

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Letter to the father: Insights into Kafka's understanding of empathy

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Abstract

Letter to the Father is an intimate and revealing classic masterpiece about the complex relationship between Franz Kafka and his father. In this work, he exposed his feelings and thoughts stemming from his daily family and professional life, rooted in the difficult paternal interactions he experienced. The study of empathy, which involves both emotional and cognitive dimensions, can be analyzed through this narrative. The aim of this study is to understand empathy as presented in *Letter to the Father*, with a focus on the cognitive and emotional aspects of this behavior. The specific objectives are to identify the emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy between the characters and to characterize these behaviors in Franz Kafka based on inferences drawn from his writing. This research is exploratory and bibliographic in nature, involving a literature review, reading, logical organization of data, thematic discussion, and writing, with an inductive methodology. It is suggested that this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between family experiences and the development of emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy while also emphasizing the importance of nurturing welcoming and respectful environments for healthy emotional growth.

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1. Introduction

The letter written by Franz Kafka ([Figure 1](#)) to his father in 1919, when Kafka was 36 years old, was never delivered to the recipient. *Letter to the Father* is an intimate and revealing work that provides a deep insight into the complex relationship between Kafka and his father, Hermann Kafka. In this long letter, the writer exposed his anguish, resentments, and difficulties in communicating with his father, with the power dynamics and apparent apathy of Hermann toward Franz being central themes. These themes allow for an intense analysis of the family dynamics that shaped Kafka's life and his works. The psychological depth of the letter is remarkable, addressing both directly and indirectly the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy inherent in individual and interpersonal behaviors, revealing the lasting marks and impacts that family relationships have on the individual. Kafka not only described these conflicts but also highlighted important aspects of neuroscience and emotion in the constitution and expression of the subject.¹

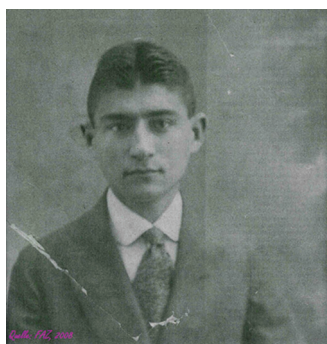


Figure 1. Franz Kafka (July 3, 1883 – June 3, 1924) by Pittigliani, 2005. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0. Taken from <https://openverse.org/image/dac3b7c3-779c-44af-8087-db4c1b122262?q=franz+kafka&p=15>.

The autobiographical bias of Kafka's works, including *Letter to the Father*, appears in other narratives that explore the themes of bureaucracy, maternal absence, loving relationships, and paternal authoritarianism.² Kafka found in writing a way to expose his dislikes and sought an absolute expression of his complex and contradictory emotions in response to the authoritarian personality of Hermann.³ An example of this is the tale *The Verdict*, in which Kafka equated his father with a higher power – one with absolute control over the son and capable of subjecting him to condemnation.⁴ Kafka's sense of inferiority to Hermann is also present in the novel *The Metamorphosis*, where he describes a manipulative father who incessantly assumes the role of provider in the family and does not accept a child who does not perform a "worthy" job.⁵

Considering the descriptions of human behavior in Kafka's writing, as well as the fantastic symbolisms rooted in his private experiences, empathy can be identified as an agent of human relations within Kafkaesque literature. Empathy thus becomes essential in conceptualizing interpersonal dynamics. In this sense, understanding empathy requires an analysis of its three aspects: cognition, emotion,⁶ and motivation.⁷ The cognitive aspect is characterized by the intellectual ability to recognize and understand other's emotions and thoughts, from the perspective of others to oneself,⁷ and is particularly susceptible to educational processes over the course of life.⁸ The emotional aspect of empathy involves the feelings that arise in the observer when interpreting the emotions of a third party.⁶ The motivational aspect can be defined as the internal motivation that generates in an individual the potential to act with empathy.⁷

It is important to note that empathy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that permeates human relations and manifests itself in different areas of social life, including the arts and literature. According to Stansfield and Bunce,⁹ there are consistent relationships between reading fiction and the effective development of empathy in readers.

Their studies indicate that both cognitive improvement and affective empathy are related to literature, with the difference lying in the way they develop. The first is related to the quantity of fiction books an individual reads, while the latter is linked to how emotionally involved the reader feels in the narrative. In general, the number of fiction books read by an individual directly impacts the improvement of cognitive empathy, compared to control groups. Immersion in the work and the level of involvement with the narrative influence affective empathy. Both findings support the notion that the reading habit affects individuals' real empathic abilities.⁹

Letter to the Father appears to bridge literature with the real-life themes of family relationships, which can either promote or inhibit the development of empathy. In general, cognitive empathy and emotional empathy within family relationships significantly contribute to psychological development, making individuals more understanding, emotionally intelligent, socially altruistic, and better equipped to handle relational challenges.¹⁰ Kafka's narrative can thus be interpreted as a testimony to his family experiences and the impacts that this oppressive environment had on his life and works.

