

**Interpersonal Emotional Responses in Violent  
Offenders: (Re) examining the role of Empathy.**

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Thanks for your friendship, and for being someone I'm proud to call my colleague.

## Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text.

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## Preface

It is necessary to provide an explanation of the presentation style of this thesis. The work for this thesis was completed via article submission and in order to reflect that appropriately, each article has been presented in its entirety. Therefore, some chapters consist wholly of a single article; while other chapters include preambles, theoretical expansion of the article and the like. For ease of reading, each article is presented with tables and figures inserted into the text and with end references removed. The final reference list contains references for the whole thesis. A cover page has been left attached to each article along with the abstract. Additionally, the full reference for each article is presented in a footnote on the appropriate cover page.

## Abstract

The study of empathy has had a long history in both psychology and philosophy; however, debate has continued in relation to the exact nature of the construct. Several distinct variants of empathy have evolved over time, with some researchers viewing the construct as cognitive, while others emphasise the affective nature of empathy. An examination of the history of the construct reveals evidence which supports both positions. Multidimensional models of empathy, such as that posed by Davis (1994), encompass both cognitive and affective accounts of empathy, as well as their interaction. Despite the apparent acceptance of multidimensional models of empathy, confusion still remains as to the definition of empathy. This has restrained theories of the relationship between empathy and constructs such as aggression.

The current program of study sought to clarify the relationship between aggression and empathy, focusing on a multidimensional approach. It was argued that previous research relied on the assumed inhibitory nature of empathy on aggression, and although intuitive, had failed to acknowledge alternative explanations for a relationship between empathy and aggression. Three possible explanations to account for a possible relationship between empathy and aggression were therefore examined. firstly, that the distress cues of another produce distress in the observer (personal distress) and that distress is interpreted as aversive. Personal distress produces a drive to reduce the aversive state which may result in the use of violence by some individuals. (Empathic arousal functioning as a facilitator of aggression); secondly, that the distress cues of another fail to produce an affective reaction in some observers. (Empathic arousal failing to function as an inhibitor of aggression); and

thirdly, that the distress cues of another produce an affective reaction in some observers, which is interpreted as an excitation (contrast empathy), and functions to reinforce the use of violence. (Empathic arousal functioning as a facilitator of aggression).

During phase 1 of the research the psychometric properties of the empathy measure, currently used with offenders, were examined in an offender sample. Results from 88 violent offenders indicated that the measure was not suitable for use with offender samples, and therefore new scales needed to be produced before research could continue. Two scales were constructed; the Negative Affect Intolerance Scale (NAIS) assessed offenders' level of intolerance toward distress cues of others, while the Offender Contrast Affect Scale (OCAS) assessed offenders' level of excitation and enjoyment of the distress cues of others. Once scale construction had been complete, the psychometric properties of the scales were examined using sample of 166 university students. These preliminary results indicated that both scales were reliable and valid.

Phase 2 of the research program began with a pilot study to examine the psychometric properties of the two newly constructed scales with sample of 49 incarcerated male offenders. Both scales once again produced results which supported their reliability and validity. A larger study was then conducted to examine the three theorised roles that empathy may play in either the production or maintenance of aggression. Cluster analysis identified 5 clusters in a sample of 106 sentenced male offenders, based on their responses to a set of scales (including the NAIS and OCAS). Each of these clusters was compared to a Western Australian community sample (43 low SES

males). Results supported all three explanations of a relationship between empathy and aggression, within different clusters of offenders.

The final phase of research involved postulating a theoretical role for cognitive aspects of empathy (perspective taking) in the production or inhibition of aggression. It was argued that, despite the apparent simplicity with which the construct has been dealt with in the literature, perspective taking should be considered a two dimensional construct (frequency & accuracy). When considered in this way, perspective taking may provide additional guidance in the study and treatment of human aggression.

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