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Empathy rules, maps and paths: A qualitative exploration of the factors that facilitate or inhibit empathy and prosocial responding among youth

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore young people's perspectives on the factors that facilitate or inhibit empathy and prosocial responding among youth. Qualitative focus groups (n = 29) were undertaken with Irish young people aged 13–17 years relating to their views on the factors that facilitate or inhibit the expression of empathy. Parents, friends, and social media were found to be key influences, whereas barriers identified included societal norms, gender norms, lack of skill, or knowledge and target characteristics. This research provides important insights into adolescents' perceptions of the social correlates of empathy. Concepts from the sociology of empathy, such as empathy maps and paths, are helpful in drawing out the implications for future research and practice.

KEYWORDS
civic engagement, empathy, prosocial responding, sociology of empathy, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Empathy and prosocial behaviour are key social and emotional processes that drive social connectedness and promote wellbeing (Lai et al., 2015; Melloni et al., 2013). However, research indicates that rates of empathic and prosocial responding among young people may be declining (Hylton, 2018; Konrath et al., 2011), and substantial differences in youth's empathy and prosocial behaviour have been observed across situational and cultural contexts (Chopik et al., 2016; Silke et al., 2018). Although the importance of understanding how and why these individual differences in empathic and prosocial responding occur, and the implications this knowledge has for applied research and intervention, is well recognized in the literature (Carlo et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2016; Wynn et al., 2023), much of this research is quantitative in nature. Consequently, qualitative explorations that provide insight into adolescents' own perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of youth empathy and prosocial behaviour are notably sparse. Furthermore, the majority of empirical research has emerged from the field of psychology; there are few studies that draw on ideas and concepts from other disciplines.

To address this gap, this study presents the findings of a qualitative exploration of adolescent's perceptions of the factors that promote or hinder the development or expression of empathy and prosocial behaviour among young people. Using qualitative focus group interviews with young people, this research explores youth's perspectives about how young people acquire or develop empathy and probe their opinions about what factors facilitate, or impede, youth engagement in prosocial behaviour. In this study, we consider literature and theoretical insights from psychology and sociology of emotions and empathy in interpreting the findings and reflect on the implications of the findings for future research and practice.

1.1 | Empathy and prosocial behaviour among youth

The term 'empathy' can be interpreted in a myriad of ways and is often a synonym for concepts such as kindness, compassion or concern (Bloom, 2017). Although there is no unifying definition of empathy (Cuff et al., 2016). the term empathy is often used to refer to a person's ability to understand and share the emotions and feelings of others (Davis, 1983; Eklund & Meranius, 2021). Empathy is typically considered to have both cognitive and affective dimensions; the cognitive component of empathy is regarded as the ability to identify another person's perspective or to understand the emotions of others while the affective component of empathy is characterized as the ability to share the emotions and feelings of others (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Prosocial behaviour is a related concept, which is traditionally defined as a voluntary action that is carried out with the intention of helping or benefitting another person (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2010). Researchers argue that empathy and prosociality are important interpersonal skills as they may provide the foundation for wider moral principles, such as care, justice, and altruism (Decety & Cowell, 2015; Howe, 2012; Wang et al., 2017). Empathy and prosocial responding are also considered to be two closely related constructs, in that both theory and research suggest that empathy is a key motivating factor of prosocial action (Brazil et al., 2023; Carlo et al., 2010; Cartabuke et al., 2019; Lockwood et al., 2014; Simas et al., 2020).

Both empathy and prosocial responding have been found to play a key role in the development of healthy social and emotional functioning among young people (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010; Wagaman, 2011). Research shows that these constructs are linked to higher levels of emotional and psychological adjustment (Kim & Morgül, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2017), including enhanced self-esteem, improved mental health and increased life satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2014; Martela & Ryan, 2016). Greater empathy and prosocial behaviour have also been linked with better cognitive performance and higher academic achievement among children and adolescents (Ballard et al., 2018; Gerbino et al., 2018). Similarly, an array of evidence indicates that empathic/prosocial responding facilitates social development; promoting positive interpersonal relationships (Fike et al., 2023; Flanagan &

Levine, 2010; Spinard & Eisenberg, 2014), large-scale cooperation (Zaki, 2014) and reducing antisocial behaviour (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015; Raskauskas et al., 2010).

Although adolescence has been identified as an important period for the development of empathy and prosociality (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Malin & Pos, 2015), research suggests that the level of empathic and prosocial responding expressed by young people appears to be declining (Hylton, 2018; Kidd, 2013; Konrath et al., 2011). Other emerging evidence suggests that young people's empathy and prosocial behaviours do not appear to be expressed equally across all situations and contexts (Estévez et al., 2016; Melloni et al., 2013; Zaki, 2014). For example, a small body of research indicates that adolescents show differences in their empathic and prosocial responding depending on their relationship with the target (e.g., family, friends, strangers) (Fowler et al., 2021; Fu et al., 2017; Jaureguizar et al., 2013). Youth empathy and prosocial behaviour has been shown to vary across different situations and cultural contexts (Mesurado et al., 2014; Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014; Rad et al., 2020) and there have been calls for greater attention to be paid to how context shapes the expression of empathy (Stellar & Duong, 2023).

