

The Impact of Gender on Empathy

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Introduction

Research Questions

Empathy has been the focus of countless studies making the research on this topic plentiful (Davis, 1996; King, 2011; Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Yet, there are still significant aspects of empathy that remain unexplored. This study examines the impact gender has on the levels of empathy people feel. This research aimed to answer several questions. First, what impact does the gender of the empathizer have on the level of empathy they express? Second, does the gender of the “victim” in a situation impact empathy levels? Finally, when a third party, or second-hand “victim” is involved in the scenario will their gender impact the level of empathy felt?

Literature Review

Defining empathy.

A significant challenge in the study of empathy is defining the concept consistently. It is crucial that a widely accepted definition of this term be established, since empathy is described as being “one of the most fundamental skills in the repertoire of human social behavior” (Rameson, Morelli, & Lieberman, 2011, p. 1). Due to its multifaceted nature, empathy has been defined in a variety of ways depending on the objectives of the individual study. For example, Gerdes and Segal (2009) identify empathy as having both a passive and an active form, which they refer to as “the dual nature of empathy” (p. 116). There is agreement around this proposition that empathy has a twofold meaning. In one study it was found that empathy could most appropriately be described as a combination of tenderness and sympathy (Niezink, Siero, Dijkstra, Buunk & Barelds, 2012).

The most relevant definition to the present study is the one found in *The Social Work Dictionary* which defines empathy as “the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person” (Barker, 2003). Nearly all researchers address the “responding” aspect of Barker’s definition by emphasizing the importance of not just the feeling itself of empathy, but also what is done in reaction to this feeling (Gerdes, Lietz & Segal, 2011; Gerdes & Segal, 2009; King, 2011). While a universal definition of empathy is yet to be established, the consensus is that empathy is the feeling one gets in reaction to the experiences or emotions of another that may or may not result in some sort of action on the part of the empathizer. This is the definition that will be used moving forward with this study.

Measuring empathy.

Measuring empathy is another significant challenge. There is no universal empathy scale meaning different studies use unique tools to measure this concept.

There are a variety of self-report surveys that have been used by researchers to gather data on empathy. The Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) is one which is “based on a comprehensive definition of empathy that is rooted in social cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology, and social work’s commitment to social justice” (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011, p. 83).

In a different study the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES) was used “to provide an objective measure of emotional empathy” (Manolakis, Olin, Thornton, Dolder & Hanrahan, 2011, p. 3). This is a 30-item questionnaire where participants respond to statements on a scale between very strong agreement and very strong disagreement.

King and Holosko focused an entire study on determining if the Empathy Scale for Social Workers (ESSW) was valid and reliable as a measure of empathy among this specific population. The ESSW is described as a “41-item self-report inventory designed to assess empathy in social work practitioners” (King & Holosko, 2012, p. 174). What makes this instrument useful is that it measures the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of empathy, which are all important, especially in the field of social work.

Some studies also use narratives as a way of gathering data. Lietz (2011) interviewed individuals and asked them questions about the “experiences of [their] family” in relation to empathy (p. 257).

Other researchers turn to neurology to measure empathy in a more scientific fashion. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) sessions were used in one study to record what was taking place in the brain while participants read and looked at depictions of sad situations (Rameson, Morelli, & Lieberman, 2011).

There are three ways empathy tends to be measured in research studies. The most widely used are self-report surveys. There are many variations of empathy self-report surveys manipulated based on what data is being gathered and who the participants are. Less frequently used (yet still beneficial) measures of empathy are narratives and neurological activity.

Importance of empathy for helping professionals.

While a specific definition of empathy may not be clear, it is widely agreed that it is essential to helping professionals. As King (2011) states, “psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and humanistic perspectives all focus, to some degree, on the use of empathy and related interpersonal skills to define any successful helping relationship” (p. 680).

