



***Development of Empathy When Raising a Child in a Cultural Environment That Sanctions Aggression and Violence***  
***Rozwijanie empatii w procesie wychowania dziecka w środowisku kulturowym mogącym sankcjonować agresję***

**ABSTRACT**


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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The purpose of this article is to deepen the knowledge of the significance of developing empathy in the upbringing of young people. This issue concerns various contexts, in which specific patterns and other cultural factors may negatively affect this process.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The primary focus of the study was to investigate the relationship between the development of cognitive empathy among the younger generations and their sociocultural environment. The research approach included a comparative analysis that utilized qualitative data collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Polish regions of Masovia and Podlasie.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The considerations involved several sequential stages, beginning with the presentation of theoretical underpinnings and followed by the examination and explanation of the results of the qualitative research. The final stage entails the construction of postulates and the derivation of conclusions.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The comparative study demonstrates the fact that there is a need to conduct further research on the significance of the social and cultural factors that influence adolescents' and children's cognitive empathy development. These phenomena not only play an important role in building peer relationships, but they also influence the quality of relationships formed later in adult life.

**CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:** It is crucial to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social factors that inhibit the development of cognitive empathy and morality in young people. Studies indicate that fostering cognitive empathy can diminish the inclination toward aggression and violence within peer groups. It is imperative to continue investigating the origins of peer violence across diverse cultural settings. Consequently, there is a pressing need to undertake further research at both the local and global scales.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **UPBRINGING CHILDREN, EMPATHY, SOCIOCULTURAL PATTERNS, AGGRESSION, VIOLENCE**

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## STRESZCZENIE

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**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest pogłębienie wiedzy na temat znaczenia rozwoju empatii w wychowaniu młodych ludzi. Zagadnienie to dotyczy różnych kontekstów, w których np. określone wzorce i inne czynniki kulturowe mogą negatywnie wpływać na ten proces.

**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** Głównym problemem badawczym było zbadanie związku zachodzącego pomiędzy społeczno-kulturowymi uwarunkowaniami a rozwojem empatii poznawczej u przedstawicieli młodych generacji. W metodologii badań zastosowano analizę porównawczą bazującą na wnioskach z etnograficznych badań jakościowych przeprowadzonych na Mazowszu oraz Podlasiu.

**PROCES WYWODU:** Rozważania zostały zrealizowane w kilku etapach. Najpierw przedstawiono podstawy teoretyczne, by na tej podstawie odnieść się do wyników badań jakościowych poddanych interpretacji. W ostatnim etapie pracy skonstruowano uogólnione wnioski oraz postulaty badawcze.

**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Badania porównawcze wykazały, że istnieje potrzeba pogłębienia studiów nad znaczeniem wpływu uwarunkowań społecznych i kulturowych w procesie rozwijania u dzieci i młodzieży empatii poznawczej. Te zjawiska odgrywają istotną rolę nie tylko w budowaniu relacji rówieśniczych, ale także przekładają się na jakość relacji kreowanych przez ludzi w ich dorosłym życiu.

**WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ:** Niezwykle istotne jest zrozumienie wpływu czynników kulturowych i społecznych, które mogą hamować rozwój empatii poznawczej i moralności u młodych ludzi. Badania wskazują, że rozwijanie empatii poznawczej może zmniejszyć skłonność do agresji i przemocy w grupach rówieśniczych. Konieczne jest więc kontynuowanie badań nad przyczynami występowania przemocy rówieśniczej, obecnej w różnych środowiskach kulturowych. W związku z tym istnieje pilna potrzeba rozwijania dalszych studiów zarówno w skali lokalnej, jak i globalnej.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: PROCES WYCHOWANIA, EMPATIA, WZORCE KULTUROWE, AGRESJA, PRZEMOC**

## Introduction

The process of youth education and development has long been one of the most important topics of interest in many scientific disciplines, which share the view that introducing the younger generation to the adult world, alongside educating children and adolescents, is one of the most important and difficult social tasks (Karbowniczek, 2020, pp. 225–226). Certain issues could surface during this time and impede the child's proper development; two of them are the consequences of violence and of peer aggression. The findings of the study highlight the key role that sociocultural circumstances play in the development of empathy in children (Strayer & Roberts, 2004; Hoffman, 2000), which may correlate with an increase or decrease in aggressive and violent tendencies.

