

## Potential of observational learning to induce empathy and self – efficacy in pre-adolescent Indian orphan minors

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### ABSTRACT

The study explores the potential of Observational Learning as a technique to induce an understanding of the basic soft skills among children who belong to an orphanage. The study considers two soft skills namely empathy and self-efficacy. The qualitative technique of a semi-structured interview was used after a session of observation with the model. The sample constituted of 12 children (6 males and 6 females) between the age group of 6-12 years of age. The non-probability technique of convenient sampling was used. Thematic analysis was carried out on the collected data. Themes related to empathy (Love, kindness, caring and ability to think about/others) and Self-efficacy (Self-awareness, self-belief and self-regulation) were found out.

**Keywords:** *Observational Learning, Empathy, Self-Esteem, Life Skills, Learning*

When it comes to the quality of education and teaching, Indian homeless children are at the bottom of the barrel with respect to other children of the country. When the condition of primary education in the well-funded private schools is poor (Aggarwal, 2000), one can only wonder what the condition of education at the government schools would be, where most children from poorly-funded orphanages are sent.

Skills and etiquettes that children who are part of a family receive is something that children living in an orphanage lack all through their lives. There is a difference, in terms of basic skills and etiquette training between the children living in an orphanage and the ones living with their family (Taneja, 2002). Studies have suggested that these children are limited by the amount of psychological care and assessment that is required (Shukla, 2011). This adds to the problem of them not being able to survive as adults. In the Indian setting, it is the parents who provide their children with such a training (Malik, 2015), which is why the orphans remain oblivious to such training. This forms a clear distinction in the way orphans and non-orphans develop.

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Received: June 13, 2020; Revision Received: June 21, 2020; Accepted: June 25, 2020

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Research suggests that to be able to healthily deal with the world and lead a meaningful life, these children require education (Prajapati, 2017). However, they cannot make the most of the education system if they lack the basic skills and etiquettes that children are taught by their parents and other guardians (Malik, 2015).

This lack of resources requires the individuals to be resourceful. The children need to be taught these basic skills by the primary care-givers at the orphanage itself. This demands for various techniques of learning to come into play. This is where Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory can be employed.

Albert Bandura contributed significantly to the understanding of learning and self- esteem i.e., The Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1989). It was later confirmed through other studies that observational learning contributes to the learning of basic behaviour in the formative years (Schwarzer, 2005). The specifics of Social Cognitive Theory involve a huge element of observational learning and other associated process like cognition and self-reflection (Bandura & Grusec, 1966).

A question arises as how is this kind of teaching any different from the moral science lectures that one would receive in the government school? As the basic skills taught remain the same. This question does not apply to the problem that is being discussed.

It is already implied that by the time a child receives lectures given at school, it is too late to teach these skills (Gupta, 2001). It becomes difficult to bridge the gap between the children living with parents and homeless children (Taneja, 2002).

From the literature reviewed, it could be formulated that these children due to lack of a parent or a guiding figure, do not receive the social and self-regulating soft skills that our society deems necessary. They cannot attain the knowledge being given at school because they do not understand the fundamentals of existing in our society. The skills that the average person takes for granted remain alien to these children.

As opposed to other schools of thought like Behaviourism which believes humans learn only through reinforcements of desired behaviour, this school of thought emphasizes on the cognitive and decision-making aspect of an individual's learning (Bandura, 1989). It explains learning in a much more comprehensive and wholesome manner.

If observational learning helps the children pick up empathetic behaviours then various interventions and strategies can be derived out of it to help children not just in India but around the world. It is because there exists both a universal approach to the theory (Bandura, 2003) and a strong need for a powerful and novel technique to teach underprivileged children (Keefe, 1977).

A widespread false belief among people was that observational learning is just related to picking up negative behaviours. A common misconception was that aggression and rage were the only things one could learn through observational learning. However, later Bandura proved this wrong (Bandura, 2003). This misconception was because Bandura's initial experiment on Social Cognitive Theory was to investigate, if children pick up aggression through observational learning by observing an adult model beating and cursing a bobo doll i.e., The Bobo Doll Experiment (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963).