Given the psychological and social benefits associated with empathic and prosocial responding, this apparent decline and variability in youth's empathy and prosociality is cited as an important concern (Lerner et al., 2005; Rossi et al., 2016; Stern et al., 2021). In response, better policy and research efforts that can help promote greater empathy and prosocial responding, across various cultural and situational contexts, have been called for. However, the lack of clear understanding about the factors and processes that impact the expression/socialization/ development of empathy and prosocial behaviour among young people is a major limitation impeding advancement in this area (Chopik et al., 2016; Malin & Pos, 2015; Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014). Although a large body of international research implies that a variety of contextual and individual factors interact to influence youth's empathy and prosocial behaviours (Silke et al., 2018), there is a noticeable lack of research exploring youth's perceptions of the factors that influence their own empathic and prosocial responding. It is becoming increasingly recognized that young people should be consulted more on such matters, with researchers and policy-makers now recognizing the importance of incorporating youth voice into research and practice, to open the way for new directions of understanding (Facca et al., 2020; Zaki, 2014).

1.2 | Sociological perspectives on empathy

Much of the research on empathy has emerged from the field of psychology. However, building on the work of classical theorists such as Cooley (1922) and Goffman (1974), a growing body of work in the sociology of emotions has challenged the idea that emotions, such as empathy, are purely psychological or physiological reactions, emphasizing and illustrating the socially constructed nature of human emotions (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Sociologists have shown that emotions are influenced by social dynamics such as norms and values, relationships, and other social factors (Bericat, 2016). For Bericat (2016, p. 495), 'Understanding an emotion means understanding the situation and social relation that produces it'. Sociologists view emotions as fundamentally relational; people's emotions both emerge and are shaped by the perceived consequences of interactions with others 'for the survival, well-being, needs, goals and personal plans of the self' (Bericat, 2016, p. 493; Stryker, 2004, p. 3). For example, Scheff's (1990) theory of shame argues that humans have a deep-seated desire to maintain social bonds. Every social encounter with others has the potential to either strengthen or undermine the bonds that we have with them; we can feel shame and a reduced sense of security when we perceive that others judge us negatively. Hochschild (1979) and others have also demonstrated the relationships between culture, politics, and emotions. According to Bericat (2016: 504), 'the basic structure and processes of a society create specific emotional climates, emotional cultures, or even societal emotions, which condition the general sentiments of the population' and may impact the feelings and behaviours of individuals.

Goffman's (1974) concept of Frames illustrates how issues in the public domain, such as news stories, are discursively defined and structured. Applying this concept to the study of empathy, it has been argued that empathy frames are deployed at a societal level to structure social behaviour and influence individual action. An empathy frame generally encompasses: an empathizer (individual and/or collective); a recipient (individual and/or collective); and a moral claim for empathy derived from cultural norms and values. The global media and social movements can be seen to use empathy frames to elicit empathy from the public towards particular groups in society based on moral claims such as humanitarianism or human rights. For example, in media reporting of the impact of war on children, the audience is positioned as empathizer, the children as recipients of empathy, and a moral claim for empathy based on humanitarianism is made (Ruiz-Junco, 2017, p. 423).

Conceptualized by Hochschild (2016), empathy rules are 'socially learned expectations regarding empathy that people internalize' (Ruiz-Junco, 2017, p. 424). An example of an empathy rule is that it's inappropriate to laugh at a funeral or that girls are expected to be more caring than boys. People or groups can have their own sets of empathy rules; Ruiz-Junco (2017) gives the example of birth doulas choosing to empathize with the women they are supporting through childbirth, but not with the medical staff. In other words, we have often unconscious rules 'that separate the empathy deserving from those without empathy worthiness' (Ruiz-Junco, 2017, p. 423). Furthermore, doctors and doulas, because of their differing occupational positions, are not bound by the same empathy rules. People have the option to 'creatively interpret empathy rules confirming or disconfirming the normative expectations' (Ruiz-Junco, 2017, p. 424).