In this article, I focus on disturbed patterns of social interaction and the underlying mechanisms that prevent children and adolescents from developing and expressing empathy. Research by social psychologists indicates that helping children to acquire cognitive empathy at this stage of development not only reduces aggressiveness, but also increases compassion and awareness of the needs of others through the ability to take on their perspective (Zuckerman et al., 1980; Eisenberg et al., 1991; de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Woolrych, 2020, p. 2; Baron-Cohen, 2014, p. 31).

In my research, it is assumed that peer violence is supported by some cultural patterns, especially those from the past, which allow or even encourage the use of aggressiveness and violence as a means of resolving conflicts in Polish society. Recognizing these phenomena through the analysis of sociocultural occurrences may be the first step in reducing peer aggression and violence. Simultaneously, it is important to strengthen and model empathy by supporting sociomoral attitudes and behaviors related to it.

This study's methodology is based on my personal qualitative fieldwork (in-depth interviews) carried out in southern Podlasie (between 2010 and 2017) and Mazovia (between 2014 and 2018) at the Anthropology Department of Vistula University (previously A. Gieysztor Academy of Humanities). The results of a project carried out in cooperation with Zespół Ośrodków Wsparcia [the Complex of Support Centers] in Piastów, Poland, with the goals of social diagnosis and counteracting violence in the Pruszków district and called the District Program Against Violence in the Family for 2024–2029, as well research entitled "Młode głowy", UNaweza Foundation (2023), were also used. The study incorporated theoretical concerns and previous research results related to the topic.

## The Importance of Developing Empathy Among the Younger Generation

Baron-Cohen's definition of empathy emphasizes that it involves not only recognizing another person's thoughts or feelings, but also responding appropriately with the right emotions and behavioral scripts. To better understand this phenomenon, he proposed different empathy indicators based on recognized scales (Baron-Cohen, 2014, p. 32). Hoffman (2000) presented research based on the empathy trajectory model. Firstly, it enables us to differentiate between empathy at lower and higher levels. Lower-order empathy, which entails an instinctive reaction, is usually linked to affective empathy, which is the propensity to feel other people's pain (Hoffman, 2000). This leads one to believe that empathy, from an evolutionary perspective, is essential for regulating social interactions and fostering teamwork in order to accomplish shared objectives (de Waal, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to Chiara Bulgarelli and Emily J.H. Jones "general frameworks identify two main components of empathy, an affective one (i.e. experiencing a feeling that is alike the one perceived to be felt by the other) and a cognitive one (i.e. understanding the other's emotional state)" (2023, p. 2).

When children acquire cognitive empathy, which is related to the ability to understand the needs and feelings of others and to decode the thoughts of others (perspective-taking), they engage in higher-order empathy (Hoffman, 2000). Young people with enhanced cognitive empathy are more sensitive and are better adapted to everyday school and social life. These individuals more easily find their way into peer groups and create support systems in the social network (Vaish et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2013). These abilities are also important in their adult lives. In this context, we can observe how sociocultural conditioning influences the development of cognitive empathy. The experiences, knowledge sharing, and internalized relational patterns that young people perceive in their social environment contribute to this process (Woolrych, 2020). As a result, higher levels of cognitive empathy may emerge, but may also be “muted” or restricted to specific individuals or social groups (for more on empathy in rival groups, see Singer & Lamm, 2009, pp. 83–84). According to Hoffman’s study, empathy can vary in different situations and sometimes even highly empathic individuals may display less empathetic reactions and behavior (2000). Empathy is not static; it can change over time, but also depends on social interactions (Sharkey, 1985, p. 50; Assimakopoulos, 1987, p. 26).

The research of Hein and his team at the University of Zurich shows these phenomena, as well as the degree of identification with one’s own community (even if it is an imagined community) and the preference for one’s own group, which we could associate with “selective” empathy. They studied the brain activity of two opposing teams’ fans when they watched a scene where the fans’ hands were electrically shocked. Their brain activity showed empathy for members of their group and compassionate reactions toward them. The observation of their opponents’ pain indicated pleasure-related brain activity (Hein et al., 2010, pp. 149–160). The experiment shows that empathy was limited to members of one’s own group for cultural reasons; it also leads to the conclusion that inflicting pain on members of marginalized groups can generate enthusiasm when their suffering is witnessed. Alaiza Luft (2015, p. 149), who studied the reasons for violent behavior, argued that in such research we should also take into account the variability of human behavior, especially in situations where individuals may transgress the boundaries of their moral behavioral scripts. Such behavior is often rooted in social relations, which could support violence or passive attitudes toward such acts.

