



Experience with Mental Disorders: The Relationship Between Closeness,

Empathy, and Life Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Participants' degree of closeness to an individual with a mental disorder was determined and its association with empathy and life satisfaction were assessed. Undergraduates ($N = 196$) called to mind the person closest to them who has a mental disorder, including themselves. Participants answered questions about the type of disorder, severity of symptoms, and closeness of their relationship with the person with a disorder. Participants also completed measures of empathy and life satisfaction. Empathic Concern and Personal Distress increased as degree of closeness increased. Life satisfaction scores decreased as degree of closeness increased. These findings support previous literature and suggest that people with very close relationships with individuals with mental disorders should be provided with more support and treatment options.

INTRODUCTION

- Empathy is an important skill to master for good social skills and close personal relationships (Lam et al., 2011; Morelli et al., 2017).
- Individuals with bipolar or unipolar mood disorder tend to have elevated empathy levels (Parker et al., 2018).
- Professionals who work with individuals with mental disorders, such as mental health workers, also have high empathy levels (Santamaría-García, et al., 2017).
- There is a positive correlation between empathy and well-being (Caro et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2016; Grünh et al., 2009).
- Well-being includes life satisfaction, which is defined as the cognitive and judgmental components of well-being (Diener, 2006; Diener et al., 1985; Grünh et al., 2009; Pavot et al., 1991).
- Individuals with mood disorders have lower life satisfaction than people who do not have disorders (e.g., Bello et al., 2011; Fergusson et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2018).
- Individuals with more symptoms of a mental disorder have lower life satisfaction (e.g., Bos et al., 2016).
- Individuals with a close relationship to a person with a mental disorder, such as mothers of children with Down's syndrome (Sloper et al., 1991) and caregivers of children with autism (Ruiz-Robledillo et al., 2015) tend to have lower life satisfaction.
- The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the closeness of the relationship between college students and a person with a mental disorder on participants' empathy and life satisfaction.

HYPOTHESES

The closer the participant's relationship to a person with mental disorder, the higher empathy will be.

The closer the participant's relationship to a person with mental illness, the lower life satisfaction will be.

The greater the severity of symptoms in the target, the lower the participant's life satisfaction.

METHOD

Participants

- 196 (136 women, 59 men, 1 non-binary) undergraduate students recruited from a private college in PA
- The average age of participants was 20.03 years old ($SD = 2.18$).
- The sample was predominately Caucasian at 90.30%, African American 5.10%, Hispanic 2.04%, Other 2.04%, and Asian American 0.51%.

Materials & Procedure

- Participants received a link to the Qualtrics survey via email and began by reading the informed consent.
- Participants called to mind the person closest to them, including themselves, who has a mental disorder.
 - From a list of mental disorders, participants identified the mental disorder(s) of the target person.
 - Participants answered three Likert scale questions about severity of symptoms.
- Participants completed two closeness scales: the Functional Analytic Psychotherapy Intimacy Scale (FAPIS; Leonard et al., 2014) and the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS Scale; Aron et al., 1992; Gächter et al., 2015).
- Participants completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI, Davis, 1983) to measure empathy.
- Participants completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985) to measure life satisfaction.
- Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and were debriefed.

RESULTS

Participants were divided into three groups of closeness based on scores on the IOS: **not close** (don't know anyone with a mental disorder or a score of 1 or 2 on the IOS); **moderately close** (a score of 3 to 5) and **very close** (a score of 6 or 7).

Empathy

- A 3 (closeness) x 2 (gender) between subjects ANOVA was conducted on IRI scores.
- Women ($M = 95.46$, $SD = 11.87$) scored higher on the IRI than men ($M = 88.00$, $SD = 13.63$), $F(1, 189) = 0.57$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .057$.
- IRI scores did not differ significantly across closeness groups, $F(1, 189) = 2.00$, $p = .138$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$.
- 3 x 2 ANOVAs were conducted on the subscales of the IRI.
- Scores on the Empathic Concern subscale differed across closeness groups, $F(1, 189) = 3.18$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$: Participants in the very close group ($M = 28.36$, $SD = 4.23$) had significantly higher empathic concern scores than those in the not close group ($M = 25.79$, $SD = 4.79$), $t(132) = -3.29$, $p = .001$. See Figure 1.