## IMPORTANCE OF SELF- EFFICACY

Self-esteem is how one values oneself; it is how one perceives their value to the world and how valuable they think they are to others. It is derived from a Greek word meaning “reverence to self”. The “self” in self-esteem involves the attitudes, beliefs and values one has about them. Whereas, the “esteem” in self-esteem focuses on the value that one gives to oneself. Self-esteem could also be thought of as individual’s overall positive evaluation of oneself (Rosenberg, 1965).

The environment, where one is raised, especially for children contributes to the development of their self-esteem (Mizuho Ozogi et al., 2012). The feedback received from one’s social environment, including the quality of relationship with the caregivers adds in the development of one’s self-esteem. Research suggests that children living in orphanages tend to have a lower self-esteem than those living with their parents (Yasmin & Marina, 2009).

It has also been found that children who are not orphans tend to look down and dissociate themselves from orphans in group behaviour, which negatively affects the self- perception and image of these orphans (Gudyanga et al., 2015). This lowered self-esteem might be due to unfulfilled expectations and are a part of the demoralization process (Pilapil, 2015).

The role of self-efficacy is also talked about in improving one’s self esteem and perception of self. According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is a key phenomenon. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual’s belief in his/her abilities to perform certain tasks (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Models both adult and peer can influence observer’s self-efficacy (Schunk, 2001).

Observing a successful model enhance observer’s belief that if the model can learn then so can they. Research shows that successful group wherein all the members have some responsibilities and they tend to share their rewards based on their collective performance can reduce the negative ability-related social comparisons by low achievers (Ames, 1984). If through observational learning, children can improve their self-efficacy and self-esteem, then they would be more motivated to learn behaviours such as empathy, love and even enhance their academic achievements (Reasoner, 1988).

This research aims to investigate if, observational learning helps one to learn a positive behaviour like empathy and self-efficacy. As compared to other strategies of learning that exist today, this technique if it gains confidence among teachers and social workers, will not only help to form a cost-effective and powerful tool to teach basic moral skills but will also act as novel way of teaching that can be tested to teach other subjects as well. Therefore, a fresh perspective along with an in-depth analysis of this teaching technique is required.

### *Objectives*

The literature review shows that the current scenario lacks a novel and cost-effective technique to teach soft skills and values such as empathy and self-efficacy to Indian homeless children. This study was designed with the central idea that if the observational learning can help induce elements of empathetic behaviour and values of self-efficacy in the orphanage children, it can be further developed to create an intervention or a model. Hence, the objective was framed.

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The aim of the study was to explore if observational learning influences children (aged 6 to 12 years) when it comes to inducing empathetic behaviour. Additionally, this study explored, if observational learning can be used to induce values of self-efficacy in such children who come from an underprivileged background.

### **METHOD**

The qualitative method was selected for the following reasons. Firstly, the focus of this study was to investigate the process of learning through observation. A quantitative method would not help one understand the process of learning in a comprehensive manner. Secondly, the objective of this study was to come up with an in depth understanding of learning. To understand the concept of learning in a comprehensive way, one must go further than just a cause-effect relationship. We selected the orphans with the minimum age of 6. This inclusion criterion was selected for multiple reasons. Firstly, this was the age where children could comprehend the nature of the information being presented to them. The information being presented requires a certain level of competence and maturity that children above the age of 6 showed. Other than that, we also wanted the children being selected to be supported by the orphanage solely. Their financial needs should only be met through orphanage, along with their need for psychological needs.

#### *Procedure*

The male group and the female group were assigned to a male and a female model respectively, the reason being that Bandura believed that children identify with the model of the same sex better than the different sex model. Therefore, the presence of a same sex model would affect the modelling of behaviour among children. The participants had to observe the model as he or she watched the video and talked about it simultaneously. While watching the video, the model points out the empathetic characteristics of the protagonist. Attributes relating to self-efficacy can also be observed in the clips that were shown to the children. The models call out such instances and actions of the characters while they happen.

