

Exploring Sociological Perspectives on Empathy: An Analysis of the Role of Socialization Agents on Adolescent Empathy Development

Shayl R. Khatod*

Reflect Empathy, United States

*Correspondence to: Shayl R. Khatod, Reflect Empathy, United States; Email: shaylkhatod@gmail.com

Abstract: Adolescence is a formative period for the development of empathy and prosocial behavior. A plethora of research focuses on the psychological elements of empathy education in adolescents; however, there is a dearth of research from other subjects, like sociology. This paper aims to explore the development of empathy through sociological perspectives by examining the socialization of empathy through adolescence. The study focuses on three main socialization agents: social media, parents, and peers. It includes both qualitative, through thematic analysis, and quantitative, through review of survey results, by analyzing qualitative survey results in which peers offered their viewpoint on the impact of each agent on empathy development within themselves and their peers. Findings from the study indicate both the impact and direction of impact on adolescent empathy development for social media, parents, and peers. The study highlights that peers have the most significant impact on empathy development, though their direction of impact is neutral due to qualitative themes like empathic reciprocity; parents had the second most significant impact on empathy development and the most positive direction of impact; and social media had the least effect and most negative direction of impact. This study aims to inform social and emotional learning curricula to promote student empathy by highlighting the most critical socialization agents in fostering empathy in youth.

Keywords: Empathy, Socialization, Adolescents, Prosociality, Education, Sociology

1. Introduction

Empathy and prosocial behavior are fundamental socio-cognitive skills that drive social connectedness and promote well-being. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the emotions, perspectives, and mental states of others (Davis, 1983). Empathy comprises cognitive (perspective-taking) and affective (feeling others' emotions) elements (Lai et al., 2015; Melloni et al., 2013). Furthermore, empathy helps predict prosocial

behavior, which involves voluntary actions taken to benefit others (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Van der Graaff et al., 2018). Thus, empathy-inducing interventions have been shown to mitigate hate (Batson et al., 1997; Soral et al., 2022) as empathy catalyzes prosocial behavior (Khatod, 2024). Both empathy and prosocial behavior are essential interpersonal skills that can provide the foundation for developing moral principles such as care, justice, and altruism.

Further, empathy is a skill that adolescents can



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cultivate in schools (Dolan, 2022; Gerdes & Segal, 2011; Wang et al., 2003). Empathy-based education could be pivotal in fostering a positive school environment. Research by Brouwer and Boros shows that fostering empathy through direct contact with a minority group can substantially decrease expressions of hatred from individuals in the majority group (Brouwer & Boros, 2010). Other studies have similarly found that teaching empathy to adolescents can lead to a notable increase in prosocial behaviors (Silke et al., 2021). Research suggests that levels of empathy and prosocial behavior among young people may be on the decline (Hylton, 2018; Konrath et al., 2011). Furthermore, significant variations in these traits have been noted, depending on different situational and cultural contexts (Chopik et al., 2017; Silke et al., 2018).

The majority of quantitative research on the development of empathy within adolescents comes from psychology, with relatively few studies integrating ideas from other academic fields, such as sociology (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024).

This study aims to add to existing literature by providing findings that explore adolescents' understanding of empathy from a sociological perspective. It highlights adolescents' perceptions of the socialization agents that hinder or promote empathy among their peers. Socialization agents are the people, groups, and social institutions that affect one's self-concept, attitudes, and behaviors, building upon C. Wright Mills's notion of the sociological imagination, where personal circumstances influence society (Mills, 2000). This research utilized a qualitative survey to explore how youth ascribe different socialization agents, social media, parental relations, and peers, to influence their perceptions of how another adolescent would act with empathy. This study is based on a study by Silke and Brady et al. (2024), in which students in Ireland, in a focus group setting, were asked how the specific socialization agents mentioned above influenced their empathy development (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). This paper expands on their study by quantifying participants' responses to evaluate whether peers, parents, social media, and gender promote or inhibit empathy.