- Results for the Personal Distress subscale were marginally significant in the direction predicted, $F(1, 189) = 2.94$, $p = .055$, $\eta_p^2 = .030$: Personal distress increased as closeness increased from not close ($M = 16.75$, $SD = 4.87$) to moderately close ($M = 16.79$, $SD = 4.34$) to very close ($M = 18.74$, $SD = 4.88$).

Life Satisfaction

- A 3 (closeness) x 2 (gender) ANOVA was conducted on scores on the SWLS.
- Life satisfaction scores for women ($M = 23.99$, $SD = 6.31$) were higher than for men ($M = 23.78$, $SD = 6.74$), $F(1, 189) = 3.06$, $p = .049$, $\eta_p^2 = .031$.
- Life satisfaction scores differed across closeness groups, $F(1, 189) = 5.29$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .053$. The very close group ($M = 22.05$, $SD = 6.94$) had significantly lower life satisfaction scores than the not close group ($M = 24.56$, $SD = 6.93$), $t(132) = 2.07$, $p = .040$, and significantly lower than the moderately close group ($M = 25.44$, $SD = 4.81$), $t(137) = 3.26$, $p = .001$. See Figure 2.
- More severe symptoms in the target were correlated with lower life satisfaction, $r = -.26$, $p = .001$.

FIGURES

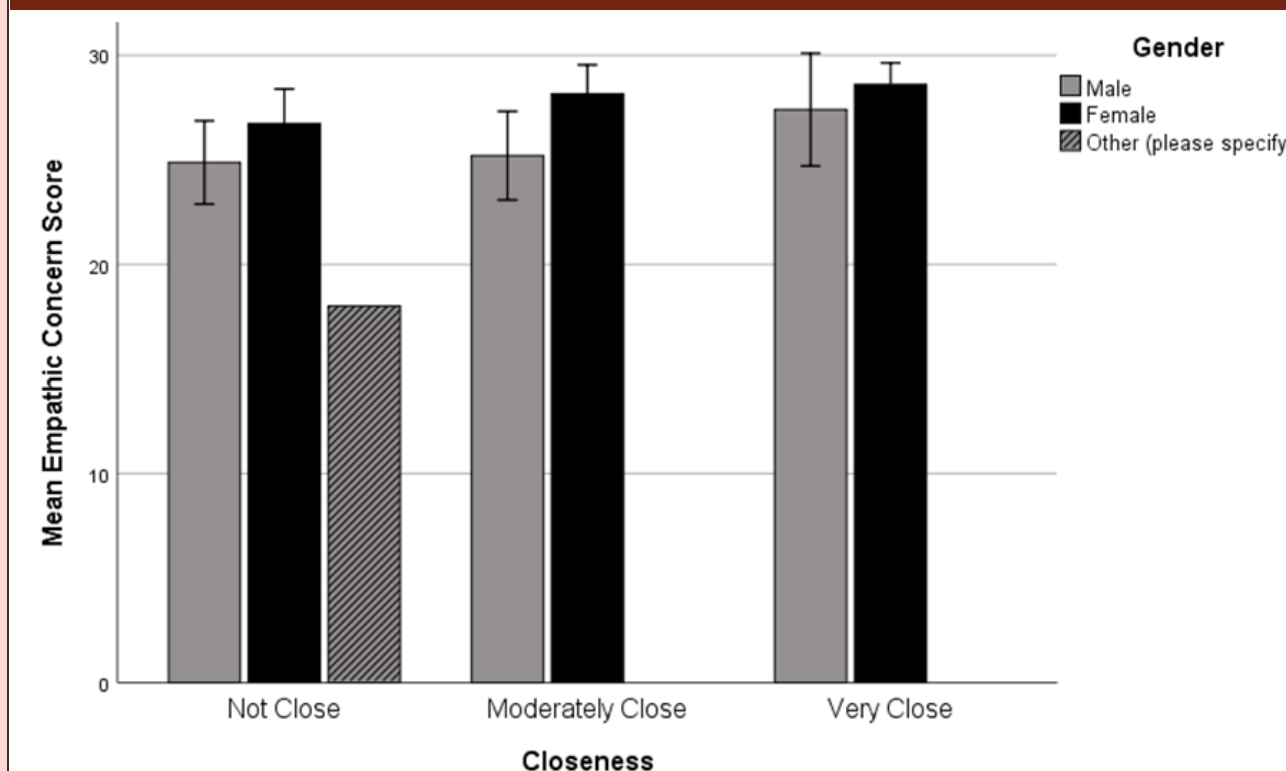


Figure 1. Mean empathic concern by closeness and gender. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the means.