Hochschild (2013) also introduced the concept of empathy maps, to refer to 'a society's or a person's distribution of empathy across the field of social relationships' (Ruiz-Junco, 2017, p. 425). Maps provide guidance to the empathizer regarding those who are deserving of empathy, dividing them into 'high-empathy, low-empathy, and no-empathy zones' (Hochschild, 2013, p. 38). People can choose to alter the boundaries of their maps to include or exclude groups or individuals from their empathy zones. Ruiz-Junco (2017) builds on these ideas by offering the concepts of empathy paths. At an individual level, empathy paths become established based on people's preferences, relationships, past behaviours, and identities. Paths can also exist at a cultural or institutional level whereby institutional structures, patterns and habits repeatedly shape how empathy is expressed in those settings. Ruiz-Junco (2017) identifies three types of paths. Paths can be self-transcendent, where the boundaries between self and other are diluted, giving rise to a deep emotional understanding. Ruiz-Junco (2017, p. 428) states that self-transcendent paths are found in institutional settings where 'the moral (and institutional) imperative is to empathize with those who suffer', for example in a Baptist church. In therapeutic paths, the empathizer tries to understand the emotion and experience of another with a view to helping them; for example, a therapist or mediator. With instrumental paths, empathy is deployed for some extrinsic purpose (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Using flight attendants as an example, Hochschild (1983) illustrated how companies can require the expression of a particular type of instrumental empathy among staff as part of their customer service obligations. Wynn et al. (2023) demonstrate that therapeutic and instrumental empathy paths are evident in how faculty engage with students in college classrooms.

As noted earlier, although adolescence is widely recognized as a critical period for empathy development, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring youth's perspectives of how empathy is socialized or shaped during this period. While sociologists/theorists have suggested that empathic and prosocial responding are shaped by the interplay between relational dynamics and wider social norms/values, few studies have explored the socialization of youth empathy or prosocial responding. Understanding adolescents' perceptions of the social factors that promote or hinder empathic/prosocial responding can help inform intervention work in this area and ensure that youths' perspectives and opinions are included and heard. The aim of this study is to explore adolescents' perspectives of the social factors that promote or inhibit the development of empathy and expression of prosocial behaviour.

2 | METHOD

This qualitative study was part of a broader mixed-methods study of youth empathy and civic values in Ireland, which incorporated cross-sectional survey research, literature review, and policy and curriculum review (see Silke et al., 2019). Ethical approval for this study was granted by the authors' University Research Ethics Committee.

2.1 | Socio-cultural context for the study

Ireland is a democratic republic that has a population of just over 5.1 million (CSO, 2023). In the 2022 census, 87% of the population reported their ethnic background as White Irish or other White background, followed by Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi at 2% and Black or Black Irish at 1%. In comparison with other EU countries, Ireland is notable for its young population and high level of educational participation. In 2021, Ireland was above the EU-27 average for third-level attainment across all age groupings. Traditionally a Catholic country, the numbers of Catholics has fallen from 84.2% of the population in 2011 to 69% in 2022, whereas the percentage of the population with no religion current stands at 14% (CSO, 2023).

Ireland has adopted a rights-based approach for children through its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, and in 2012, the people of Ireland voted to strengthen the rights of children in the Irish Constitution. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (DCYA, 2014) is an overarching national policy framework for children and young people aged 0–24 years. It establishes a set of six goals and five national outcomes, which aim for children and young to (1) be active and healthy, (2) be achieving in all areas of learning and development, (3) be safe and protected from harm, (4) have economic security and opportunity, and (5) be connected, respected and contributing to their world (DCYA, 2014, p. 4). A recent review found that Social and Emotional Learning is embedded in policy at all levels from high-level frameworks and action plans to the school curriculum.

2.2 | Participants

A total of 29 (10 male and 19 female) adolescents participated in this research. All participants were aged between 13 and 17 years (M = 14.76, SD = 1.27). All participants were recruited from three public secondary schools located within three separate provinces in the Republic of Ireland and were enrolled in their second or fourth year of secondary education at participating schools. The majority of participants were white Irish, with four participants (just over 10%) from minority ethnic backgrounds.

2.3 | Recruitment strategy

Postprimary schools from the Republic of Ireland, as listed on the Department of Education and Skills website, were selected to take part in this research. From the schools selected, three agreed to take part in this research, indicating a general response rate of ~43% from schools. Students in their second and fourth years of education at these three participating schools were invited to participate in the research, on an informed, ongoing consent basis. Any young person wishing to take part in the focus group discussions was required to provide written parental consent and personal assent. In total, written personal assent and parental consent was received from 31 (11 male and 20 female) young people. However, two adolescents were absent or otherwise unavailable on the day of data collection.