It is therefore worth noting under which conditions cognitive empathy is enhanced and under which conditions it is weakened or restricted to selected individuals or groups. Cultural conditions dividing people into their own kind and strangers may play an important role in such phenomena. Limited empathy may also apply to people stigmatized by negative stereotypes or others who experience the consequences of stigmatization, discrimination, social exclusion, and violence for various reasons. It may also involve cultural patterns and practices that sanction aggression related to the subordination of individuals. This phenomenon is visible when a person disrupts the constructed social order associated with explicit and implicit norms and rules and they are isolated, marginalized, or exposed to such strong social pressure that their life strategies change from active to passive. These phenomena can be evident in everyday life, which Pierre

Bourdieu (2001) defines as *symbolic violence*, when conflicts arise due to significant asymmetries in social relations (for example, according to status, position, or authority).

## Cultural Conditions Affecting the Development of Empathy

In light of Hoffman's studies on the importance of developing cognitive empathy in young people, more attention should be paid to the diversity of cultural conditions that can influence this process. For example, the term "schadenfreude," which was once common in Europe (although it appeared in different linguistic forms), has often been explained as taking pleasure in the misfortune of others (Powell & Smith, 2012). This phenomenon has been observed both in adult and child groups. It may be due to resentment or jealousy, but according to other researchers, it may also be a reaction to injustice. Research conducted among children has led to the hypothesis that schadenfreude may have evolved as a reaction to the experience of injustice and inequality (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2014).

Consequences such as inequality are also visible in cultural patterns associated with aggressive scenarios of social relations among men, referred to as the "culture of honor" (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). As regards this study, seniors from Podlasie and Masovia were brought up in this type of culture. In a hierarchical society, family wealth, class, age, gender, role, and social position vary greatly. One of the main reasons for the fear of losing face and status in groups was the desire to protect one's honor. A combination of these elements created a fear of "what people would say," while each individual was controlled by the group (especially in the countryside). Inappropriate behavior could damage the family's reputation in their community. Even rumors had similar potential. According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 178), people may behave irrationally if they are motivated by something other than the desire to maximize their material gains or losses, such as recognition or dignity – that is, if they act in a way consistent with the values and standards of honorable behavior. Conflict sometimes leads to strong polarization in interpersonal relationships due to a combination of phenomena such as domination, inferiority, or humiliation. For these reasons, the defense of dignity (perceived as a value) may indicate a deficit of recognition, but at the same time, it could be a response to injustices, reflecting strong divisions in the social hierarchy and asymmetry in relations.

In traditional upbringing patterns, boys were trained to use force (e.g., to defend their honor or, in adulthood, for family members or communities). According to Professor Wojciszke (2004), "in the face of the slightest insult, aggression was sanctioned, which was a normal response to insults" (p. 463). Men's aggression and violence appear to be part of the cultural stereotype of masculinity in this type of community. The boys internalized the patterns of dominance and aggression; in adulthood, they often reproduced them in their family lives.

At present, young men are still experiencing the consequences of old masculine patterns transforming into new ones. Research clearly proves that men's feeling that they are unable to meet the social images of their own gender and need to prove their masculinity to

themselves and others is a source of tension that causes internal conflict, low self-esteem, and health problems. On the other hand, cooperation – not dominance – plays a major role in new patterns of masculinity, which is also visible in the new canon of partnerships and the definition of a father's role (Dzwonkowska-Godula, 2011, pp. 111–127).

According to Radzińska research of younger generations the “culture of honor,” which is often embodied by grandparents, belongs to the past. Young people aged 20–30 has revealed that their main values include respect, kindness, and pleasure in the sense of joy (Radzińska, 2023). In-depth interviews with young people rarely emphasize the value of honor; however, this does not mean that young people are no longer interested in a positive social image and the acceptance of their peers. The majority of elementary- and secondary-school students have a deficit of acceptance (including self-acceptance) and recognition, which corresponds with problems in their mental health.<sup>2</sup>

The search for recognition is often part of new trends offered by popular culture and online activities that influence peer relationships. It has been demonstrated that a person's difficulty in building their identity and forming an independently functioning component of human mental regulation is due to the incorrect development of a mature form of empathic communication established in family relationships and peer groups. Reduced empathy may also be due to a high level of stimulation caused by urbanization, a fast-paced lifestyle, and overstimulation due to the abundance of information from the digital world, which also correspond to a limited focus on tasks that require mindfulness. Difficulties in life and increased stress promote a focus on oneself (Wilczek-Różyńska, 2002, p. 18), which may hinder the development of altruistic behavior and the stable development of cognitive empathy.