2. Empathy Among Adolescents

The word "adolescence" is derived from the Latin

term *adolescere*, meaning "to grow" or "to mature," and refers to the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. Contemporary frameworks define the age range of adolescents to include ages 10 to 24 years (Sawyer et al., 2018). Adolescence represents a critical period of change with important biological, cognitive, and socioemotional developments (Tur-Kaspa, 2002), during which individuals actively explore their identities (Hitti et al., 2011; McLean & Syed, 2016; Waterman, 1999). While empathy tends to increase from infancy to adulthood, adolescence represents one of the most critical age ranges for developing empathy (Hitti et al., 2011; McLean & Syed, 2016; Waterman, 1999). Existing studies, though limited, indicate that both affective and cognitive empathy undergo notable changes during the adolescent years, with a marked increase in cognitive empathy, or perspective-taking, in particular (Van der Graaff et al., 2014). Further, a longitudinal study shows consistent increases in cognitive empathy during adolescence, with notable shifts occurring between ages 15 and 16 (Eisenberg et al., 2005). These developmental changes in empathy can have lasting effects into adulthood (Allemand et al., 2015).

Furthermore, empathy and prosocial behavior are crucial to young people's healthy social and emotional development (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010; Wagaman, 2011). Research consistently links these qualities to better emotional and psychological well-being, including higher self-esteem, improved mental health, and greater life satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2014; Martela & Ryan, 2016). Additionally, higher levels of empathy and prosocial actions are associated with improved cognitive abilities and academic performance in children and adolescents (Ballard et al., 2019; Gerbino et al., 2018).

However, these descriptions are mainly psychological, focusing on individual development and well-being. Beyond individual well-being, these traits play a significant role in fostering positive social interactions, promoting healthy relationships (Fike et al., 2023; Flanagan & Levine, 2010), facilitating large-scale cooperation (Zaki, 2014), and reducing antisocial behaviors (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015; Raskauskas et al., 2010). Thus, empathy is crucial for individual and group interactions.

However, a lack of research evaluating the specific

socialization agents that enhance or hinder empathy within an adolescent is a major limitation to developing a curriculum for adolescent empathy activation. Though a majority of research documents a variety of individual factors that promote empathy within adolescents (Silke et al., 2018), there is a dearth of research on exploring adolescent perspectives on the socialization factors that influence their empathic understanding and ability.

3. Sociological perspectives on empathy

Although much of the research on empathy originates from psychology, a growing body of work in the sociology of emotions has challenged the view that emotions, including empathy, are solely psychological responses (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). Drawing on the ideas of theorists like Cooley (1922) and Goffman (1974), sociologists have emphasized that social contexts such as norms, values, and relationships shape our emotional experiences (Cooley, 1922; Goffman, 1974; Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Bericat highlights the importance of emotional structures and dynamics in sociology. Sociologists argue that emotions, including empathy, are relational: emotions emerge and are shaped by the perceived outcomes of interactions with others that influence our well-being, needs, and goals (Bericat, 2016; Ruiz-Junco, 2017; Stryker, 2004). Hochschild and other scholars have highlighted the interrelations of culture and politics with emotions (Hochschild, 1979). According to Bericat (2016), the structures within a society generate emotional climates and cultures that influence the population's sentiments and the feelings and behaviors of individuals.

Goffman's 1974 concept of frames emphasizes that issues are framed to shape social behavior (Goffman, 1974). Ruiz-Junco applies Goffman's 1974 concept of frames to empathy. Empathy frames suggest that societal actors employ frames to create public perceptions and influence individual prosocial actions (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). An empathy frame involves an empathizer, a recipient, and a moral claim for empathy based on cultural values (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). For example, Americans are the empathizers for immigrants who are worthy of empathy based on the value of human rights (Ruiz-Junco, 2017).

Another essential concept Hochschild (2016) explores is empathy rules. Empathy rules are the

set of socially learned expectations that individuals internalize regarding when and how to express empathy. (Hochschild, 2016). For instance, people with liberal political ideologies follow the norm of being empathic toward poor people, while conservatives may not (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Further, social norms usually dictate that women are expected to be more caring than men (Hochschild, 2016). The notion that empathizing involves the identification of rightful empathizers is prevalent in empathy rules (Ruiz-Junco, 2017).

