

The Relationship Between Compassion and Social Justice Beliefs: The Mediating Role of Empathy

The purpose of this study was to examine whether there is a **relationship** between **preservice teachers'** dimensions of **compassion** and **social justice beliefs** and see what role **empathy** plays in this relationship.

Introduction

Research suggests that a way to increase awareness of social inequity is through developing empathy (Gerdes et al., 2016) and that increasing empathy might promote positive attitudes towards marginalized people and social justice attitudes (Cartabuke et al., 2017; Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Pedersen et al., 2004). However, empathy might lead to negative outcomes like empathic distress (Singer & Klimechi, 2014) or false empathy (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). These outcomes can lead to increased suffering. Since some qualitative research suggests that teachers' compassion and social justice beliefs might be related (Oplatka & Gamerman, 2021; Whang & Peralta Nash, 2005), and empathy is considered to be a part of compassion (e.g., Strauss et al., 2016), one avenue to explore is the quantitative relationship between preservice teachers' compassion and social justice beliefs. Therefore, we aimed to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the relations among dimensions of preservice teachers' compassion, social justice beliefs, and intentions?
2. Does empathy mediate the relationship between preservice teachers' compassion/compassionate engagement and motivation and their social justice attitudes and behavior intentions/educational social justice beliefs?

Method

Participants

102 participants: 80% female; 94% White; 73% third years; 78% elementary preservice teachers.

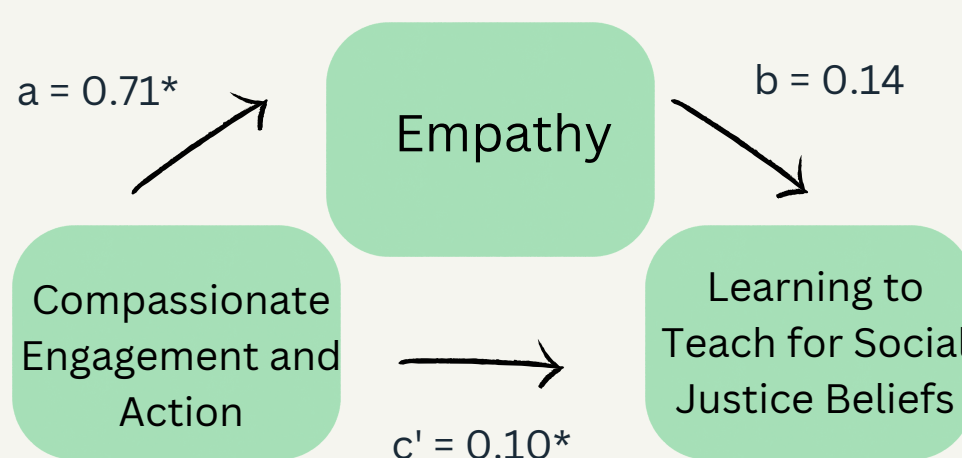
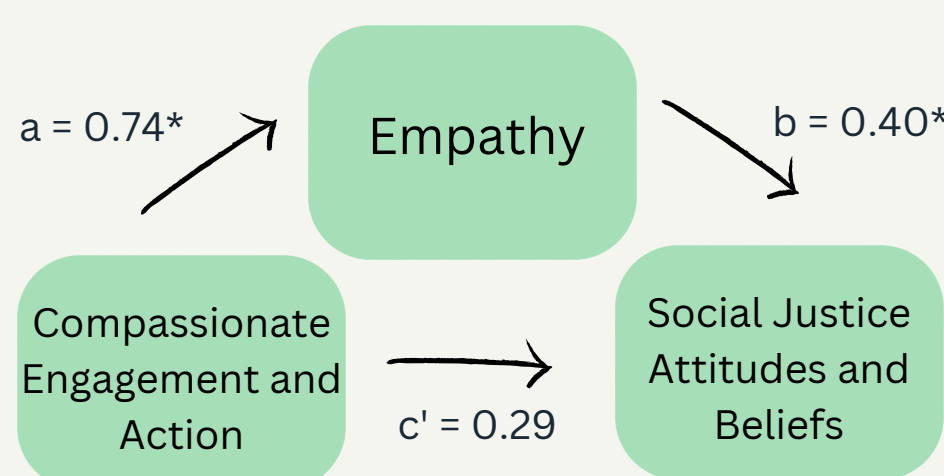
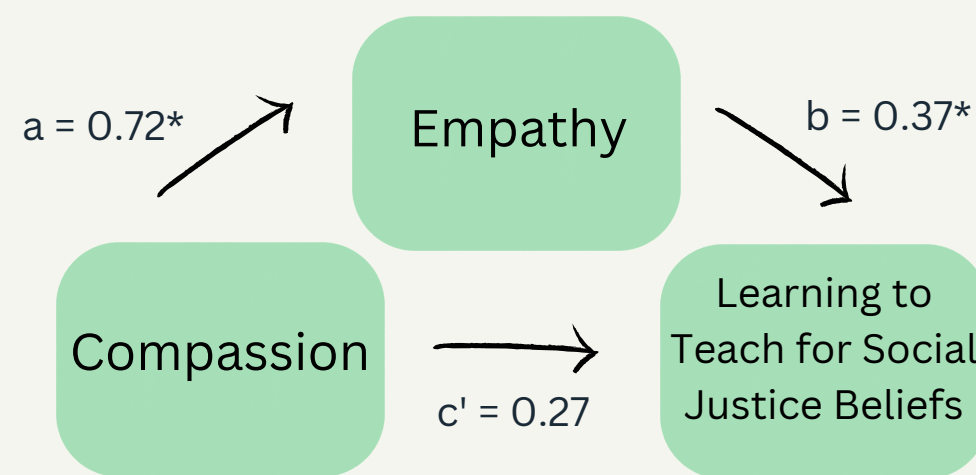
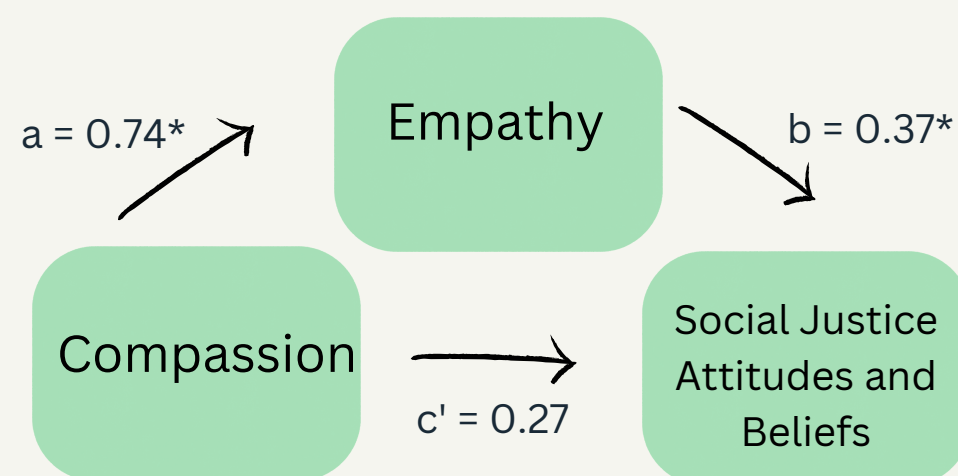
Measures