2.4 | Data collection

Focus groups were chosen as the main method of data collection as they are proposed to be particularly conducive to exploring adolescents' views and opinions about a particular set of issues or topics (Crabtree & Miller, 2022; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Additionally, it is argued that the group format is designed to facilitate discussion among adolescents in a manner that reflects the way in which they discuss issues naturally, within their peer and school settings (McEwan et al., 2004; Ybarra et al., 2018). Before the start of data collection, the authors developed a focus group protocol, with consideration for the relevance to the targeted age group, number of prompts required, and clarity. All focus groups were co-facilitated by two of the authors, both of whom have extensive facilitation experience and training. A total of three focus groups were conducted, with one focus group being carried out in each participating school. Each focus group had between 8 and 11 participants, and contained participants from the same school year (see Table 1 for a full overview of the focus group compositions). All focus groups were audio-recorded for transcription purposes, with the consent of parents and participants. Each focus group followed the same semistructured interview format. The two facilitators began each focus group by asking participants to engage in a few icebreakers. Specifically, each participant was asked to introduce themselves to the group and to provide some background information about themselves (e.g., hobbies). Each focus group began by asking students what the term empathy meant to them. Following a brief discussion, where students shared their definitions or understanding of the term, the facilitators provided each focus group with the following working definition of empathy 'Empathy refers to our ability to understand the world through another person's eyes or to understand their point of view. It also refers to our ability to share the emotions and feelings of others'. Each focus group was then prompted to discuss several general topics relating to empathy and prosocial responding, such as 'Where do you think empathy or prosociality comes from?'; 'Do people your age have/show empathy?'; 'What helps or stops you from showing empathy, or from helping others?'; 'How can we encourage more empathy or prosocial behaviour among young people?' Each group discussion lasted for ~60–70 min.

2.5 | Data analysis

All focus groups were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft word and were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis that enables the researcher to identify and interpret themes and patterns within the data (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Clarke and Braun (2017) conceptualize thematic analysis as a situated and interactive process, incorporating the data, the researcher and the context of the research. A strength of thematic analysis is that it can be used for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) analyses, although it is acknowledged that the distinction is not clear-cut and most data analyses use a combination of both approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Although we had drawn on theory and literature relating to empathy to inform and develop our research and interview questions, our aim in this study was not to deductively test a particular theory but to adopt an exploratory approach that prioritized the interpretations and understandings of participants. Therefore, an inductive approach was adopted, whereby an 'open' approach was taken to coding based on the viewpoints presented in the data. However, an element of deductive analysis was employed to ensure that the themes produced were relevant to the research questions (Byrne, 2021).

To generate codes and identify themes and patterns in the data, the analytic six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) was followed. First, analysis began with the authors reading the interview transcripts and becoming familiar with the data. All focus group transcripts were read and reread multiple times. The raw data from all three transcripts were then inductively coded to capture important information from the data set. Once all the data had been coded, codes were reviewed, and relevant themes were generated from the extracted codes. Initial themes were then refined to ensure that all important information had been captured within the emerging themes. Once themes were generated, the authors reviewed the data again to ensure that the opinions of

TABLE 1 Participant composition in each focus group.

Focus group	Name	Age (years)	Gender
1	Kevin	15	Male
1	Lily	15	Female
1	Anna	14	Female
1	Evelyn	14	Female
1	Chris	14	Male
1	Noel	14	Male
1	Cathal	13	Male
1	Paul	14	Male
1	Kelly	14	Female
1	Ava	14	Female
1	Madeline	14	Female
2	Sarah	14	Female
2	Carmel	14	Female
2	Maura	14	Female
2	Hillary	14	Female
2	Charlie	14	Male
2	Oscar	14	Male
2	Ethan	14	Male
2	Milo	14	Male
2	Ashleigh	14	Female
2	Michael	14	Male
3	Olivia	15	Female
3	Isabella	17	Female
3	Emma	16	Female
3	Martha	17	Female
3	Helen	17	Female
3	Cora	17	Female
3	Heidi	17	Female
3	Eleanor	17	Female

Note: Names listed above are pseudonym. Real names have been altered for confidentiality purposes.

respondents whose views had differed from the consensus were also included (Silverman, 1993). Meyrick (2006) proposes including this step in data analysis to uphold the quality of the research and ensure that the findings presented are not biased to support only one particular conclusion. From this analytic approach, several major themes were identified from the data. For the purposes of this paper, however, only a subset of themes are reported here.

3 | RESULTS

Several themes relating to youth's perceptions of the factors that influence empathy and prosocial responding emerged from the data. Other themes relating to youth's perceptions of the barriers that prevent young people from engaging in prosocial behaviour or from 'showing empathy' similarly emerged. These themes are outlined in detail below.

3.1 | Factors that influence the development of empathy and prosocial behaviour

One dominant theme that emerged from the data centred upon youths' deliberations about whether empathy was learned through one's experiences, or whether empathy was a trait that individuals are born with. On one hand, several students felt that empathy was something that occurred 'naturally', as a trait one is born with. For example, Kevin[1] commented 'it just comes naturally …I think you're born with it', whereas Milo agreed that empathy happens 'on instinct'. The view was also expressed that empathy is impacted by youth's exposure to certain contextual or social factors; that people learn to show empathy because of their 'own experiences… you can sort of know how it feels' (Oscar). In addition to one's experiences, it was asserted that there is a reciprocal aspect to empathy and that one is more likely to develop or show empathy 'if others show empathy towards you'.