There were two videos in general that were being used. First clip was used to show empathy between the characters. The second video was used to show the skill of self-efficacy. The first contained scenes from a movie where the dynamics between a father-daughter relationship is explored. The father and daughter form the primary relationship in the film. Although there are other side-characters that could give rise to learning of other soft-skills as well, we edited and cut the clips so as to majorly only project the skill of empathy between the father and daughter. The scene illustrates instances where the only way the father would be able to take action for the daughter is if he can be in her shoes and think like her. We put this forth in the interview with the subjects as well. We wanted to explore whether if children picked up on this soft skill of empathy without say, the model pointing it out explicitly. Hence, making it more about observational learning than say a technique like modelling i.e., making it more about how the observer makes sense of the behavior being presented rather than an explicit behaviour with well illuminated message behind it. This clip is 10 minute long.

The second clip was for making self-efficacy the target skill that could be observed by the participants. The scene shows an upcoming sports person who faces a lot of hurdles between him and his dream of becoming a member of the national cricket team for India. Adding to his difficulties is the fact that the protagonist is dumb and mute since birth. The way self-efficacy is illuminated in this clip is by editing together montages of the character working

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hard towards his goal while his peers and family make him realize how incapable he is supposedly of achieving his goals. The only person who believes in himself is he and the model points it out to the participants clearly. This clip is 7 minutes long.

Therefore, one session per participant constituted of a 30-minute duration with the screening of the two clips with the model and 10-12-minute semi-structured interview. The participants were de-briefed after the session was over.

The participants were made to watch the video along with the model and once without him/her. They observed the model without any disturbance. After this a personal face to face semi- structured interview was conducted with both the males and the female of the sample chosen. During this part, the responses from the participants were collected. The general outlines for the questions of the interview were 1) ‘What did you see in the video?’ And 2) ‘Did you learn something from the video? What was it?’ Additionally, proxy questions were also added as the interview went along. The interviewer made conscious effort to keep the discussion around the topics of self-efficacy and empathy, as much as possible. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and the counselor in charge. Following which verbatim transcripts were created. Their responses were thematically analyzed to look for themes related to empathy.

### **DIMENSIONS**

The dimensions of the study are learning and empathy.

**Learning** – It refers to the process of acquiring information by the process of observation of the model. In the setup, the participant observes the model and this leads to the acquisition of the information. The participant is asked to reproduce this behaviour during the interview.

**Empathy** – It is the acquired skill to think about what another person is going through mentally which is learned through the observation of the model in the setup. If the participant looks at the video and elicits the same behaviour that the model produced, it would be considered as empathy.

**Self-Efficacy** – The belief in oneself that no matter the situation one can handle and thrive in the given situation. A sense of control over the situation.

**Homeless children** – This involves the state of not having a home ( a place of shelter), but it does not implicate that the child’s parents are not alive.

**Orphans** – This involves children whose parents are not alive and therefore they might require a place for shelter as well.

### ***Sampling Technique and Characteristics***

The objective of the study is very specific in terms of the background of the participants it aims to study. It seeks to understand the potential of observational learning as a technique in Indian orphan children.

### **Inclusion criteria:**

1. Age - The participants must be in the age group of 6-12 years of age.
2. Socio-economic status – The survival of the minor needs to be supported by an orphanage or another childcare organization.

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### Exclusion criteria:

1. The minor must not be supported by parents or guardians in any way. Their complete survival should be dependent upon the institution or associated alliances.

The sample is composed of 6 males and 6 females. It constitutes of minors belonging to an orphanage, between the age group of 6-12. The sampling technique used here is purposive sampling because the objective of the study required the participants to be homeless. The participants are from two branches of the same orphanage in New Delhi. The first centre was boys under 18 and the other was for girls under the age of 18.

*Table 1: Distribution of participants across for semi-structured interview*

Sr No.	Males	Females	Total
1.	6	6	12

### MEASUREMENT

The method used for data collection was the semi structured interview. The tool for the method has been open ended items comprising of multiple questions. All the participants had to answer the same questions. The questions and the videos were validated by three experts in the field of child psychology. One was a school counselor in Ryan International School, Sohna Road, the other was a counselor in the orphanage and the third was a counselor at Max Hospital, Saket. All three are experienced psychology and mental health professionals, dealing with children. That is why they were chosen to validate the questions due to their expertise in the field. The videos constituted clips from two films. The scenes were selected on the basis of the overall message the scene delivered and its similarity to the kind of soft skill we were aiming to teach i.e., empathy and self-efficacy.