The concrete benefits of empathy have been studied frequently in the medical field. One study demonstrated that “physician empathy [is] linked to physician diagnostic ability, job satisfaction, and likelihood of malpractice claims and to patient adherence, satisfaction, and health outcomes” (Passalacque & Segrin, 2012, p. 451). Another study found more generally that “empathy improves health outcomes”, which the researchers credited to the fact that “patients want to be understood rather than pitied” (Williams, Sadasivan, Kadirvelu, & Olausson, 2014, p. 149-150). Clearly, it is necessary for medical professionals to possess the ability to empathize with their patients.

This same importance can presumably be extended to all helping professionals. Social work specifically focuses on the “decision-making” or “the need to take action” portion of empathy (Gerdes & Segal, 2009, p. 121). Physically reacting to ones feelings of empathy is an essential element of the social work profession. Even though empathy is universally agreed upon as being a necessary social work skill there are still questions that remain unanswered about how to best utilize it.

Gender and empathy.

Gender tends to play a role in nearly all facets of daily life, many times unknowingly. This being the case, it is likely that gender plays a role in the expression of emotions, such as empathy.

Gerdes and Segal (2009) examine the human instinct to judge others. They note, “we may have a bias towards those we deem worthy of our concern” (Gerdes & Segal, 2009, p. 119). Davis (1996) elaborates on this proposition. He explains how “we need to believe that individuals receive the outcomes they deserve” and as a result “when exposed to apparent injustice of an innocent person suffering...one response of observers

is to judge the victim more harshly” (Davis, 1996, p. 100). It seems as though some people may refrain from feeling empathetic as a way of maintaining the belief that negative occurrences are rare and can be rationalized.

Neurology also suggests that women are more empathetic than men. By analyzing brain structures it was found that both the right and left frontal lobes of women are sensitive to emotions, where as in men this was only true of the right frontal lobe (Schoore, 1997). With this being the case, women are biologically more capable of being sensitive to and potentially expressing feelings.

This suggestion that women are more empathetic than men was tested in an interesting study done by Suzanne Osman who looked into how empathetic men and women were towards both rape victims and perpetrators. Osman (2011), along with many others, found that in general women are more empathetic towards victims of rape than men (p. 513). Her data also revealed that participants were more empathetic towards female perpetrators than male perpetrators, particularly when a female was victimizing a male (Osman, 2011, p. 513). Osman suggests this may be due to the general assumption that women cannot cause serious harm to men.

While there has been some research done on the impact gender has on empathy in regards to sexual assault, the data is severely lacking in relation to other types of tragedies.

Need for Study

Empathy is a topic that has generated much attention and research, especially in being noted as an essential skill for helping professionals. Even so, there is still much that remains unclear. The literature suggests that people are more empathetic towards those

whose experiences they can relate to. It is also likely that there are other factors that can influence how empathetic people are towards situations. Previous studies have concluded that empathy levels can vary depending on the gender of those involved, particularly in situations of sexual assault. However, there are still many unanswered questions about just what role gender plays in expressions of empathy.

While there is a fair amount of research showing that in general women are more empathetic than men, there has been far less exploration around what impact the gender of the person being empathized with has on empathy levels. It is the main purpose of the present study to explore this area.

Methodology

Participants

There were few restrictions on who could participate in this study. Anyone over the age of eighteen was eligible to complete the survey after agreeing to the consent form provided as the first question (Appendix A). It outlined the purpose and function of the survey. It also promised that confidentiality would be maintained and emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary and stated participants were free to end the survey at any time. Those taking the survey were given the option to either agree or disagree to these terms. After doing so, participants could begin the survey.

Participants were found using an online blog site, Reddit. This website contains a variety of categories in which people can share comments or questions. The surveys for this study were posted in a section dedicated entirely to surveys, labeled using the basic description that the survey was exploring gender and empathy for academic purposes.

The two different surveys were posted days apart at several different times, to assure that both surveys were completed by different individuals visiting this website.

Survey

Two surveys were created using the online survey generator Survey Monkey (Appendix B). Each survey began with demographic questions collecting data on participant gender and age. The remainder of the survey consisted of 5 different scenarios to which participants were asked to rate their empathy level from 1 (not empathetic to all) to 5 (extremely empathetic). The only difference between the two surveys was that the gender of one individual in each scenario was changed.