3.1.1 | Role of parents

Across the three focus groups, the role that youth perceive parents to play in influencing the development of empathy and prosocial responding was commonly discussed. There was widespread agreement that parents and 'how your family raises you' (Anna) are important socialization factors, 'because you spend probably 90% of your time with family, you learn most of your things from your family' (Emma). Some participants reflected on how their empathic and prosocial responding had been influenced by their parents' encouragement of empathy and prosociality. For instance, one young person noted that her 'mom has always told me not to judge someone by how they look and to take their feelings into consideration' (Olivia), whereas another reflected on the perceived negative affect her mother's attitudes had on her own ability to care about others:

> I grew up with my Mum; my Mum is always the type of person to say 'oh I don't care about this; 'I don't need that person, they can go'…. So, I've always grown up knowing ok I don't need to care that much about people. (Emma)

3.1.2 | Role of friends

Other students believed that young people's empathy or prosocial responding 'kind of depends on your friend group' (Carmel) and is influenced by the 'way you get along with your friends' (Maura). Notably, several respondents felt that friends play even more of an important role in influencing empathy/prosociality than parents: 'It's mostly your friends though' (Ethan). Others appeared to agree that friends influence empathy and prosocial responding because of the amount of time young people spend socializing with their friends. For instance, Maura argued that 'friends are really important like, because you hang around with them all of the time… cause you end up getting so

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[1]Real names have been altered for anonymity purposes. All names reported here are pseudonyms.

close to them that you're with them in school and then an hour after school you're with them again', whereas Sarah echoed that 'you just start finding yourself being a mini them or something'. Some felt that friends were important for empathy and prosocial behaviour because 'you can say things to your friends, you're quicker to talk to your friends, and you'll listen to your friends' (Carmel) and discussed the powerful impact that friends can exert on one's attitudes and behaviours.

> If you're surrounded by a group of people who judge everyone as they pass, then you're going to learn to be like that. Whereas if you're surrounded by people that take into consideration what people are going through… you're more likely to be like that. (Anna)

Likewise, Charlie discussed the negative influence that friends can play in deterring or discouraging young people from helping others:

> One of your friends could say something…they could maybe not like that person, and you mightn't know them that good, so like, so say they're going 'oh no don't talk to her, she's a weirdo, she's this, she's that' …it could put you off wanting to help them. (Charlie)

Although participants suggested that empathy and prosocial behaviour could be both positively and negatively impacted by friends' behaviour or attitudes, overall, they appeared to be more optimistic about this relationship. Oscar surmised 'if one friend is brave enough to make the first step… then others could follow'.

3.1.3 | Role of 'other' family and nonfamily members

Although parents and friends were the two most dominant socialization factors discussed by the young people in these focus groups, the role that other family members and other adults played in influencing young people's empathic development were also acknowledged ('your neighbours, your teachers…it's just how people act in general'—Oscar). In particular, a small number of students expressed their opinion that parents are not the only family members to influence empathy or prosocial responding among young people: 'like it doesn't even have to be your parents like it can be your cousins, aunties, uncles any of them' (Carmel), or 'say if you've an older brother or sister…you might inherit the good will from them' (Michael). Additionally, some students, like Sarah, discussed the reciprocal nature of empathic and prosocial responding shown among individuals in the local community—'people from like your estate will stick up for you, no bother', whereas Milo claimed that a person's empathy or prosociality could also be impacted by the values and behaviours expressed by strangers. For example, he suggested 'if you see someone, just walking down the road and like donating to a homeless person it might make you think, "why don't I do that?"' A couple of other students also appeared to agree that the actions of strangers, but the actions of other young people, can inspire greater prosocial action in others.

> You know the shooting that happened in America and those kids that did the… march, and they organized everything, and they raised millions of dollars; they did that and they're only high-school kids. And I feel like that creates inspiration for other high school, or secondary school, people to do it as well. (Cora)

3.1.4 | Role of social media

Social media was seen to play both a positive and negative role in young people's empathic attitudes and behaviours. A few students argued that there is a lot of positivity on social media, and it can help to foster empathy because it 'shows us that this stuff is happening'. However, a number of students felt that it is 'easy to be mean to

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people, or it's easier for bullying to happen' (Evelyn) and people are less likely to stick up for other people online. Social media celebrities tend to be people 'who are just popular for like shaming people, or being pretty, being good-looking, are the ones that have millions of followers' (Olivia) and that 'half the people we follow online, they don't show any empathy' (Eleanor). Furthermore, some participants argued that social media could lead to desensitization due to the sheer volume of messages or requests for help that young people are exposed to daily:

> … millions of tweets a day, probably hundreds of millions of tweets a day, whatever, and like so many different things. We can't even stop and focus on one thing. You'd be like, oh my God, we should like help solve this, because then ten more things come in and we're like, okay, we don't have enough time. (Emma)

3.2 | Barriers impeding the expression of empathy and prosocial behaviour

Within each focus group, youth reflected on several 'barriers', which they believe prevent young people from showing empathy, or engaging in prosocial behaviour, more frequently.