The experts were asked to scrutinize the videos and questions. They were requested to comment on the relevance of video and the questions with respect to the objective of the study. We specifically asked the experts to review the clips on the basis how impactful and useful they thought the videos were if we use them to teach empathy and self-efficacy. The experts were made aware of the background of the participants including their overall mental and physical health and their lifestyles. Feedback provided by the experts lead to formation of the questions mentioned above and the subsequent usage of the clip.

### *Ethics and Informed Consent*

The tools and the design of the study were presented to the counselor of the orphanage and the head of the orphanage to get the clearance required for conducting the study. The Participant's right to opt out of the study at any time, and matters related to confidentiality were explained to the premise counselor before the study. Written informed consent was obtained from the counselor on premise.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The method for analysis used was thematic analysis with the following steps:

- The researcher read through all the transcripts and coded the relevant parts of the sentences. The relevant parts were noted down on another sheet of paper.
- Following this process, a list was created. Through this list similar codes were grouped together to form sub-themes of the studies.
- Finally, all the sub-themes put together were used to identify the major theme of the paper.

**RESULTS**

*Table 2: The major themes found*

<b>Love</b>	Love for family Love for sport
<b>Thinking about / as others</b>	Understanding towards others Trying to know others Understanding from other perspectives Believe in goodness
<b>Helpfulness</b>	Helping others Showing care
<b>Self-belief</b>	Belief in one’s ability Others belief in self
<b>Self-regulation</b>	Regular practice Learning diligently
<b>Self-awareness</b>	Winning competitions

The data reveals 6 major themes of ‘Love’, ‘Thinking about others’, ‘Helpfulness’, ‘Self-belief’, ‘Self-regulation’ and ‘Self-awareness’. A no. of sub-themes adds up to make each of these themes mentioned in the above table.

**Love**

Two sub-themes were derived out of this theme. The characters displayed behaviour showcasing an innate sense of love for the family members. Studies have found that those family members who understand another member's perspective in a family the most are also found to be perceived as highly supportive and tend to have an innate sense for this love for the family members (Scapaletti, 2011). This response was observed by all 12 participants involved.

**Example**

“his sister loves him the most, she even got him a sports magazine.” (M)  
 “...but when he spoke some abusive words to her younger sister, she punched him.” (G)

These responses observed also showed the protagonists love for their sport. Their love and passion towards their respective sport portrayed through their behaviour and actions is reported by the participants in the transcripts.

**Example**

“he had displayed those cutout photos of famous cricketers in a secret hut because he loves playing cricket.” (M)

**Thinking about others**

The participants observed that certain characters displayed understanding towards other characters without even knowing much about them. A belief in goodness seemed to be reported as being observed by the participants. A meta-analysis incorporated this “thinking about others” into a type of empathy called the “Affective empathy” (Cuff et Al., 2014).

**Example**

“the person who is the cricket authority tries to understand the other before making any judgment” (M)

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“papa, we aren’t able to practice in salwar suit...her father then asks their elder cousin brother to bring his extra pants, then his wife cuts and sews these pants to make shorts for the girls.” (G)

“she apologizes because she understands her father’s love and care for her” (G)

### Helpfulness

In a seminal meta-analysis Eisenberg and Miller (1987) reviewed the relationship between empathy and pro-social behaviour, and found a positive relation between the two, defining pro-social behaviours as helping, sharing and giving to others. In our study as well helping emerged as one of the major themes.

A no. of characters displayed behaviors and actions where they were trying to help others. The participants also observed characters showing care for others.

### Example:

“...his sister uses the sign language to help Iqbal understand what the coach is saying” (M)

“...Babita helps Geeta understand their father...” (G)

The father showed concern for the needs and pleasures of the daughters as well. This is something that the participants noticed as well. They pointed out that the father could have just started the training without giving any prior information but the father chose to inform the daughters beforehand.