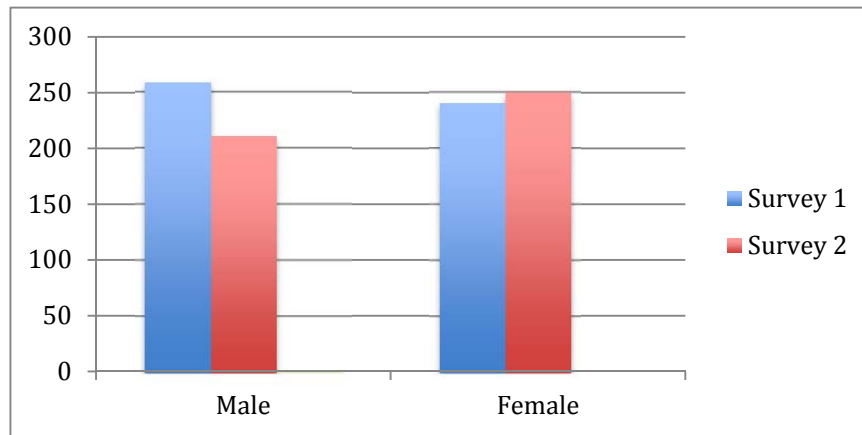
Each scenario involved up to two individuals. On certain questions, participants (who will be referred to as the empathizers) were asked to empathize with the individual who was the immediate target of the tragedy. These individuals will be referred to as the primary target. In other scenarios, participants were instructed to empathize with an individual close to the victim of the tragedy. These individuals will be referred to as a secondary target. For example, scenario two reads, “An 80-year-old grandmother passes away. How empathetic are you towards her 27-year-old granddaughter?”. In this case the grandmother is the primary target and the granddaughter is the secondary target. Establishing and understanding these labels for the individuals involved will be important moving forward.

Results

Data was analyzed for the two surveys. A total of 961 individuals participated in this study. Survey 1 was completed by 500 respondents, 48.2% of which identified as female and 51.8% identified as male. The age range for survey 1 was between 18 and 60

years old, with an average age of 25 years old. Survey 2 was completed by 461 individuals, 54.23% of whom were female and 45.77% were male. The age range for this survey was also 18 to 60 years old, with the mean age being 24.5. The graph below depicts the gender distribution of the two surveys.

Gender by Survey



The data was analyzed by survey, scenario, and demographics. Tables 1 and 2 contain the scenarios from both surveys in the order they were presented to participants. The individual in bold indicates the person whose gender was changed between surveys.

Table 1: Survey 1 Scenarios

Scenario	
1	A 25-year-old woman is sexually assaulted on her way home from work. How empathetic are you towards her?
2	An 80-year-old grandmother passes away. How empathetic are you towards her 27-year-old grandson ?
3	A 40-year-old man is diagnosed with terminal cancer. How empathetic are you towards his 9-year-old son?
4	A married couple in their 30s loses their home in a fire. How empathetic are you towards the husband ?
5	A 15-year-old female is in a serious car accident and is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. How empathetic are you towards her mother ?

Table 2: Survey 2 Scenarios

Scenario	
1	<i>A 25-year-old man is sexually assaulted on his way home from work. How empathetic are you towards him?</i>
2	<i>An 80-year-old grandmother passes away. How empathetic are you towards her 27-year-old granddaughter?</i>
3	<i>A 40-year-old woman is diagnosed with terminal cancer. How empathetic are you towards her 9-year-old son?</i>
4	<i>A married couple in their 30s loses their home in a fire. How empathetic are you towards the wife?</i>
5	<i>A 15-year-old female is in a serious car accident and is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. How empathetic are you towards her father?</i>

The mean empathy level from each scenario was broken down into five different categories- the overall mean, the mean of female participants, the mean of male participants, the mean of participants ages 18-40, and the mean of participants ages 41-60. The median empathy level was also calculated. These analyses were done for each scenario on both surveys and are displayed in tables 3 and 4. The scenarios will be referred to in decimal form using their survey number and scenario number. For example, scenario 2 from survey 1 will be referred to as scenario 1.2.

