Lennon, R. (1983). Sex differences in empathy and related capacities. *Psychological Bulletin, 94*, 100–131.
- Eisenberg, N., & Miller, P. A. (1987). The relation of empathy to prosocial and related behaviors. *Psychological Bulletin, 94*, 100–131.
- Feddes, A. R., Mann, L., & Doosje, B. (2015). Increasing self-esteem and empathy to prevent violent radicalization: a longitudinal quantitative evaluation of a resilience training focused on adolescents with a dual identity. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 45*, 400–411.
- Feshbach, N. D. (1983). Learning to care: A positive approach to child training and discipline. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 12*, 266–271.
- Feshbach, N., & Cohen, S. (1988). Training affects comprehension in young children: An experimental evaluation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 9*, 201–210.
- Folger, R., & Cropanzano, R. (2001). Fairness theory: Justice as accountability. *Advances in Organizational Justice, 1*, 1–55.
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Boston: Pitman.
- Goodman, D. J. (2000). Motivating people from privileged groups to support social justice. *Teachers College Record, 102*, 1061–1085.
- Gordon, M. (2003). Roots of empathy: Responsive parenting, caring societies. *Keio Journal of Medicine, 52*, 236–243.
- Guha, R. (1989). *The unquiet woods: Ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalaya*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, R. J., Snell, A. F., & Singer Foust, M. (1999). Item parceling strategies in Sem: Investigating the subtle effects of unmodeled secondary constructs. *Organizational Research Methods, 2*, 233–256.
- Hatcher, S. L., Nadeau, M. S., Walsh, L. K., Reynolds, M., Galea, J., & Marz, K. (1994). The teaching of empathy for high school and college students: Testing Rogerian methods with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. *Adolescence, 29*, 961–974.
- Hecht, S., & Cockburn, A. (1990). *The fate of the Forest: Developers, destroyers and defenders of the Amazon*. London: Penguin.
- Helmy, H. E. (2013). An approach to quantifying social justice in selected developing countries. *International Journal of Development Issues, 12*(1), 67–84.
- Hodges, S. D., & Myers, M. W. (2007). Empathy. In R. F. Baumeister & K. D. Vohs (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of social psychology* (pp. 296–298). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hoffman, M. L. (1990). Empathy and justice motivation. *Motivation and Emotion, 14*, 151–172.
- Hofrichter, R. (1993). *Toxic struggles: The theory and practice of environmental justice*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Press.
- Hopwood, B., Mellor, M., & O'Brien, G. (2005). Sustainable development: Mapping different approaches. *Sustainable Development, 13*, 38–52.
- Hunt, S. D., Kiecker, P. L., & Chonko, L. B. (1990). Social responsibility and personal success: A research note. *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, 18*, 239–244.
- IBM Corp. Released (2013). *IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 22.0*. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.
- Khanjani, Z., Jeddi, E. M., Hekmati, I., Khalilzade, S., & Nia, M. E. (2015). Comparison of cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and social functioning in different age groups. *Australian Psychologist, 50*(1), 80–85.
- Knafo, A., Zahn-Waxler, C., Van Hulle, C., Robinson, J. L., & Rhee, S. H. (2008). The developmental origins of a disposition toward empathy: Genetic and environmental contributions. *Emotion, 8*, 737–752.
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2016). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 15*, 180–198.
- Leff, E. (2000). Sustainable development in developing countries. In K. Lee, A. Holland, & D. McNeill (Eds.), *Global sustainable development in the 21st century* (pp. 62–75). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Margolis, J. D., Elfenbein, H. A., & Walsh, J. P. (2007). Does it pay to be good? A meta-analysis and redirection of research on the relationship between corporate social and financial performance. *Working paper*.
- Martin, G. B., & Clark, R. D. (1982). Distress crying in neonates: Species and peer specificity. *Developmental Psychology, 18*, 3–9.