3.2.1 | Societal norms

In one focus group, the majority of adolescents voiced their opinions that young people do not show empathy to others because it is regarded as a 'weakness' in society ('Just in this day and age with the way people behave… the way they behave like being empathetic towards other people is a sign of weakness'—Emma) and that young people do not wish to appear weak to others ('showing empathy is like showing weakness, and no one wants to be portrayed as weak'—Eleanor). Notably, several students expressed their belief that there appears to be a 'norm' or 'trend' in society, 'a trend to not care… to not have empathy' (Martha). Most of these youth felt that in modern society, norms that value self-interest are promoted over those that value empathy or caring for others, arguing that 'looking better than someone else matters, more than caring for them' (Olivia).

> Many people want to portray a strong image even if it is at the expense of others… putting ourselves first, even though they are aware that other people need our assistance, stops people from showing empathy. (Emma)

These students also proposed that young people may not show empathy or engage in prosocial behaviour 'because it doesn't benefit them' (Cora). Specifically, these youth contended that because 'people make it seem like it's a bad thing to care for other people' (Olivia), young people are now 'afraid to be seen as weak' (Isabella), or fear being judged by others.

> What stops people our age showing empathy is fear of being judged… being judged for being different, for caring, for being weak. We don't want to do anything out of the norm for fear of not being accepted. (Heidi)

Others argued that prosocial behaviour is seen as an inconvenience; 'it's bother like…that's how people see it, it's too much effort' (Eleanor) and felt that '…puts a lot of people off because it's just a lot of effort when you've to put a lot of your own time in to do it' (Cora). Indeed, students typically appeared to feel that young people are fearful that if they take time to help others, they may miss out on important personal opportunities:

> People act like it's them against the world, like it's them against everyone else, so they don't stop to think about someone else because they'd feel like if I stop now that someone is going to like overtake me; someone is going to take that opportunity that I should take to do something. So they don't stop to see how someone beside them is doing, or how someone else is feeling, because they're like, 'I can't waste my time on that'. (Martha)

3.2.2 | Gender norms

In addition to their perceptions on general societal norms relating to empathy, it should be noted that students in each focus group also appeared to believe that there were different gender norms regarding empathy and prosocial behaviour. Most students proposed that 'girls have more empathy' than boys (Cathal), and that girls '…just care a lot more about people' (Milo). Crucially, most of these students appeared to believe that boys may be less likely to show empathy, or engage prosocially, because society views empathy as more of a weakness in boys than girls.

> Especially for boys, it's a sign of weakness that you are not strong enough to toss them aside, not care about them; you're a weakling and with boys especially. Like with girls, it's still the same, but just it's stronger with boys. (Emma)

However, two participants verbally disagreed with this idea of 'gender norms', and instead seemed to believe that differences in empathy occur due to differences between individuals, as opposed to differences between genders; 'I think it kind of depends on the person' (Noel).

3.2.3 | Lack of skill or knowledge

Another barrier identified by participants as potentially impeding youth's engagement in prosocial or empathic responding, was their lack of knowledge or understanding about how to help. Students suggested that young people's lack of engagement in empathic action, may reflect their perceptions about their inability to help, rather than a lack of empathic 'emotion'. For example, one student reflected on her own prosocial behaviour stating: 'I'm really into all the activism stuff but it's like, eh, really hard because you don't know where to start' (Cora). Other students discussed their frustration at wanting to help others, but feeling unable to make a difference, or being unsure about which resources to trust; 'and you've to try and figure out what companies are legit…because there's a lot of fakes' (Martha).

> Seeing something that's so unjust… and you feel like there's literally nothing you can do. You know it's so wrong what's happening to them, and you feel so much for them, but you're like I don't know how I can help. (Olivia)

A small number of students also cited the lack of help or advice young people receive from other adults as a major barrier. Students stated that taking action to help others in society is 'something we need help doing it' (Sarah), because 'we don't know where to start; we're like ok I really want to help but how; what will I do that will make a difference? (Emma). Additionally, some students felt that adults do not value youth's opinions or suggestions about how to tackle societal issues; 'a lot of people don't want to hear kids; we're considered kids, they don't want to particularly hear from us, they're like, what do you guys know!?' (Cora). Similarly, other students proposed that

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because they are younger, adults believe that they 'don't know what things are important' (Martha) and query their 'experience of the world' (Helen).

3.2.4 | Target characteristics

Another dominant subtheme to emerge was the perception that youth empathy or prosocial responding varies depending on the social context in which, or target to whom, they are responding. In general, youth proposed that some people are easier to 'help' than others, and indicated that teenagers may be more likely to have, or show, empathy for 'friends and family' or 'people [they] know very well', as opposed to 'people [they] don't like or aren't really friendly with' (Kevin), More specifically, when talking about how young people show empathy, students typically agreed that 'it's easier, if you want to help out, if it's like someone you know' (Eleanor), suggesting that sometimes young people are 'just kind to the people they know' (Chris).