Literature acts as a means for personal formation, enabling the experience of diverse situations without directly encountering them, thereby fostering empathy.¹¹ This idea is supported by the fact that literary narratives simulate or are based on real issues, prompting readers to consider their consequences and impacts, which can lead to subtle changes in the subjects and their perceptions of the world beyond the pages.¹²

Literature provides opportunities for understanding personal and interpersonal relationships, with *Letter to the Father* standing out in this regard. When interpreting this work, empathic skills are included in the list of cognitive and emotional behaviors. Taking these aspects into consideration, a question arises: what are the emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy found in the characters of the narrative, and those that relate solely to Kafka's behavior, as presented in *Letter to the Father*?

The aim of this study is to understand empathy presented in *Letter to the Father*, highlighting the cognitive and emotional aspects of this behavior. The specific objectives are to identify the emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy in the characters and to characterize these behaviors in Franz Kafka, as inferred from his writing.

2. Materials and methods

This research is exploratory, as it provides an overview, of an approximate nature, of a certain phenomenon, and

bibliographic, as it is based on already established material, mainly consisting of books and scientific articles.¹³ The methodology involved a bibliographic survey, reading, logical organization of the data, thematic discussion, and writing. The method used was inductive.

Data collection was carried out using the Scielo, Science Direct, and PubMed databases, as well as libraries and websites of various research institutions, universities, and academic and scientific repositories. The associated descriptors included: Empathy and literature; Franz Kafka and emotion and empathy; cognition and empathy; book and behavior; Franz Kafka and *Letter to the Father*; empathy and *Letter to the Father*; empathy and motivation; guilt and Franz Kafka; father and Franz Kafka and power; *Letter to the Father* and fear; hostile environment and development and empathy; fear, and empathy.

Data processing was carried out using the content analysis technique, which involved pre-analysis (bibliographic collection and preliminary reading of the material, logging [exploration of the material in full, organization, and optimization of the reading], and the interpretation of results (establishing relationships between the phases of research). This method allowed for the investigation of the language and underlying meanings in the narratives, in this case, from the reading of *Letter to the Father* by Franz Kafka.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy in the narrative

This chapter presents situations from the work that refer to empathic skills regarding personal relationships described by Kafka with his family and among family members, as well as with the employees of his father's trade. These situations were examined to discussions about the construct of empathy within the literary framework of Kafka.

From the perspective of the facets of empathy, the analysis of *Letter to the Father* presents emotional and cognitive elements in both personal and relational descriptions by Kafka. The presence or absence of empathy and its characteristics will be discussed in specific situations narrated between the characters, given the complexity of the construct.

The constant experience of oppressive situations can be an obstacle to the development of empathy. In addition to individual factors such as genetics, neural aspects, and temperament, there are socialization factors at play, such as imitation, parental styles, and the relationship between parents and children.¹⁴ For the development of empathetic behavior, it is crucial to attend to contextual variables that involve emotional and cognitive expressions

from parents toward their children, as well as parental attitudes within the family. These attitudes can span a wide range of possibilities, including the presence or absence of acceptance, clear education, limits, and expressions of anger or affection.¹⁵

One of the first perceptions described by Kafka in the narrative is that the father, in a despotic way, despised people under exaggerated pretenses and, above all, always positioned himself in a state of superiority. A parallel can be drawn between the behavior described to the father and the ability to understand other people's experiences, which, according to Zaki and Ochsner,¹⁶ is a fundamental aspect of empathy. The opposition to this capacity for understanding does not exclude the feeling of empathy; it may, in fact, arise as a result of social and/or psychological factors, presupposing neglect and discrimination.¹⁷

The result of Hermann's feeling of superiority toward his family and other personal relationships manifested in behaviors of isolation and detachment. According to MacDonald and Schermer,¹⁸ the difficulty in establishing emotional connections with other people, as well as the excessive search for validation – as perceived in the narrative through the father's attitude of placing himself above others – can lead to loneliness, often stemming from authoritarian positions. By portraying the father in an emotionally detached way, Kafka seemed to highlight the tragic consequences of these behaviors. The father's desire for power and control transformed into an emotional prison that alienated him from others, including his own children.