Hochschild has also introduced the concept of an empathy map, which helps individuals navigate who to empathize with. Recipients of empathy are divided into high-empathy, low-empathy, and no-empathy zones (Hochschild, 2013). Ruiz-Junco (2017) extends this idea through the concept of "empathy paths," which are influenced not only by personal preferences, past experiences, and individual identities but also by broader cultural and institutional factors; on an individual level, these paths reflect one's identity and experiences, while on a social level, they are shaped by institutional and societal norms (Ruiz-Junco, 2017).

While the development of empathy is often framed as a critical aspect of adolescence, there is still a significant gap in research that examines how empathy is socialized during this age range. Although sociological theories indicate that empathy and prosocial behaviors are socially embedded in institutions, very few studies have examined how youth perceive the socialization agents that promote or inhibit empathy (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). Understanding adolescents' perspectives of such social agents may provide insights into the design and implementation of interventions targeting improvement in empathy and prosociality in adolescents. In this study, youth are asked to evaluate whether different socialization agents, social media, peers, and parents, promote or inhibit empathy development, expanding on prior research.

Socialization agents help describe sociology's influences on the development of empathy and prosocial behavior in adolescents. This study tests the prevailing assumption regarding empathy in adolescents, that empathy can be developed during a period of increased neural plasticity and cognitive development (Khatod, 2024).

4. Methodology

This study analyzes the socialization agents: parents, peers, and media in a group of adolescents in the Southwest United States. Silke and Brady et al. (2024) identified the socialization agents, parents, family, peers, and media, utilized in this study. This study quantifies these factors, expanding the research of Silke and Brady et al. by highlighting whether adolescents believe each socialization agent has a positive or negative impact on empathic development. Further, barriers to empathy are also presented.

5. Participants

As listed in **Table 1**, fifteen (9 male and 6 female) U.S. adolescents between the ages of 16 and 17 participated in this research study via a survey. All participants were recruited from an empathy-focused club chapter at a large public High School located in Southern California (Southwest United States) and enrolled in their 11th or 12th grade year. A majority of participants were of minority ethnic backgrounds, while six participants were White. All study participants provided informed consent.

Table 1. List of the names, gender identities, and ages of the students who participated in this study.

Name	Gender	Age (years)
Sam	Male	16
Jake	Male	16
Daniel	Male	16
Kara	Female	17
Noah	Male	16
Clara	Female	16
Isla	Female	17
Lily	Female	16
Ava	Female	16
Max	Male	16
Steven	Male	17
Zoe	Female	16
Finn	Male	16
Theo	Male	16
James	Male	16

Names listed in the table above are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

6. Data Analysis

The student research participants were asked about socialization agents and empathy. The survey began by asking the student participants for their definition of empathy. Students were then prompted with questions related to how socialization agents influence empathic development within their peers. The questionnaire had been previously validated (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024).

Questions Included

How do you think social media impacts the empathic development of adolescents/people your age? Do you think that social media affects your empathy?

How do you think parental relations impact the empathic development of adolescents/people your age?

Do you think that your parents affect your empathy?

How do you think peers impact the empathic development of adolescents/people your age? Do you think that your peers/friends affect your empathy?

What helps or stops you from showing empathy or from helping others?

Qualitative Analysis

All survey results were transcribed into Microsoft Word (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024) and analyzed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2023; Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that allows the researcher to identify and give meaning to recurring themes or patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006;

Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Braun and Clark state that the analysis process is dynamic, context-dependent, and involves the transaction between data, the researcher, and the research setting (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis can be applied to inductive, data-driven, and deductive, qualitative approaches (Byrne, 2022).

To identify a theme, which Braun and Clark (2006) highlighted as something meaningful to the data that represents a patterned response, the methodology utilized by Silke and Brady et al. (2024) was followed. First, the survey results were reviewed and transcribed into Microsoft Word (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). The data was then inductively coded, and relevant themes were highlighted and refined to saturate important information within themes (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). Per Meryick (2006), the analysis considered participants' opinions differing from the consensus to uphold the data quality.

Quantitative Analysis

Two independent researchers then reviewed all responses and graded each response. Each response was graded to determine whether the respondent felt the agent affected or did not affect empathy. If the

agent affected empathy, a secondary evaluation was then performed. The response was graded as either promoting or negatively influencing empathy. The reviewers jointly analyzed their grading to create a consensus evaluation used for quantitative analysis.