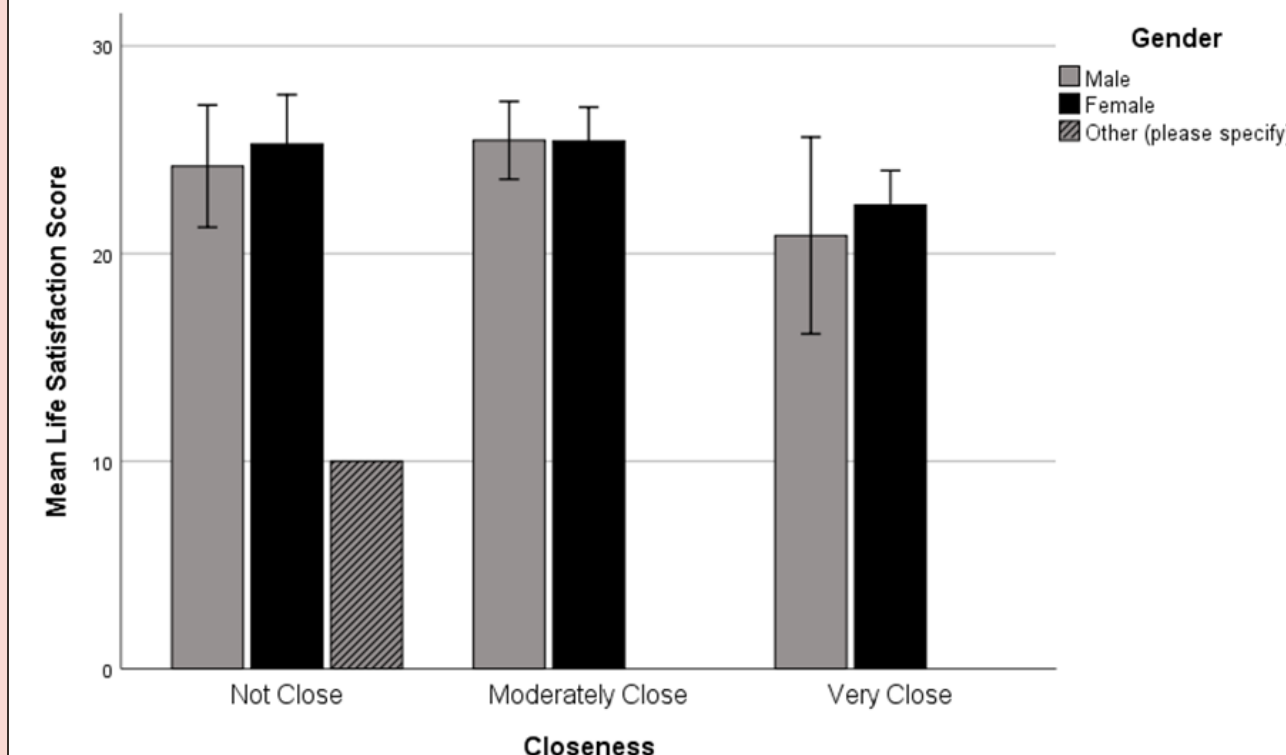


Figure 2. Mean life satisfaction by closeness and gender. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the means.

DISCUSSION

- Results are consistent with my hypotheses:
 - Participants in the very close group had higher of empathic concern than those in the not close group.
 - Participants in the very close group had lower life satisfaction than participants in the not close and moderately close groups.
 - More severe symptoms in the target were associated with lower life satisfaction.
 - Findings are consistent with past research (Bello et al., 2011; Bos et al., 2016; Fergusson et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2018; Ruiz-Robledillo et al., 2015; Santamaría-García, et al., 2017).
- Examining relationship closeness adds to existing research on the relationship among empathy, life satisfaction, and mental disorders.
- Low life satisfaction in college students who have a close relationship to someone with a disorder raises concern that these individuals receive more treatment and support options.

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