In this context, Kafka described his father's aversion to people who are dear to his son, even without knowing them. He disqualified them as if they were bugs or otherwise contemptible,¹ suggesting the father's empathic difficulty in understanding his son's personal bonds. This situation may indicate a harmful dynamic of parental control. In healthy family relationships, the ability to take the perspective of others is a crucial skill for understanding emotions and supporting choices, which contributes positively to the empathetic and emotional development among family members.¹⁹

In some passages of the narrative, Kafka questioned the methods of education used by his father with his children. Kafka attempted to understand the teachings he received in childhood by comparing them with the situation of Felix – Hermann's grandson. However, Kafka highlighted that although Hermann is an important figure as the grandfather, his attitude does not cause significant harm to the child. On the other hand, for his own son, the impact was quite distinct, as the father represented everything.¹ In addition, there are excerpts from the work that reference Kafka's sister, Ottla, and their father, in which it is written:

For example, to Ottla, you often say: With this one, you cannot talk about anything: She jumps on the neck immediately, but in reality, she is not the first to do that; you confuse the thing with the person; it is the thing that jumps on your neck and immediately you make a decision about it, without hearing the person; what later is still argued can only irritate him, never convince him.¹

In this perspective, the father is portrayed by the son as authoritarian and rude, which is especially relevant when taking into account the position he occupies within the family context, being, in this narrative, one of the main educators in the children's lives. According to Kusiak *et al.*,²⁰ parents who encourage and offer emotional support tend to be the ones best able to put themselves in others' shoes, and, as caregivers, they show greater empathy for their children's feelings. This, in turn, improves interactions between them and facilitates the regulation of their own emotions. In a household where parental education is influenced by a lack of empathic skills, harmful effects on children are presumed, affecting both emotional regulation and interpersonal and family relations.²⁰

It is pertinent to note the association of fear that Kafka experienced with his father, triggered by situations he witnessed in his childhood and involving third parties. He stated that, as a boy, he felt anesthetized when hearing swearing in conversations at home, especially in his father's shop.¹ Fear is an emotional state of insecurity about a person, situation, or object whose manifestation is related to the reality in which the subject lives and motivates its expression.²¹ For example, fear can be experienced by observing a situation,^{22,23} and in this respect, an individual who observes an oppressive situation suffered by another person is able to generate behavioral responses of fear, which are significantly influenced by the presence of the empathic skill.²²

One can see the emotional state of fear in Kafka's account of his father's trade as a result of both the oppressive and intimidating environment that the store represented, as well as the negative experiences lived in this place. Kafka declared that he was tormented and ashamed to witness the tyrannical treatment dispensed to employees by his father so that no place in the world could have been as bad. He exemplified this by describing the humiliation and disrespect suffered by the employees in the store, such as when his father says, "This sick dog should burst at once," when referring to a salesman with pulmonary disease.¹ The hostile environment established between the employees and Hermann extended into Kafka's professional life and his future. Kafka wrote, "The relationship I established in the shop with my peers went beyond it and reverberated in my future."

The perception of injuries directed at employees was one of the factors that led Kafka to feel dissatisfaction with

his father's trade, which can be associated with aspects of emotional empathy, such as the ability to sensitize to and share the affections of others. However, it also indicates a difficulty in establishing limits and distinguishing what belongs to oneself and what belongs to others, leading to emotional overload that brings anguish instead of adequate empathic responsibility.²⁴ Therefore, Kafka seemed to avoid contexts that refer to experiences with his father, as he did not feel confident or free to develop his own skills and express his behaviors, as inferred from the passage below:

Sometimes I imagine an open world map and you stretched across it. For me, then, it is as if only the regions that you do not cover or that are not within your reach were considered.¹

The self-image of an individual and the image formed about third parties are developed from experiences in the relationships between the subject and significant figures, particularly caregivers.²⁵ In Kafka's various writings, elements that highlight his negative self-perception are present, notably stemming from the early and authoritarian influence of his father. This is evidenced by his description of a frequent feeling of nullity that dominated him, arising from this relationship.¹

Throughout the work, different personalities are narrated and associated with the conduct of the father, one of which is Kafka's mother. From the text, her participation in Kafka's life was portrayed as silent and affectionate, manifested in a character who tried to weigh the actions between father and son. Some excerpts from the letter reveal these aspects, as Kafka referred to his mother as being of unlimited goodness toward him, but he perceived this as connected to his father's influence. In other words, the relationship was not healthy. Moreover, the mother secretly protected him from his father.¹ While the mother presented herself as a mediator in the conflicts that troubled the family and received affection and attention from both her husband and son, she was not sufficiently spared from the troubled relationship between them, receiving blows from both sides.¹