7. Results on Socialization Agents

Parental Influence

Figure 1 showcases that, among the 15 participants, 86.67% reported that parents impacted empathic development, 6.67% reported that parents did not have an impact, and 6.67% could not tell. Further, illustrated by **Figure 2**, 60% of participants stated that parental relations positively influenced empathy development, 0% reported a negative influence, and 40% reported that parents did not have a net positive or negative impact. Thematic analysis of the responses reported that parental influence helps desensitize students to different cultures and that parents positively and negatively impact adolescent empathic development. Overall, parents were found to be a positive socializing agent in the development of empathy in this cohort.

Figure 1: Effect of Socialization Agent

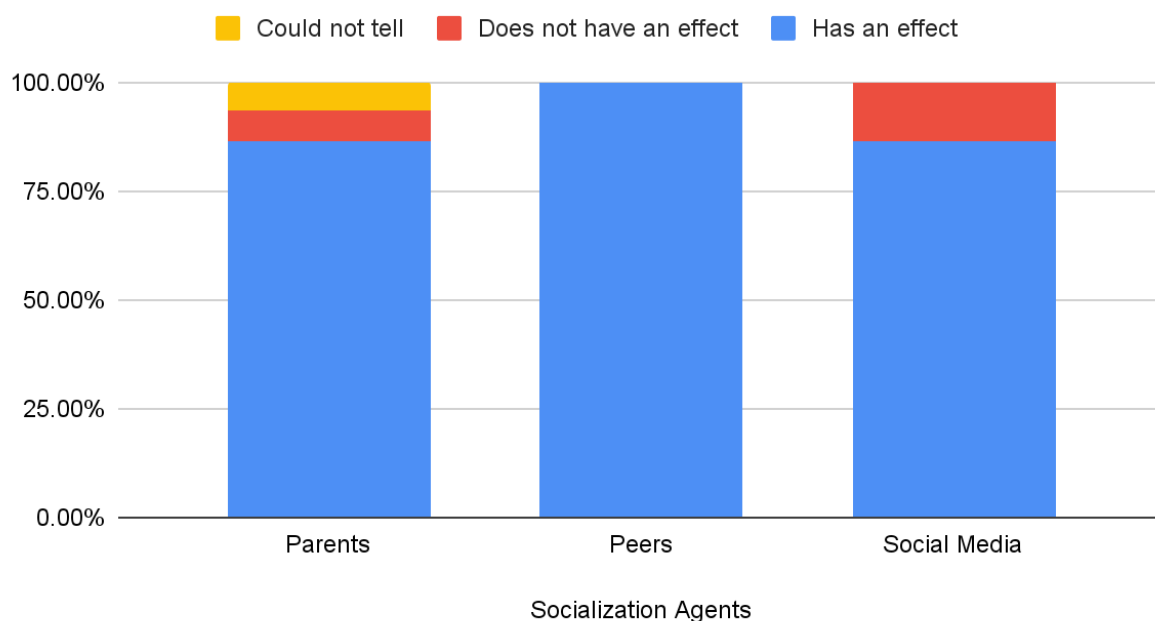


Figure 1. Summary graph for effects of socialization agents revealing that Peers have the most effect on empathy, followed by Parents and then Social Media.

