

Empathy in Relation to Prosocial Behaviour among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Empathy is the capacity of an individual to understand other's condition or situation by putting themselves in their shoes. Prosocial behavior is the act of helping of others with the intention of benefiting others or the society. **Aim:** The present study was carried out to understand the empathy in relation to prosocial behavior among college students. **Methods:** For this study a sample of 120 students (60 males and 60 females) were taken from the various colleges of Thrissur district. Prosocial Behavior Battery (PSB) and the Toronto Empathetic Questionnaire was used to collect the data. The obtained result was analyzed using Pearson's coefficient of correlation and independent t-test. **Results:** The study revealed that prosocial behavior and empathy are negatively correlated ($r = 0.298^{**}$). There is significant age difference in the level of empathy ($t = 0.019$). The independent t-test ($t = 0.001$) between men and women reveals that there is a significant difference in the level of empathy. The independent t-test ($t = 0.001$) between men and women reveals that there is a significant difference in the level of empathy. **Conclusion:** This study showed that when a person has high level of empathy, they would be more prosocial. This study also shows that students of age 17-19 years are more empathetic than the students of age 20-23 years and women have higher level of empathy than men.

Keywords: Prosocial Behavior, Empathy, Adolescents

Adolescent development is influenced by genetic, biochemical, environmental, and social variables, just as it is throughout infancy development. Adolescents spend thousands of hours interacting with their parents, peers, and teachers during their formative years of growth, but they now face huge biological changes, new experiences, and developmental demands. Relationships with parents change, moments with peers get more intimate, and dating, as well as sexual experimentation and possibly intercourse, occur for the first time.

Adolescents have more abstract and utopian beliefs. Body image becomes more important as a result of biological changes. Adolescence is both a continuation and a break from childhood. There is a long history of people being concerned about how teenagers will turn

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out. G. Stanley Hall presented the "storm and stress" concept of adolescence in 1904, claiming that it is a chaotic time marked by conflict and mood swings. When Daniel Offer and his colleagues (1988) looked at the self-images of adolescents in the United States, Australia, Bangladesh, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Taiwan, Turkey, and West Germany, they found that at least 73 percent of them had a healthy self-image. Despite differences, the adolescents were generally happy, enjoyed life, perceived themselves as capable of self-control, valued work and school, felt confident in their sexual selves, expressed positive feelings toward their families, and believed they had the ability to cope with life's stresses: not exactly a storm and stress portrayal of adolescence.

Personal experiences and media depictions combine to shape public perceptions of adolescence, but neither gives an objective picture of how normal adolescents develop (Feldman & Elliot, 1990). Adults' short memory are likely to have a role in their willingness to presume the worst about adolescents. Many adults use their experiences of their own adolescence to gauge their current perceptions of adolescents. Empathy—the ability to feel other people's emotions, sympathize with them, and see things from their point of view—is one reason for prosocial behaviour (Eisenberg, 2000). In other words, we help people because we are experiencing the same terrible sentiments they are, and we want to help them get rid of their negative feelings. This is unselfish since it motivates us to help for no other reason, but it is also selfish in one sense, because helping others benefits us as well: it can make us feel better. The empathy-altruism hypothesis, proposed by Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, and Birch (1981) in response to these basic data, implies that at least some prosocial behaviours are motivated merely by a desire to help someone in need (Batson & Oleson, 1991). Such incentive can be so powerful that the helper is willing to do things that are uncomfortable, risky, or even life threatening (Batson & Batson et al, 1995). All other considerations pale in comparison to compassion for others (Batson, Klein, Highberger & Shaw, 1995).

Empathy, according to research findings, has three distinct components: an emotional aspect, a cognitive component that involves accurately perceiving others' thoughts and feelings (empathetic accuracy), and a third aspect known as empathic concern, which involves feelings of concern for another's well-being (Gleason, Jenson Campbell & Ickes, 2009). This distinction is critical because the three components appear to be linked to various aspects of prosocial behaviour and have different long-term consequences. Consider the effects of empathic accuracy, for example. This appears to be important in social adjustment, or how well we get along with others.

Empathy refers to a perception of similarity between one's own feelings and those of others on a phenomenological level of description. Sharing another person's feelings does not always indicate that one will act in a supportive or sympathetic manner. Given the complexity of this construct, we feel that only a multidisciplinary approach may aid in a better understanding of the information-processing mechanism that causes this subjective psychological experience.