Kafka portrayed his mother as sensitive to the emotional, physical, and psychological needs of the children, mitigating the harmful effects of the relationship between other family members. She projected a positive influence on Kafka when compared to Hermann. The behavior exhibited by the mother aligns with empathy, and in this context, it can be understood as having a beneficial influence on the children's development. More empathetic mothers tend to raise children who are also more empathic.²⁶

It is pertinent to note the family configuration in which Kafka was raised, specifically within a Jewish tradition. This context is key to understanding the behavior described in the

next section. The patriarchal education of this culture granted the father full authority over the lives of the children who lived with him, whether married or not, as well as over his wife.²⁷ This family model, which restricted behaviors and demanded conformity to tradition, was challenged by new ideas of education and individual autonomy, especially among young urban Jews, who had greater access to secular thinking and emerging nationalism.²⁸ In this sense, the social and political changes of the 19th century led Jews in central Europe to face pressures from modernization, often conflicting with family traditions,²⁹ which coincided with Kafka's time.

Kafka's father exemplified the common authoritarian fatherhood of the period. He represented a Jew who had risen economically, breaking from the rabbinic tradition to integrate into the bourgeois world of central Europe.²⁹ This transition created conflicts within his family, as his children witnessed the influence of two different worlds: The rigidity of traditional parenthood and the intellectual freedom of modern thought.²⁹

In Kafka's case, his relationship with his father was marked by a mixture of fear and frustration. *Letter to the Father* highlights the emotional impact that the paternal figure had on the son and reflects the challenges of a young Jew raised in a family trying to balance tradition and modernity. This conflict was manifested, even indirectly, in his literary work, where the figure of the father often appears as a symbol of absolute oppression and judgment.³⁰

Reading *Letter to the Father* allowed for the identification of empathetic behaviors in different family situations, especially in the relationship with his father, which extended to his professional interactions. The following section presents and discusses data related to Kafka's own emotional and cognitive behavior based on what can be inferred from the letter addressed to his father.

3.2. Kafka's emotional and cognitive behavior in the narrative

This section aims to examine the different facets of empathy, particularly to Kafka's interactions with the recipient of the letter, his father, as well as understanding the psychological consequences experienced by Franz, which may be directly or indirectly linked to the education imposed by his father.

Kafka's life was notably impacted by a hostile environment in which fear became a dominant emotion, accompanied by constant guilt. This combination prevented him from expressing his individuality, feeling present, or realizing his dreams. According to Araújo and Albertini,³¹ traumatic experiences that occur without the necessary psychological structure tend to generate negative feelings, which are then repeated in contexts and relationships unrelated to the original trauma but are

nonetheless rooted in prior experiences. As a result, the consequences of Kafka's interpersonal relationships are evident throughout the letter, such as the inconsistency and superficiality of his romantic relationships. This can be observed in the following passage: None of the ladies disappointed me; only I let them down. My judgment of them is exactly the same as when I wanted to marry them.¹

There are moments in the narrative where Kafka's feelings are externalized through observing and reflecting on his father's behaviors, the relationship between them, and the motivations underlying the father's attitudes, thereby demonstrating the presence of the emotional aspect of empathy in Kafka. This empathic facet is defined, according to Roza and Guimarães,³² as the emotional response triggered in an individual, resulting from the ability to appropriate emotions experienced by another subject. This can be exemplified in:

I admit that as a child, I had no empathy for this (later I did), and I did not understand how you could somehow expect people to be sorry for you. [...] I only later understood that you were indeed suffering a lot because of your children.¹

In this fragment, Kafka revealed an effective response to the reality lived by his father, narrating his ability to understand paternal emotions, even if he had not undergone something similar himself. The ability to understand and share emotions is a form of emotional empathy,³³ as evidenced in Kafka's treatment of Hermann. Moreover, Kafka repeatedly demonstrated a desire for a harmonious relationship with his father, as when he wrote: I would have been happy to have him as a friend, boss, uncle, grandfather, even (although more hesitant) as a father-in-law. But just as a father, you were too strong for me.¹

According to Hoffman,³⁴ empathy arises not only from shared suffering but also from a genuine desire to connect with others. Kafka's yearning for a connection with his father can be interpreted as a feeling of frustration resulting from his difficulty in establishing emotional empathy. The letter appears to be an appeal for a closer paternal bond and indicates an implicit search for a different kind of family relationship.