Figure 2: Direction and Degree of the Effect

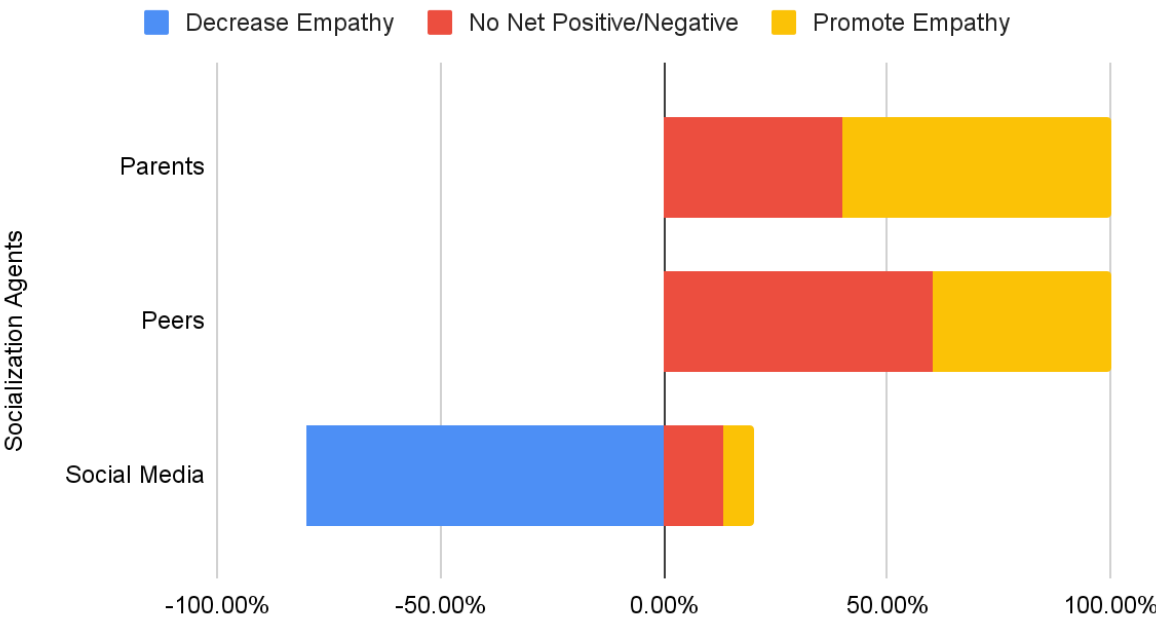


Figure 2. Parents have the strongest effect in promoting empathy, followed by Peers. In contrast, Social Media has a strong negative impact on empathy.

As an example, Clara explains, “Parents expose their children to different cultures, ideas, and norms, which can help them understand others and develop empathy. Personally, my mother has taken me to various countries, museums, and cultural sites, contributing to my understanding of other people and cultures and allowing me to better empathize with them.” Clara highlights the thematic code that parental influence helps desensitize students to different cultures and can thus increase empathy toward outgroups. Further, Clara supports the concept of “empathy paths,” in which individuals show empathy based on personal preference, past experiences, and broader cultural or institutional factors (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Zoe notes, “Parental relations can impact empathy negatively and positively, depending on the family environment.” Zoe demonstrates the thematic code that parents positively and negatively impact adolescent empathic development.

Peer Influence

Among the 15 participants, 100% reported that peers impacted empathic development, 0% of participants reported that peers did not have an impact, and 0% could not tell, as shown in Figure 1. Further, 40% of participants stated that peers positively influenced

empathy development, 0% reported a negative influence, and 60% reported that peers did not have a net positive or negative impact, highlighted by Figure 2. Thematic analysis of the responses reported that peers influence behavior by sharing their experiences, and that reciprocal behaviors drive empathic connection. Overall, peers were found to be a universal agent affecting empathy and a mostly positive socializing agent in the expression of empathy in this cohort.

Isla shared, “Peers can also negatively and positively impact empathic development. I’ve always tried to show empathy towards others, so I tend to receive it back from others.” Isla highlights the thematic code of reciprocation, which states that you will receive empathy back if you show empathy towards others. Kara, however, noted, “How your peers act can also impact how you practice empathy and how you interact with others; however, my peers do not impact my empathy.” Kara highlights the thematic code taken from participants, that peers influence behavior by sharing their own experiences and worldviews.

Media Influence

As highlighted in Figure 1, among the 15 participants, 86.67% reported that social media impacted empathic development, 13.33% reported that social media did

not have an impact, and 0% could not tell. Further, 6.67% of participants stated that social media positively influenced empathy development, 80% reported a negative influence, and 13.33% reported that social media did not have a net positive or negative impact, illustrated by Figure 2. Overall, social media was found to be a negative socializing agent in the development of empathy in this cohort.

