

Perspective-Taking Helps Us Understand Experiences Beyond Our Own

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Perspective-taking is the capacity to consider a situation from another person's point of view. It does not require agreement or mean assuming that we know exactly what another person feels. Rather, it recognizes that people may interpret the same situation differently because their experiences, relationships, communities, and circumstances differ.

Research across empathy, human development, social psychology, and education identifies perspective-taking as an important dimension of social understanding. By helping us move beyond our own immediate interpretation, it can deepen empathy and broaden our understanding of experiences beyond our own.



Overview

Each of us experiences the world from a particular point of view, shaped by our relationships, communities, experiences, and circumstances. These influences affect what we notice, how we interpret situations, and how we understand others.

Perspective-taking asks us to recognize that our own interpretation is not the only possible one. It involves making an intentional effort to consider what another person may be seeing, thinking, feeling, or experiencing—and what may be shaping that perspective.

This is not the same as assuming that we can fully know another person's experience, nor does it require us to agree with their beliefs or behavior. Instead, perspective-taking creates space for a more reflective question: What might I understand differently if I considered this situation from where they stand?

That shift—from treating our own perspective as the only one to considering another person's experience—can deepen social understanding and provide an important foundation for empathy.

“What might I understand differently if I considered this situation from where they stand?”

What the Research Tells Us

Research across developmental psychology, social psychology, education, and empathy research identifies perspective-taking as an important component of empathy and social understanding.

Within multidimensional models of empathy, perspective-taking is closely associated with cognitive empathy: the capacity to recognize and understand another person's perspective or emotional state. These abilities develop through relationships, observation, conversation, reflection, and meaningful interaction.

Opportunities to encounter perspectives different from our own can help strengthen these capacities, particularly during childhood and adolescence. Stories, respectful dialogue, cooperative learning, shared problem-solving, and meaningful interaction with people from different backgrounds can show young people that the same situation may be experienced in different ways.

Perspective-taking can also interrupt the tendency to explain another person's behavior only through our own assumptions or expectations. Rather than stopping at “Why did they do that?” we can ask what experiences or circumstances might help us understand their response more fully.

This does not give us complete access to another person's experience. It does, however, replace certainty with curiosity and create room for reflection and deeper understanding.

Why It Matters

Perspective-taking matters because human experience is shaped by more than the immediate situation in front of us. Two people can encounter the same classroom, workplace, neighborhood, conversation, or institution and experience it very differently.

When we rely only on our own perspective, we may assume that what feels normal, fair, easy, safe, or obvious to us feels the same way to others. Perspective-taking challenges that assumption by asking us to consider what we may not yet see or understand.

It helps us recognize that people's responses are shaped by experiences, relationships, and circumstances that may differ significantly from our own. For children and young people, developing this capacity can broaden their understanding of the people, communities, and social environments around them.

As that understanding expands, perspective-taking can also help create a bridge from individual empathy toward social empathy. Social empathy extends understanding beyond a single person or interaction by asking us to consider the broader social contexts that shape people's lives. Perspective-taking is one of the capacities that makes this broader understanding possible.

Putting Research Into Practice

Families, educators, youth organizations, and communities can help make perspective-taking part of everyday learning and interaction. They can:

- Ask, "How might someone else experience this situation?"
- Encourage young people to consider more than one perspective before reaching a conclusion.
- Use stories, books, current events, and real-life situations to explore how the same experience can be understood differently.
- Create opportunities for respectful conversation with people whose experiences or viewpoints differ from their own.
- Encourage curiosity before judgment and reflection before assumption.
- Ask what information or context may be missing from our understanding of another person.
- Reinforce that understanding another perspective does not require agreeing with it.

These practices help turn perspective-taking from an abstract idea into a capacity that can be practiced and applied in everyday life.

Key Takeaway

Perspective-taking expands the boundaries of what we are able to understand.

It reminds us that our own experience is real, but it is not the only way a situation can be experienced or interpreted. Learning to consider perspectives beyond our own can deepen empathy, strengthen social understanding, and make us more attentive to the circumstances that shape other people's lives.

Perspective-taking does not ask us to assume that we fully understand another person. It asks us to recognize that there may be more to understand than our own perspective can reveal.

When that curiosity extends beyond an individual interaction toward the wider contexts that shape people's lives, perspective-taking becomes an important foundation for social empathy.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. When has considering another person's perspective changed how you understood a situation?
- 2. How can families, schools, and communities create meaningful opportunities for young people to encounter perspectives different from their own?
- 3. When you disagree with someone, what might change if you first considered the experiences or circumstances that may have shaped their perspective?

“Understanding another perspective does not require agreement. It requires the willingness to recognize that there may be more to understand.”

Research Foundation

House of US Foundational Paper No. 1 - Forthcoming
Understanding Social Empathy:
What It Is, What It Is Not, and Why It Matters

Research fields
Developmental Psychology · Social Psychology ·
Empathy Research · Education · Social-Emotional
Learning

Conceptual focus
Perspective-Taking · Cognitive Empathy ·
Social Understanding · Social Empathy

Central question
How does perspective-taking broaden social
understanding and contribute to the development of
empathy and social empathy?

About the House of US Institute for Social Empathy

The House of US Institute for Social Empathy is dedicated to deepening society's understanding of social empathy and its importance in building healthier communities, stronger democracies, and a more connected world.