The process of cultural transformation is characterized by a crisis caused by incoherence and the lack of stable foundations, which are important for the harmonious development of young people. The consequences of the changes experienced by children and adolescents are also linked to a sense of uncertainty about the development of their own identity, which should be supported by real, stable authorities and cultural role models. The influence of consumer culture trends is increasingly evident, as prestige and recognition are increasingly linked to family wealth, which can play an important role in the formation of peer relationships. Not only is this divisive, but it can also lead to economic violence among peer groups. This increases the likelihood of marginalization, which can also occur for other reasons, such as cultural differences (Zespół Ośrodków Wsparcia w Piastowie, n.d.). Groups are governed by specific formal or informal rules, which also apply to peer relationships. They include prescriptive norms that specify, for example,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, research conducted among schoolchildren entitled *Młode głowy* (through the UNaweza Foundation) revealed a very low level of self-esteem among children and adolescents in Poland. The research lasted from October 25, 2022 to March 10, 2023 and involved 184,000 students aged 10–19 from elementary and secondary schools from all over Poland. The results indicate that 65.9% of students would like to have more self-respect, 58.4% of students sometimes feel useless, 46% have extremely low self-esteem, 31.6% do not like themselves, and 26.4% consider themselves to be less valuable than others (Fundacja UNaweza, 2023).

how a person should behave, what they should represent if they want to gain the approval of group members, and what consequences and punishment may be imposed if the group cohesion is destabilized. Opposing the dominant group in isolation (that is, without the support of others) in the face of peer stigma or violence is costly for a young person, which is one reason why passive people behave in a conformist manner. Dif-fused responsibility, anonymity, and deindividuation are possible phenomena as well. This could correspond with the process of losing one's moral identity (under certain cir-cumstances), making it simpler to act in a way that is compliant rather than morally right.

## Summary

Hoffman's research on the importance of developing cognitive empathy in the upbringing of young people needs to be deepened, particularly in relation to the cultural conditions that influence this process. The current research highlights the fact that some of the traditional cultural influences and methods used in the upbringing of boys and girls had dysfunctional consequences for their adult lives. In particular, cultural scripts sup-porting aggressive conflict resolution strategies and reflecting stereotypes of a real man were dysfunctional. In addition, boys' ability to express empathy was hindered by their training to suppress their emotions, which was connoted as weakness. Modern culture has changed not only the basis of conventional child-rearing practices, but also the roles played by men and women in the home and the relationships between them, which also involves a new model of fatherhood.

These changes are not easy to achieve. Qualitative research in families in the Pod-lasie and Masovia regions has shown that children often receive conflicting input due to differences between traditional and modern cultural patterns. They internalize behavio-ral scripts from different sources, which leads to difficulties in building harmonious social relationships, among other things. In many families, boys are still not supposed to be weak and emotional (stereotypically like women), even if they no longer defend their honor (according to the "culture of honor").

Violence remains an ongoing social problem. Aggression and violence have not dis-appeared and even if the causes are different than in the past, the phenomenon often intensifies and takes on a new form in peer relationships. Distorted relationship patterns can create an impression of normality that young people may adopt. If the social envi-ronment promotes patterns based on domination, control, and violence, these tenden-cies may also be reflected in peer groups and in adulthood. However, evil is sometimes difficult for young people to identify, especially if the adult world offers patterns of social interaction based on sharp social divisions, aggressive behavior, relationships based on prejudice, and negative stereotypes. It is important to support the development of cognitive empathy in young people, with the support of real authorities from the adult world acting as guides, sensitizing children and adolescents to the needs of others, and helping them to transcend the social boundaries that divide people into "us" and

“them” – promoting not only altruism, but also those scripts of behavior that defy aggression, discrimination, and violence. Therefore, research on the correlation between cognitive empathy and the cultural determinants that influence the process of raising children should continue, not only on a local or national level, but also cross-culturally.

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