Ava states, "Social media can both positively and negatively impact empathy. Since it gives us a broad view of perspective and experiences, it also creates quick judgments about people and limits face-to-face interactions, which are very important in developing genuine empathy." Finn also said, "I would say it does because people are more desensitized or don't know stuff based on what they hear." Regarding social media's effects on empathic development, Zoe says, "I think that social media has impacted empathic development negatively; it provides a mask to be hidden behind." Thematic coding on social media has highlighted different ideas from participants. Most participants argued that social media is detrimental to the development of empathy. The thematic analysis highlighted that participants argued that social media leads to criticism and thus decreases empathic development.

Barriers Impeding Empathic Development

Thematic analysis revealed common themes related to empathy barriers, including close-mindedness, a lack of shared experiences, and the perception that empathy is seen as socially weak and undesirable. Many students highlighted different barriers to empathy and prosocial behavior in their survey responses. Kara highlighted, "Some people are not willing to listen/are closed-minded, some people feel the need to always give advice, etc." Isla shared, "Sometimes it can just be pretty hard to understand what someone else has been through, depending on either of your experiences." Noah added another light: "I think empathy doesn't seem 'cool'," which insinuates that the social norms or peer pressures may not favor the expression of empathy. These responses demonstrate that students recognize barriers, including a lack of shared experiences and societal perceptions, and norms.

8. Discussion

Social learning theory holds that adolescents first

develop attitudes and behaviors through observing and imitating important people in their lives. Parents are the most important role models during early childhood (Allport, 1954; Bandura, 1977; Miklikowska, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Zagrean et al., 2022). Several studies have shown that a nurturing, sensitive, and nonpunitive style of child-rearing promotes the development of empathy in children (Wagers & Kiel, 2019; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). Our findings reveal that parents were the second most effective agent in empathy development. While parenting is an influential agent, it cannot be incorporated into an empathy curriculum. Hopefully, as more empathic individuals are created in society, they will help develop more empathic children in future generations. However, with maturation and the rise in autonomy, the influence of parents usually decreases and is replaced with peer relationships that start to influence attitudes and behaviors more significantly (Hart & Carlo, 2005; Hjerm et al., 2018; R. Larson & Richards, 1991).

Our data finds that peers are the strongest influencers for creating empathy. As adolescents seek greater independence from their families, peer relationships increasingly influence their attitudes and behaviors (Hart & Carlo, 2005; Hjerm et al., 2018; R. Larson & Richards, 1991). During this stage, adolescents spend more time with their friends, who become essential sources of emotional support, validation, and guidance (Brown & Larson, 2009). Further, as highlighted in the thematic analysis of student responses, acts of empathy are reciprocal among peers. Miklikowska et al. (2022) furthers this notion by stating that youth who had more empathic friends increased their empathy over time, as opposed to youth with less empathic friends. Peer opinions and social pressures grow stronger, as peers offer key social cues that shape how adolescents perceive others and engage with the world around them (R. W. Larson et al., 1996; Nesi et al., 2021). Engaging peers is crucial to the success of any empathy curriculum targeting adolescents. If their peers are engaged, the adolescent is more likely to be receptive to empathy development. This heightened peer influence calls attention to the importance of both cognitive and emotional empathy in helping adolescents navigate complex social interactions, such as friendships and romantic relationships. Understanding others' feelings

and perspectives is crucial for forming meaningful connections during this developmental stage (Hollarek & Lee, 2022).

Media, including television, movies, music, video games, social media, and the internet, are sources of socialization in the lives of adolescents (Arnett, 1995). Through the media, teenagers learn about societal expectations regarding norms and values. Media portrayals generally contain stereotypical and potentially unrealistic images of groups, which lead to and perpetuate prejudice and negative social attitudes (Hoffman, 2018). With social media, teens' social networks have expanded beyond what occurs within their immediate environments (Office of The Surgeon General, 2023). Yet, it has been argued that while social media allows individuals to be in a position to interact with others, it inadvertently decreases the time spent on face-to-face interaction, limiting adolescents from building and practicing empathic skills (Van der Graaff et al., 2018). This paper reveals that social media is a strongly negative agent in empathy development. The findings are in concordance with those of Gentile et al. and Krahé and Möller, who found that social media was linked to reduced empathy and prosocial behavior (Gentile et al., 2014; Krahé & Möller, 2010). In contrast, when social media content is created specifically to promote prosocial values, it may promote cooperation, sharing, and empathy (Gentile et al., 2009; Siyez & Baran, 2017). Any curriculum designed to develop adolescent empathy must address the concerns with unfiltered social media and attempt to direct adolescents to pro-social content when possible.