For scenario 1.1 the overall mean empathy level of all respondents was 4.24. For females the mean was 4.53, while for males it was 3.97. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.45 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.55. The median of scenario 1.1 was 5. Scenario 1.2 had an overall mean empathy level of 3.41. For females the mean was 3.76, while for males it was 3.08. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.20 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.55. The median for this scenario was 4. For scenario 1.3 the overall mean empathy level of all

respondents was 4.07. For females the mean was 4.28, while for males it was 3.88. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.42 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.42. The median empathy level for scenario 1.3 was 4. Scenario 1.4 had an overall mean empathy level of 3.73. For females the mean was 4.00, while for males it was 3.49. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.34 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.40. The median empathy level was 4. The overall mean empathy level of all respondents from scenario 1.5 was 3.63. For females the mean was 3.92, while for males it was 3.37. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.25 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.66. The median empathy level was 4. These values are displayed in table 3 below.

Table 3
Survey 1 Analyses

Scenario	Overall Mean	Overall Median	Female Mean	Male Mean	18-40 Mean	41-60 Mean
1	4.24	5	4.53	3.97	3.45	3.55
2	3.41	4	3.76	3.08	3.20	3.55
3	4.07	4	4.28	3.88	3.42	3.42
4	3.73	4	4.00	3.49	3.34	3.40
5	3.63	4	3.92	3.37	3.25	3.66

The overall mean empathy level of all respondents in scenario 2.1 was 4.10. For females the mean was 4.37, while for males it was 3.78. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.44 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.50. The median for this scenario was 4. On 2.2 the overall mean empathy level of all respondents was 3.55. For females the mean was 3.68 and for males it was 3.39. The mean empathy level

of 18-40 years olds was 3.25 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.50. The median for scenario 2.2 was 4. Scenario 2.3 had an overall mean empathy level of 4.20. For females the mean was 4.29, while for males it was 4.09. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.36 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.63. The median for this scenario was 5. The overall mean empathy level of all respondents for scenario 2.4 was 3.85. For females the mean was 4.03, while for males it was 3.64. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.42 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.58. The median empathy level for 2.4 was 4. Scenario 2.5 had an overall mean empathy level of 3.71. For females the mean was 3.77 and for males it was 3.64. The mean empathy level of 18-40 years olds was 3.22 and those over 40 had a mean empathy level of 3.33. The median for 2.5 was 4. These calculations are displayed in table 4 below.

Table 4
Survey 2 Analyses

Scenario	Overall Mean	Overall Median	Female Mean	Male Mean	18-40 Mean	41-60 Mean
1	4.10	4	4.37	3.78	3.44	3.50
2	3.55	4	3.68	3.39	3.25	3.62
3	4.20	5	4.29	4.09	3.36	3.63
4	3.85	4	4.03	3.64	3.42	3.58
5	3.71	4	3.77	3.64	3.22	3.33

For all ten scenarios, the range of empathy levels was from 1 to 5. The highlighted values in the tables represent which scenario had a higher average empathy level between survey 1 and survey 2. For all scenarios other than scenario one, the

version from survey 2 had a higher mean empathy level. The italicized values are the highest mean values for each category of participants. For three of the five categories (overall mean, female mean, and 18-40 mean), scenario 1.1 elicited the greatest level of empathy. For males, scenario 2.3 elicited the greatest level of empathy, and for participants between the ages of 41 and 60, scenario 1.5 elicited the highest level of empathy.

The median for eight of the ten scenarios was 4. The only two scenarios with a median of 5 were scenario 1.1 and scenario 2.3.

Discussion

Findings

The information this data provides is valuable in looking at how gender impacts empathy levels. In all 10 scenarios, females in general were more empathetic than males regardless of the gender of those involved in the fictional situation.