It is true that Kafka's affective understanding is not the only way through which he attempted to approach his father, as his efforts to understand his father's behaviors often involved the cognitive sphere. In this sense, cognitive empathy corresponds to the ability to understand and predict the behaviors of another person based on their mental states,³² without necessarily experiencing the same emotions.³⁵ This facet of empathy activates complex cognitive functions of mentalization and perspective-taking, but not emotional sharing.³²

Kafka's effort to understand his father's motivations for some of his actions is repeated throughout the narrative, as are his attempts to justify Hermann's behaviors – indications of cognitive empathy in the narrator. According to Mansur *et al.*,³⁶ this form of empathy is characterized by the ability to simulate another person's thoughts and feelings. The following excerpt underscores Kafka's efforts to comprehend his father's reasoning and justify his actions:

The fact that at this point you were mistaken, perhaps due to the circumstance that in reality you did not know anything about my personal relationships, assuming, suspicious, and jealous (do I deny that he likes me?), that I had to make up for my family life because it would be impossible for me to live the same way out there.¹

In their analysis of the structure of *Letter to the Father*, Deleuze and Guattari³⁷ explained that Kafka appears in figurative form, writing indirectly on various themes to preserve the real subject. A characteristic element connected to this figurative structure is the incessant search for exoneration. According to Higa,³⁸ all subjects are continuously absolved throughout the writing process, demonstrating an externalization that nothing is truly resolved. Although the discourse focused on relieving guilt, the theme often suggests that innocence is generalized – yet guilt is equally distributed.³⁸ This is evident when Kafka wrote: This usual way of seeing things I consider only fair in so far as I also believe that you have no fault for our distance. But I also have not the slightest fault.¹

At times, Kafka showed compassion for the actions of his father by attempting to recognize his feelings and relieve him of guilt despite the anguish this process of understanding entailed. Kafka explicitly described his pain upon noticing that his father was impressed by apparently superior people and believed he needed superficial affirmations of worth, often bragging about them.¹ In this sense, when one projects the self and its reality onto another occurs, and thereby feels the pain and suffering of that other, the motivational aspect of empathy emerges – an aspect directed toward reducing negative feelings in oneself or in others.³⁹

The motivational aspect of empathy is linked to the capacity of individuals to become more inclined toward prosocial behavior – that is, actions intended to promote care and well-being in others.⁴⁰ Kafka's motivation for writing the letter can thus be interpreted as a prosocial act aimed at alleviating his own suffering, where he attempted to articulate his conflicts with his father and outlined reasons not to place blame. Kafka was tireless in his pursuit of understanding Hermann's role in the anxieties that permeate his life, seeking a resolution that remains in the realm of ideas. This relentless search for understanding may stem from the need to express the most complex feelings an individual can experience.⁷

Kafka wrote to his father:

Dear father: You recently asked me why I claim to be afraid of you. As usual, I could not answer, partly because of the fear that I have of you, partly because in the motivation of this fear intervened so many details that I could hardly summarize them in a speech. And if I try to answer in writing, it will be, without doubt, very incomplete because, also, when writing, the fear and its consequences inhibit me before you and because the magnitude of the subject far exceeds my memory and my understanding.¹

This passage appears to reflect Kafka's motivation to express himself in response to his father's attitudes throughout life – an effort to understand him across the varied contexts and ramifications of his behavior. Throughout this process, Kafka demonstrated the motivational empathy he developed throughout his life.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the emotional and cognitive aspects in the narrative of *Letter to the Father* demonstrated that the authoritarian behavior of Hermann Kafka deeply affected Franz Kafka's life. Kafka's familial environment, in which the father figure was dominant, impacted Kafka's development of empathic abilities, as fear, isolation, and a weakened self-image were constant in his personal and professional relationships. Kafka's difficulty in expressing his feelings to his father – stemming from their separation within an oppressive environment – and his unfulfilled desire to strengthen the paternal bond represented a significant barrier to his individuality.

The manifestation of empathetic behaviors, in both their emotional and cognitive facets, was observed among the characters in the narrative, specifically in Kafka's own behavior while writing the letter. It is demonstrated that his father, mother, and other significant figures in his life also contributed to the shaping of his empathetic development. The excerpts selected serve as a sample of what can be found in other Kafkaesque works, exploring themes related to the emotional and cognitive expression of empathy that extend into personal, familial, and professional spheres.

Kafka's letter, beyond revealing his personal struggles in relation to his relationship with his father, allows reflection on the complexity of interactions within the family context and the impact of parental practices on the emotional and cognitive development of children and, consequently, on the formation of empathic capacities. It is suggested that this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the relationship between family experiences and the development of emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy while also emphasizing the importance of welcoming and respectful environments for the healthy emotional growth of the individual.

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