He let them eat their favourite dish before they were never allowed to eat it for a certain amount of time of training that showed to the observers that the father was very caring towards the daughters.

### Self-belief

The protagonists showed an immense believe in themselves and in their abilities. Also, other characters belief in them was very important for their belief to develop. All this was observed by the participants in the responses displayed by the characters.

Example:

“yes, he believed in himself to become a good cricket player” (M)

“he felt really good and even says that from now on he will make his daughters learn wrestling and all their mopping and cleaning work will be stopped from now on.” (G)

### Self-regulation

The participants observed the protagonists displaying efforts in getting themselves trained to become better. Also, the protagonists showed behaviour of being a good student to their respective trainers. This was all reported in the transcripts.

### Example

“coach is saying that, stump out on every ball doesn’t work. Bowling technique should be changed each time.... Iqbal understands this.” (M)

“father rents a place... at night both the daughters meet him there to get more trained...” (G)



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### **Self-awareness**

The participants also report that the protagonist later becomes more aware of their ability which furthermore increased their belief in themselves.

### **Example**

“Geeta starts winning fights which marks the beginning of her belief in herself” (G)

As also established in previous researches (Panisoara et Al., 2019), empathy does influence the development of self-esteem. Thus, the themes discussed above elucidate the very nature of empathy, whether they are a consequence of or an extension of empathy itself. Other researchers have also found positive correlation between the two (Carter, 2017).

In our study, these themes clearly are a part of empathy and should be studied in the future to establish causation as well. It would help to induce and facilitate the development of the discussed constructs.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper has revealed the clear potential of the Observational learning technique as a teaching method to help induce some empathetic behaviors in the Indian homeless children. It revealed that Indian Orphans of the ages between 6-12 do pick up empathy-based insights and behaviors from a model of 21 years of age. It confirms the assumption that individuals think about and reflect on the behaviors and lessons they are taught rather than just mindlessly learn them due to a positive outcome.

### **Influence of the Model**

The influence that a model has on a participant/subject is immense and noteworthy. The responses collected reveal that the way a model behaves has a huge impact on the way the orphans thought. Sometimes, the orphans covered almost all the major themes of empathy that the model talked about. This leads the researcher to believe that the homeless children have a potential to learn through observational learning and all they need is the right amount of motivation, care and dedication from their caretakers.

### **Influence of the collectivistic culture on the learning**

Culture forms a huge aspect of how these individuals learn behaviours. This can be said without any hesitance as the place that these children reside in has a lot to do with it. Children from all over India reside in the orphanage where the research was conducted. They have to communicate with each other, mingle with each other’s cultural norms and sometimes even learn them. However, as a result of India belonging to a collectivistic style of culture, these children have an innate sense of survival in a group.

They participants had understood early on in their lives, that they have a better chance of survival in a group. This is clearly seen in the responses that the participants give as they explain the protagonist’s behaviour always in relation to people in his surroundings. The explanation of doing such altruistic deeds, according to the children of the orphanage, is the fact that the culture they belong to deems helping others and thinking about others to be the accepted way of life.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of this study are not generalizable to all the children of various orphanage settings around the world. Further, a more detailed and deeper research is required to truly understand if observational learning is practical or not. This endeavor was relatively short lived.

### CONCLUSION AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The insight gained through this study is motivation enough to explore two things in the field of childcare and education of the same age group. First, check if the observational learning technique can be used to induce other soft skills and second, to develop interventions and training programs for helping the under privileged children of India as a continuation of this study.

This study was an exploratory research to see if the Observational learning technique holds the potential to teach empathy and other alike soft skills to the homeless children of India. The thematic analysis reveals that the theory does have an inductive effect when it comes to teaching empathetic behaviors to children from 6-12 years of age.

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### ***Acknowledgements***

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Rai, A. & Sharma, R. (2020). Potential of observational learning to induce empathy and self – efficacy in pre-adolescent Indian orphan minors. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(2), 1299-1309. DIP:18.01.149/20200802, DOI:10.25215/0802.149