Helping, sharing, and soothing are examples of prosocial behaviour, which is defined as moral, voluntary behaviour meant to benefit others (Eisenberg et al; 1997). The quality of a prosocial action, that is, the maturity of logic driving the behaviour, changes as the kid acquires the capacity for higher degrees of moral judgement (Eisenberg, Pasternack, Lennon, Beller & Marhy, 1987). Furthermore, it is thought that mature moral judgement is positively related to the amount of prosocial behaviour that occurs (Blasi, 1980).

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Children show (a) the cognitive capacity to interpret the physical and psychological states of others, (b) the emotional capacity to experience the states of others on an affective level, and (c) the behavioral resources that enable the possibility of attempting to alleviate the discomfort of others as early as two years of age, according to Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1990). These researchers came to the conclusion that youngsters develop sympathetic worry throughout the course of the next two years, and that this care is converted into prosocial behaviour on their behalf. The relationship between empathy and prosocial behaviour is frequently recognized as a basic motivator in evoking benevolence and suppressing violent acts in moral development theories (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow 1990). As a result, if a person can feel the pain that they have caused others through vicariously experiencing it, they are less likely to continue to harm others and are more motivated to aid them. Hastings and colleagues (2000) explained this impact in terms of empathy's ability to serve as an anti-aggression component. Empathy, according to these authors, provides immediate, proximal feedback that deters aggressive behaviour by bringing the perpetrator's attention to, and maybe sympathy for, the victim's pain. Miller and Eisenberg (1988) observed that empathy and aggression are often inversely associated, supporting the above hypothesis. Furthermore, among children with disruptive behaviour difficulties, the degree of this unfavorable link has been reported to rise with age. As a result, the importance of developing and maintaining normative levels of empathy in youngsters is growing in popularity.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

The objective of the study is to understand the levels of empathy and prosocial behaviour among adolescents with respect to the age and gender difference.

Hypothesis

- **H1-** There is no significant relationship between prosocial behaviour and empathy among adolescents.
- **H2-** There is no significant difference in the level of prosocial behavior and empathy among adolescents with respect to age.
- **H3-** There is no significant difference in the level of prosocial behavior and empathy among adolescents with respect to gender.

Sample

The sample of 120 adolescents (60 males and 60 females) within the age group of 17 to 23 years was used in this study, which were taken from the various colleges of Thrissur district. Purposive sampling was used in this study. Inclusion criteria include a sample of 120 college students between 17 to 23 years which were taken from various government and private colleges of Thrissur district. Adolescents below 16 years of age were excluded.

Tools used

Socio demographic Details: This socio demographic data is intended to gather information regarding the name of the participant, gender, and age.

Prosocial Personality Battery: The prosocial personality battery (PSB) used for the present study is a 30-item new and short version of the full PSB scale, which had 56 items developed by Penner et.al. (1995). The shorter version of the scale was developed by Penner L A(2002) has 30 items assessing components related to prosocial behaviour. The subscales

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included under this are Social Responsibility (SR), Empathetic Concern (EC), Perspective Talking (PT), Personal Distress (PD), Mutual Moral Reasoning (MMR), Self-Reported Altruism (SRA). Penner has established the reliability of Prosocial Personality Battery. The alpha coefficient of the 'Other Oriented Empathy' factor is 0.82 and of Helpfulness is 0.81. The test-retest reliability for other oriented empathy factor is 0.77 and for helpfulness is 0.85. It shows the test has a high reliability. The scale has both content validity and face validity. The PSB thus appears to provide a reliability and valid measure of the prosocial personality of adolescents.

The Toronto Empathetic Questionnaire: The TEQ contains 16 questions that encompass a wide range of attributes associated with the theoretical factors of empathy. The affective aspect of empathetic responding is thought to be related to such phenomenon as emotional comprehension, Sympathetic physiological arousal and non-specific altruism which are represented in TEQ items. It has to be proven to be a reliable measure of empathy for different age groups including adolescents. Its internal consistency was found to be high, ranging from alpha = 0.85 to alpha= 0.87, as well as test-retest reliability at $r=0.81$, $p<0.001$ (Spreng et.al.2009). Its construct validity has been demonstrated through associations with other measures of empathy (for example positive correlation with the EQ $r=0.80$, $p<0.001$) or similar concepts, such as interpersonal sensitivity and social comprehension.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, the researcher provides information about the nature and purpose of the study. The test materials were administrated in one way. The way opted was taking printouts of the questionnaire and distributing it among the adolescents by meeting them individually. The ethical considerations are informed consent was acquired from each participant, participants were given the option to leave the study at any point of time and confidentiality of the personal data and the test response of the participants was assured and maintained.