- McDonald, N., & Messinger, D. (2011). The development of empathy: How, when, and why. In A. Acerbi, J. A. Lombo, & J. J. Sanguinetti (Eds.), *Free will, emotions, and moral actions: Philosophy and neuroscience in dialogue*. London: IF-Press.
- Mencel, J., & May, D. R. (2009). The effects of proximity and empathy on ethical decision-making: An exploratory investigation. *Journal of Business Ethics, 85*, 201–226.
- Milkovich, G. T., Newman, J. M., & Gerhart, B. A. (2011). *Compensation* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Miller, David. (1979). *Social justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Monroe, K. (2006). Can empathy be taught? *Academe, 92*, 58–63.
- OXFAM. (2014). *Working for the few political capture and economic inequality*. Retrieved from OXFAM International website: <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-working-for-few-political-capture-economic-inequality-200114-en.pdf>.
- Piff, P. K., Stancato, D. M., Côté, S., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Keltner, D. (2012). Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA, 109*, 4086–4091. doi:10.1073/pnas.1118373109.
- Pizarro, D. A. (2000). Nothing more than feelings? The role of emotions in moral judgment. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 30*, 355–375.
- Pizarro, D. A., & Salovey, P. (2002). Being and becoming a good person: The role of emotional intelligence in moral development and behavior. In J. Aronson (Ed.), *Improving academic achievement* (pp. 247–266). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2006). Strategy and society: The link between competitive advantage and corporate social responsibility. *Harvard Business Review, 84*(12), 78–94.
- Preston, L. E., & O'Bannon, D. P. (1997). The corporate social-financial performance relationship: A typology and analysis. *Business and Society, 36*, 419–429.
- Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as fairness: A restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Rothstein, B., & Uslaner, E. (2005). All for one. Equality, corruption and social trust. *World Politics, 58*, 41–72. doi:10.1353/wp.2006.0022.
- Rowell, A. (1996). *Green Backlash: Global Subversion of the environmental movement*. London: Routledge.
- Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., & Bobik, C. (2001). Emotional intelligence and interpersonal relations. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 141*, 523–536. doi:10.1080/00224540109600569.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2002). Employment, social justice and societal well-being. *International Labour Review, 141*, 9–29. doi:10.1111/j.1564-913X.2002.tb00229.x.
- Stiftung, B. (2011). Social justice in the oecd—how do the member states compare? Sustainable governance indicators 2011. In *Organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD) sustainable governance indicators (SGI)*. http://news.sgi-network.org/uploads/tx_amsgistudies/SGI11_Social_Justice_OECD.pdf.
- Szalavitz, M. (2009). *How empathy can save the economy*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/05/28/how-empathy-can-save-the-economy.html>.
- Tangney, J. P. (1991). Moral affect: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61*, 598–607.
- Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. (2002). *Shame and guilt*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Toi, M., & Batson, C. D. (1982). More evidence that empathy is a source of altruistic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43*, 281–292. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.43.2.281.
- Traiser, S., & Eighmy, M. A. (2011). Moral development and narcissism of private and public university business students. *Journal of Business Ethics, 99*, 325. doi:10.1007/s10551-011-0809-x.
- Turker, D. (2009). Measuring corporate social responsibility: a scale development study. *Journal of Business Ethics, 85*, 411–427. doi:10.1007/s10551-008-9780-6.
- Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., & Bushman, B. J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the narcissistic personality inventory. *Journal of Personality, 76*, 875–902.
- Vetlesen, A. J. (1994). *Perception, empathy, and judgment: an inquiry into the preconditions of moral performance*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Weinberg, B. (2000). *Homage to chiapas: The new indigenous struggles in Mexico*. London: Verso.
- Williams, L., & O'Boyle, E. (2008). Measurement models for linking latent variables and indicators: A review of human resource management research using parcels. *Human Resource Management Review, 18*(4), 233–242.
- Zuniga, X., Williams, E. A., & Berger, J. B. (2005). Action-oriented democratic outcomes: The impact of student involvement with campus diversity. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*, 660–678. doi:10.1353/csd.2005.0069.