Relatedly, several participants argued that it is harder to help people who are outside their close social network, or to empathize with 'someone who has done you wrong or something' (Kevin).

> Sometimes people like; don't feel empathy for people with different views to them... Because they can't relate to them, or they just don't want to. (Cora).

Students also said that the type of relationship they have with a person, or how that person has treated them in the past ('like their attitude toward you'—Carmel), influences the level of empathy they feel for that person; with some suggesting that 'you give empathy to the people you respect... and who respect you' (Kevin). Markedly, some noted differences in 'feeling' empathy and taking 'action', and pointed out that although it may be 'easier in the inner circles to act and feel; like further out, it's like you can feel it, but it's harder to act' (Martha).

On the other hand, several participants argued that youth's engagement in prosocial responding depends on specific characteristics of the situation. Most youth seemed to think, that regardless of the relationship between individuals, if the situation was dire enough, or if the person was clearly distressed, they would try to help in some way. For instance, Maura contended that if someone was being teased or picked on by other students in the school, regardless of 'whether we were friends with that person or not, if their friends are just standing there, like, we'd still stick up for them', whereas other students felt that 'it's easy to show empathy to someone who is upset'. Students proposed that if others are 'really mean you might not help them... unless it's a really bad situation' (Ethan) or that showing empathy to others 'depends how bad they need it' (Carmel).

4 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this qualitative study was to provide new insight into youths' perceptions of the contextual barriers and facilitators of empathy and prosocial behaviour. The findings revealed several novel insights and indicated that adolescents appear to view youth's empathic or prosocial development as being both socially, and biologically, driven. Although youth believed that parents and peers play important roles in shaping youths' empathic development, they also identified a number of barriers, which they believe hinder youth's engagement in prosocial or empathic responding.

First, findings from this research indicate that young people believe that the ability to empathize with others comes from both one's own personality traits and one's exposure to key contextual factors. Most participants seemed to believe that empathy is socially constructed and relational in nature. Specifically, most suggested that young people's empathic and prosocial responding are influenced by parents and friends' modelling and encouragement of empathy and prosocial behaviour. Previous research also indicates that parents (Carlo

et al., 2017; Miklikowska et al., 2011) and peers (Barr & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2007; Harper et al., 2016; Miklikowska et al., 2022) play an important role in the development of empathy and prosocial behaviour. However, participants in this study also believed that empathy and prosociality can similarly be impacted by their interactions with other family members, or by witnessing kindness or activism in strangers. Social media is also seen to play both a positive and negative role. Notably, the role that youths' wider relational networks play in shaping empathic/prosocial responding has not been widely explored in the literature (Lam et al., 2012; Tucker et al., 1999). Future research may benefit from exploring how relationships with parents, peers and others shape youths' identity and behaviour, and the establishment of their 'empathy paths' over time (Ruiz-Junco, 2017).

Participants in this research also discussed their perceptions of the personal and situational barriers that disable and dissuade young people from engaging in greater empathic/prosocial responding, which may have relevance for future educational or social initiatives. Several young people proposed that negative norms regarding the value of empathy in society, may deter young people from showing empathy or engaging in prosocial behaviours. More specifically, students in one focus group appeared to feel strongly that empathy was regarded as a non-beneficial, 'weakness' by society, and that young people refrain from showing empathy to avoid negative judgement for appearing 'weak'. Hochschild (2016), Bericat (2016, p. 504) and others have argued that the emotional climate or culture of society can influence the expression of empathy at an inter-personal level. Concerns have been expressed that a culture of competition and individualism is negatively impacting the expression of empathy among younger generations and these findings, although not generalizable, appear to support this argument (Konrath et al., 2011). This finding that young people believe that society promotes self-interest and devalues concern for others may have important implications for interpersonal functioning and societal morality in the long-term (Hoffman, 2000; Schumann et al., 2014; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). In line with Scheff's (1990) theory of shame, these finding also highlight the innate desire of young people to maintain social bonds and avoid any behaviour that may result in shame or social disapproval. Empathy is more likely to be expressed in peer social networks that value empathy and to be suppressed where the peer culture perceives empathy as weakness (Miklikowska et al., 2022).

Most students seemed to believe that girls were more likely to show, or value, empathy than boys; a trend which has been observed in numerous other studies (Del Rey et al., 2016; Fike et al., 2023; Van der Graaff et al., 2018). However, previous researchers have argued that it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether these apparent gender differences occur due to differences in adolescents' empathic capacity, or simply differences in their prosocial tendencies (Lam et al., 2012). The current research findings provide some insight into adolescents' beliefs about why these differences occur. When discussing the source of these gender differences, a number of students made reference to the pressure of societal norms. Youth suggested that while society regards empathy as a weakness, this seems to be more the case for males than for females. It appears that young people operate according to a set of gendered 'empathy rules' (Hochschild, 2016), which set out the expectations for empathic responding. However, young people's capacity for agency in challenging normative expectations was also highlighted. This finding is noteworthy from an education or intervention perspective as it indicates that reflecting on and articulating the often-unspoken social norms or rules governing young people's emphatic responding has the potential to raise young people's awareness of these dynamics, sensitizing them to the fact that they have the option to behave differently if they wish.