Statistical Analysis

The data was coded for SPSS 16 analysis. Frequency and percentages were used for categorical variables. The mean and standard deviation values of the variables were used. The Pearson product moment correlation was used to see the significant relationship between variables. The independent t-test was used to see the age and gender difference between the variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the socio- demographic variables of the respondents. (N=120)

Socio demographic data	Category	Frequency	Percentage%
Age	17	8	6.7
	18	45	37.5
	19	33	27.5
	20	18	15.0
	21	13	10.8
	22	1	0.8
	23	2	1.7
Gender	Male	60	50.0
	Female	60	50.0

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Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of socio-demographic variables. From the table the age category is 17 to 23 years with more samples in the age of 21 and 22 when compared to the other age groups. The age category of 17 to 23 comes under the college students. Among the 120 samples there are 60 (50%) male and 60 (50%) female participants.

Table 2 shows the mean and deviation of the variables (N=120)

Factors	Mean	Standard deviation
Prosocial behaviour	1.0887	9.83044
Empathy	38.8750	5.68732

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the variables. The mean value of the variable prosocial behaviour is 1.0887 and standard deviation is 9.83044. The mean value of the variable Empathy is 38.8750 and standard deviation is 5.68732.

Table 3 shows the correlation values between the variable's Prosocial Behavior and Empathy (N=120)

Factors	Empathy
Prosocial behaviour	0.298**

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Table 3 shows the correlation between prosocial behaviour and empathy. The variables prosocial behaviour and empathy has a correlation of -0.298** which indicates a weak positive correlation between the variables. This shows that when empathy increases, there will be an increase in prosocial behaviour also. In one study, empathy was found to be positively related to prosocial and social behaviors, and negatively associated with anger and aggression (Strayer and Roberts, 2004). As such empathy- the ability to feel other people's emotions, and seeing things from their point of view- is one reason for prosocial behaviour (Eisenberg,2000).

Table 4 shows the age difference between the variables. (N= 120)

Factors	Age	N	Mean	Std. deviation	t-value	Sig.
Prosocial behaviour	17 - 19	86	1.0979	9.78248	1.649	0.659 (NS)
	20 - 23	34	1.0653	9.70234		
Empathy	17 - 19	86	39.5581	5.16687	2.123	0.019 (S)
	20 -23	34	37.1471	6.60180		

There is no age difference in prosocial behavior as 0.659 is greater than 0.05, there is no significant age difference in empathy as 0.019 is lesser than 0.05, where students from age 17 to 19 years are comparatively more empathetic than students of age 20 to 23 years.

Table 5 shows the gender difference between the variables. (N= 120)

Factors	Gender	N	Mean	Std.deviation	t-value	Sig.
Prosocial behaviour	Male	60	1.0428	8.04667	-5.756	0.303 (NS)
	Female	60	1.1345	9.35084		
Empathy	Male	60	36.0833	5.69356	-6.154	0.001 (S)
	Female	60	41.6667	4.11968		

There is no gender difference in prosocial behavior as 0.303 is greater than 0.05, there is significant gender difference in empathy as 0.010 is lesser than 0.05, where female have

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higher level of empathy than male i.e., female tend to be more empathetic towards other people than the male population.

CONCLUSION

- There is a significant positive relationship between prosocial behavior and empathy among college students.
- There is no significant difference in the level of prosocial behaviour with respect to age.
- There is significant difference in the level of empathy with respect to age.
- There is no significant difference in the level of prosocial behaviour between men and women.
- There is a significant difference in the level of empathy with respect to between men and women.

Limitations

Limitations in the present study could be a stepping stone for the future extension of the study. However, the major limitations include, the data collection was conducted in a certain area which may be difficult on generalizing the findings and results of the current study. One limitation is related to the size of the sample. The sample size was small, that the study was carried out only among 120 adolescents.

Implications for the Future Study

The study can be used to understand the association of prosocial behaviour with poor social adjustment, when elaborated. The current study can also be used to understand the influence of empathy in tolerating conflicts in life, when elaborated.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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