These results also highlight students' perceptions of the barriers that inhibit adolescents from showing empathy or engaging in prosocial behavior. These barriers included a lack of shared experiences, and societal perceptions and norms. Several scholars, including Hochschild (2016) and Bericat (2016), have argued that the broader emotional culture or climate of a society plays a significant role in shaping how empathy is expressed at the interpersonal level. There is growing concern that contemporary cultural trends, particularly those emphasizing competition and individualism, may diminish the capacity or willingness of younger generations to express empathy. Although not universally applicable, empirical evidence supports this concern (Konrath et al., 2011). Per Scheff's (1990)

theory of shame, these findings also underscore the fundamental motivation to preserve social connections and to avoid behaviors that might lead to feelings of shame or social exclusion. Thus, empathy is likely to be expressed by adolescents in peer environments where it is socially endorsed. Conversely, it may be inhibited in contexts where empathy is interpreted as a sign of vulnerability or weakness (Miklikowska et al., 2022).

9. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

The present study highlights different socialization agents', including parents, peers, and social media, impact on the development of empathy within adolescents. The study further identifies barriers to empathic development. This study reveals similar findings in thematic analyses to Silke and Brady et al. in 2024 and further builds upon the previous research by analyzing adolescents in the Southwest United States, a region and culture distinct from students in Ireland (Silke, Brady, et al., 2024). This study goes beyond qualitative analysis to offer a quantitative evaluation of the frequency an agent affects empathy and the direction of the effect in a pro-empathic or contra-empathic direction.

A potential limitation of the current findings is that participants were selected from an empathy-based club chapter and were thus likely primed to the idea of empathy and prosociality. These students also likely had some pre-understanding of socialization agents and their role in empathy and prosocial behavior. Despite these limitations, this data expands current knowledge by adding outcomes from a Southern California high school with students from a unique cultural background that has not been previously studied.

Empathy is a trainable trait (Silke, Davitt, et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2003), and adolescence is a critical period for its development given significant sociocognitive growth during this stage (Gaspar & Esteves, 2022). Adolescent empathy levels and development can have lasting social impacts into adulthood (Allemand et al., 2015). In contrast, adulthood is marked by a time when prosocial behaviors see little development (Eisenberg et al., 2005) and bias and prejudice become more resistant to change (Stangor & Schaller, 2000). These findings warrant future research on the development

and application of empathy education programs in secondary schools. By addressing the social agents and overcoming the barriers to empathy activation, programs may be able to enhance empathy amongst adolescents.

The Activating Social Empathy (ASE) curriculum was developed by the team from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at the University of Galway in collaboration with Foróige and the UNESCO Chair in Community, Leadership, and Youth Development at Pennsylvania State University focusing on the development of empathy among Irish students aged 12–16 years (Silke, Davitt, et al., 2024). Based on the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, 2021) framework, the program targets four primary outcomes: 1. Understanding Empathy, 2. Practicing Empathy, 3. Overcoming Empathy Barriers, and 4. Empathy in Action through Service Learning. Delivered by teachers through interactive methods such as role-play, group discussions, and projects, the curriculum is structured to help students progressively develop empathy-related skills like perspective-taking and emotional awareness and address barriers to empathy (Silke, Davitt, et al., 2024). The program has been validated and has undergone cultural adaptation for implementation in American schools (Khatod, 2024). The program offers the chance to mitigate the barriers to empathy and the empathy rules established by adolescents to further empathic and prosocial development within adolescents.

In conclusion, this study highlights the role of socialization agents—parents, peers, and social media—in shaping adolescent empathy. Additionally, the study highlights barriers, such as societal perceptions, that impact an individual's expression of empathy. These findings underscore the need for empathy education programs, like the Activating Social Empathy curriculum, in schools to promote prosocial behavior among adolescents.

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