The scenario that was overall empathized with the most was scenario 1.1, in which a woman was sexually assaulted. In this scenario over half of the participants rated their empathy level a 5, indicating they were extremely empathetic. Of all 10 scenarios, women empathized with this scenario the most, and it was the second most empathized with by men. This suggests that the finality of the tragedy does not necessarily impact empathy levels. In this scenario, no one died, and yet it was empathized with more than other scenarios involving death. The severity of sexual assault is clearly understood by many, as represented by the high level of empathy expressed. This corresponds with the research done by Suzanne Orman (2011) comparing the responses of men and women to rape victims and perpetrators.

The scenario that men empathized with the most was 2.3, which reads, “A 40-year-old **woman** is diagnosed with terminal cancer. How empathetic are you towards her 9-year-old son?”. It is possible that men were most empathetic towards this scenario because it was the one they could relate to the most. All participants were over the age of 18, meaning they likely remember what it was like to be 9 years old. Also in this scenario, the primary target is a female, as compared to scenario 1.3 in which the primary target is male. This suggests that the gender of both the primary and secondary target does impact the level of empathy felt.

In scenarios 1 through 4, the empathy level on average was greater when the gender of either the primary or secondary target (whichever was switched between surveys) was female. It is interesting to see that the gender of both the primary and secondary targets influences how empathetic participants were. For example, scenario 3 reads, “An 80-year-old grandmother passes away. How empathetic are you towards her 27-year-old **granddaughter/grandson**?”. In this situation on both surveys the primary target is a female, yet the empathy level still increased when the secondary target is a female when compared to when the secondary target is a male.

The one scenario when this did not hold true was scenario 5 which reads, “A 15-year-old female is in a serious car accident and is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. How empathetic are you towards her **father/mother**?”. In this case, participants were more empathetic towards the father (mean empathy level of 3.71) when compared to the empathy level felt towards the mother (mean empathy level of 3.63). What is also interesting to note here, is that females were more empathetic towards the mother, while

males were more empathetic towards the father. This suggests that people may be more empathetic towards those of their gender.

In all 10 scenarios, participants ages 41 to 60 were more (or in one case equally as) empathetic than those ages 18 to 40. The scenario the older age bracket was most empathetic to overall was scenario 1.5. The younger age bracket was overall the most empathetic towards scenario 1.1. Again, this makes sense given the prior research (Davis, 1996) that shows people are more empathetic towards those they can relate to. The primary target (and in this case also the secondary target) in scenario 1.1 is 25 years old, whereas in scenario 1.5 the secondary target is a parent with a 15-year-old child. Likely those in the 18-40 age range can relate to the 25 year-old relatively easily, while the older participants have an easier time relating to a parent who is most likely around their age.

The scenario with the biggest difference between the empathy level of males and females was scenario 1.2. For this scenario, the difference between the male and female means was .68. Scenario 1.5 had the greatest difference between the two different age brackets. There was a .41 difference in average empathy levels between age categories for this scenario. For scenarios 1 and 2 the difference in average empathy levels between surveys was .14, which is the greatest difference of all scenarios. With both of these scenarios, the version with female targets was empathized with more.

Limitations

There are certain limitations to this study that need to be taken into consideration. No definition of empathy was provided meaning participants may not have understood what the questions were asking. As noted in the literature, empathy is a complex term easily confused with other emotions. Providing a definition of empathy for participants to

reference could have helped to eliminate the chance that participants were unsure what was being asked of them.

Another limitation is that the majority of participants were in their 20s. This is likely a result of the fact that distribution method was the Internet. Young people are more likely to be on a blog site, such as Reddit, making this survey more accessible to them than older individuals. Future research on this topic could involve more people over the age of 50, making the data more representative of the whole population.

Recommendations

A key component this research is lacking is identifying why it is that people empathize the amount they indicate. Gathering qualitative data would help to explore this aspect of empathy more, providing insight into what it is about scenarios that people are particularly empathetic towards.