Another barrier to empathic action identified by the young people in the current study was youth's lack of perceived knowledge or guidance about how to actively help others. A pertinent argument put forward in the current research is that young people may lack knowledge about how best to help, or show empathy, and refrain from taking prosocial action in a particular situation for fear of making the situation worse. Furthermore, discussions also hinted at a perceived lack of help from adults about how to engage in active empathic and prosocial responding at a societal level. Students appeared to believe that adults did not value young people's opinions about how to address societal issues and suggested that although young people need help, to help others, there is a lack of guidance from older generations about how to achieve this. Although other research has indicated that helping and prosociality appear to be declining among younger generations (Hampton, 2016; Konrath et al., 2011), these

findings may suggest that youth's apparent lack of empathic/prosocial engagement may reflect a lack of opportunity or lack of knowledge as to how to help, as opposed to their lack of willingness. It could be argued that established societal frames (Goffman, 1974) regarding empathy are adultist and fail to allow for the possibility that young people have the capacity to act. The reference by one participant to being impacted by seeing young people taking action in another country may indicate that pro-active efforts to reframe empathic action as something young people can do may help to overcome these obstacles.

It was also clear from the findings that young people have well established empathy maps, whereby they show empathy to people within particular zones, supporting Hochschild's (2013) proposition. Adolescents in these focus groups claimed that although it is easy to show or feel empathy for people in one's close social circle, such as family or friends, it is more difficult to empathize with someone one does not know as well, or to someone who displays certain undesirable characteristics. However, participants suggested that these target characteristics may take less precedence in situations where there is a dire need to intervene or help. Thus, these findings indicate that empathy may be a 'conditional' rather than a 'universal' response, in that it seems to be felt or shown toward certain people, in certain situations, but not toward others (Van Rijsewijk et al., 2016). Evidence from other empirical research also suggests that youth's empathic and prosocial responding does vary according to different situational and target characteristics (Fu et al., 2017; Padilla-Walker et al., 2015; Sturmer et al., 2006), although research investigating this matter appears somewhat limited. Hence, these findings may suggest that there is, at least to a certain extent, a parochial aspect to youth's empathic and prosocial responding. The concepts of empathy maps may be a valuable tool to use in future research or practice to further explore in-group/out-group empathy gaps and why such bias in empathic responding may occur (see Bruneau et al., 2017; Zaki, 2014).

4.1 | Future directions, limitations, and conclusion

The findings of this study point to a few areas of relevance to research and practice. First, youth perceptions of negative societal norms toward empathy may be an important area for future intervention research, as this was a key barrier to empathy identified by youth in the current study. Second, future initiatives aiming to promote greater empathic responding among young people may benefit from reflecting on the role that adolescents' knowledge and perceptions of their skills have on their willingness to engage in prosocial action (Alessandri et al., 2014; Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Ghidina, 2019).

Finally, this study has argued that the concepts of empathy maps (Hochschild, 2016) or empathy paths (Ruiz-Junco, 2017) are useful tools to help us to understand the factors that promote or inhibit youth empathic responding. These are concepts that would merit further exploration in future research. Such research can explore possible inequities in youths' prosocial/empathic responding and whether certain target characteristics moderate adolescents' perceptions of situational need (see Hauser et al., 2014). Research of this nature can help to ensure that interventions aiming to promote greater empathy/prosociality are effective in promoting empathic responding across all empathy zones, and not just towards friends and family and may be especially important for increasing empathy/prosocial behaviour at a societal level.

There are several potential limitations associated with this research which are important to acknowledge. First, it should be noted that the current research was qualitative in nature and represents the view of a small number of adolescents only. As such generalizations about the validity of the findings represented here cannot be made and the authors acknowledge the importance of carrying out future qualitative and empirical studies to examine the replication of these findings. Future research may also benefit from consulting other, more diverse age, or cultural groups. Furthermore, given the nature of the group discussion format employed, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that the opinions and views shared by adolescents in the current research may have been influenced by the opinions of other students in the focus group. Hence, future research may benefit from employing individual

interviews as an alternative method of data collection, to investigate whether similar or divergent patterns of responses are found.

In conclusion, this research provides important insights into the socialization of youth empathy and prosocial responding, and adolescents' perceptions of the social correlates of empathy. By providing greater insight into the perceived social barriers that reduce youths' empathic responding, and prevent young people from taking empathic action, the current study has notable implications for research and practice, and highlights the advantage of conducting qualitative, sociological research in this area.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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