- Compassion Scale (Pommier et al., 2020)
- Compassionate Engagement and Action scale (Gilbert et al., 2017)
- Toronto Empathy Scale (Spreng et al., 2009)
- Social Justice Attitudes and Behavior Intentions Scale (Torres-Harding et al., 2012)
- Learning to Teach for Social Justice Beliefs Scale (Ludlow et al., 2008)

Analyses

Correlations, Mediations, *t*-tests

Mediation Analyses



Scan me for references

Results

Results indicated significant positive bivariate correlations between compassion and social justice beliefs:

Correlation results

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
CS	4.25	.45	-				
COEA	80.96	10.24	.66*	-			
TEQ	52.38	6.97	.75*	.74*	-		
SJSABI	97.57	9.50	.56*	.55*	.59*	-	
LTSJB	3.71	.47	.27*	.41*	.36*		-

Note. *Indicates $p < .05$.

Results also indicated that females scored significantly higher on both the compassion scales as well as on the empathy scale. Additionally, females scored higher on the social justice scales compared to males. There were no significant differences between third- and fourth-year students.

The mediation analyses indicated that empathy often explained the relationship between compassion and social justice beliefs. The only time this was not the case was in the relationship between compassionate engagement and action and educational social justice beliefs. In this mediation, there was a direct effect of compassion on educational social justice beliefs.

Discussion

The results indicated that empathy often conveys the effect of compassion on social justice beliefs. This is not surprising as empathy is considered a part of compassion (e.g., Strauss et al., 2016). One reason that empathy did not play a role in the relationship between compassionate engagement and action might be due to the nature of the empathy scale used. This scale primarily measures empathy as an emotional process (Spreng et al., 2009). It is possible that more cognitive empathy is used when one is motivated to engage and act on their compassion to promote educational social justice beliefs. Future research could use a cognitive measure of empathy to investigate this possible explanation. Because prior research suggests that empathy might lead to false empathy or empathic distress, we suggest teacher education programs focus on developing compassion over empathy as a way to increase social justice beliefs.