Asking participants for more demographic information could also provide valuable information into what other factors impact empathy. It would be interesting to explore what impact race and religion have on empathy levels felt towards different situations. This research focused only on age and gender, but there are likely far more factors influencing how empathetic people are towards different scenarios.

Looking into the impact age of “victims” has on participants’ empathy levels would also be valuable. While ages of individuals in the scenarios were provided, they were the same between the two surveys, meaning the impact the age of those being empathized with has on empathy levels cannot be determined. There still remains a huge amount of information about empathy that remains unknown. Future research on this

topic could be extremely valuable, especially to helping professionals who utilize this skill regularly.

Conclusion

The ability to empathize with others is an incredibly important skill, particularly for those in the helping profession. It is crucial that people are aware of what variables impact empathic abilities. Prior studies (Schore, 1997; Orman, 2011) had been done, demonstrating that women are more empathetic than men. Studies in the past have also focused on sexual assaults in particular when looking at empathy and gender (Osman, 2011). The current research elaborates on the effects gender has on empathy levels, by showing that the gender of both primary and secondary targets has an influence over how much empathy is felt. It also presented a variety of scenarios covering many different types of empathy provoking situations beyond sexual assault. It is likely there are other factors impacting empathy as well that are yet to be researched. This study proves there is a continued need to learn more about this fascinating skill.

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Appendix A
Consent Form

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a social work graduate student at the University of New England. As part of my coursework, I am conducting a study on empathy. I am inviting you to participate in this study to explore the relationship between gender and empathy.

Participants over the age of 18 and of all backgrounds are invited to take this survey. The survey consists of different scenarios for which you will be asked to indicate your level of empathy.

There are no anticipated significant risks associated with involvement in this research. Participants are free to stop participation in the study at any time.

Confidentiality will be protected, as there will be no identifying information connected to your individual responses.

Participation in this study is voluntary. A decision to decline to participate will not have any negative effects for you.

Please use the information below to contact me with any questions or concerns.

BY CHOOSING TO AGREE TO THESE TERMS, YOU ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Kaitlin Rice, Social Work MSW Student,

e-mail: krice3@une.edu

Appendix B
Surveys

Survey 1:

Are you over 18? Yes No

CONSENT: Agree Disagree

Gender: Male Female

Age: _____

Empathy is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings”

For the following scenarios please rate your level of empathy from 1-5 with 1 being not empathetic at all and 5 being extremely empathetic. Please circle the number you feel best corresponds to your level of empathy.

1.) A 25-year-old woman is sexually assaulted on her way home from work. How empathetic are you towards her?

1 2 3 4 5

2.) An 80-year-old grandmother passes away. How empathetic are you towards her 18-year-old grandson?

1 2 3 4 5

3.) A 40-year-old man is diagnosed with terminal cancer. How empathetic are you towards his 9-year-old son?

1 2 3 4 5

4.) A married couple in their 30s loses their home in a fire. How empathetic are towards for the husband?

1 2 3 4 5

5.) A 15-year-old female is in a serious car accident and is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. How empathetic are you towards her mother?

1 2 3 4 5

Survey 2:

Are you over 18? Yes No

CONSENT: Agree Disagree

Gender: Male Female

Age: _____

Empathy is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings”

For the following scenarios please rate your level of empathy from 1-5 with 1 being not empathetic at all and 5 being extremely empathetic. Please circle the number you feel best corresponds to your level of empathy.

1.) A 25-year-old man is sexually assaulted on his way home from work. How empathetic are you towards him?

1 2 3 4 5

2.) An 80-year-old grandmother passes away. How empathetic are you towards her 18-year-old granddaughter?

1 2 3 4 5

3.) A 40-year-old woman is diagnosed with terminal cancer. How empathetic are you towards her 9-year-old son?

1 2 3 4 5

4.) A married couple in their 30s loses their home in a fire. How empathetic are you towards the wife?

1 2 3 4 5

5.) A 15-year-old female is in a serious car accident and is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. How empathetic are you towards her father?

1 2 3 4 5