

Assessment of Empathy Life Skill among Adolescents

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ABSTRACT The present study entitled was undertaken with the specific objectives viz. (i) to assess the empathy skills of adolescents and (ii) to compare these skills among male and female adolescents. The data were collected from two randomly selected blocks (Bajjnath and Panchrukhi) of Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, India. A total of 120 adolescents (60 male and 60 female) of age 15-18 years were selected from the three schools of each block. To collect the required data from the respondents, an interview schedule, covering measures of empathy was prepared. The data was analyzed statistically using frequency, percentages and t-test. The results revealed that maximum respondents possessed medium level of empathy. Significant differences were found in overall empathy skills of male and female respondents. Likewise, significant differences were found in mean values of perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress between male and female respondents, whereas non-significant difference was found in fantasy measure of empathy.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, a vital stage of growth and development, marks the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. They also have the need to exercise skills to indicate and establish individuality and independence. Adolescents need help and guidance in decision-making, problem solving, critical thinking, developing interpersonal skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with stress and managing emotions.

The present scenario of adolescents clearly shows that the condition of our youth has significantly deteriorated. Recent studies show that there is significant rise in the problems faced by the adolescents for example, serious emotional disturbances has increased (WHO 2001), increased sexual activity in schools, apart from the above, use of heavy drugs and youth drop-outs have also increased in the recent years (UNICEF 2001). All these studies illustrate the increase in aggressiveness, suicidal cases, drug use, and depressive cases among adolescents. This gives us the clear image of the struggles that adolescents go through, the problems they face. Providing tools to strengthen adolescents' coping abilities to counter stress and challenges is an essential need. One best-practice model for contributing to the healthy development of adolescents is a life skills approach.

Life skills include psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people to

make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person even in a situation that we may not be familiar with. It is an effective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, feeling similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel. It plays a vital role in one's social-emotional health and well-being. The ability to perceive what other people are feeling and appropriately share that emotional state enables us to react properly to social situations. It is essential for healthy relationships and overall well-being. To have a successful relationship with our loved ones and society at large, we need to understand and care about other peoples' needs, desires and feelings. Higher levels of trait empathy predict positive outcomes, such as better emotion management and relationships with peers, and even lead to a heightened valuation of others' welfare and well-being and broadly have been implicated in better overall social-emotional health in individuals. Without empathy, our communication with others will amount to one-way traffic.

Rapidly changing social, moral, ethical and religious values have ushered in certain 'life styles' in the present society especially among

the youth. Young people need social skills for consensus building and advocacy on issues of concern. There is an urgent need to provide today's youth with a new set of ways and systems to deal with the demands of life. Empathy can play a very vital role to increase the awareness among the youth about social problems and the challenges they may face. It helps the young people to take positive actions to protect themselves, to promote health and meaningful social relationship.

Objectives

Hence keeping in view the importance of empathy life skill in the life of adolescents, the present study has been planned with the following objectives:

1. To investigate the empathy skills of adolescents.
2. To compare these skills among male and female adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, India was purposively selected for the study because it is the largest district of Himachal Pradesh in population. For the selection of the blocks, a list of all the development blocks falling in the district of Kangra was procured from the latest concerned document and two blocks were selected at random. Accordingly, Panchrukhi and Baijnath were selected for the purpose of the study. A list of total Senior Secondary Government Schools falling in these selected blocks was procured from the relevant documents available in the concerned Block Development Office and three schools from each selected block were chosen randomly. A list of all adolescents in the age group of 15-18 years was prepared with the help of the principal of the concerned school. From each school, a sample of 10 males and 10 females was chosen randomly making it a total of 120 (60 males and 60 females) adolescents. Various crucial factors influencing the empathy skill of adolescent were studied as personal (age and class), social variables (caste and religion), familial variables (family type, family size, education of parents and parental occupation) and economic variables (family income). Empathy life skill was studied under categories namely, perspective taking, empathic concern, personal distress and fantasy.

To collect the required data from the intended school students an interview schedule was prepared keeping in view the addressed objectives of the study. It consisted of 49 statements including both positive as well as negative which were based on 4 continuums, that is, always, sometimes, rarely and never. All the statements were classified under four subscales namely perspective taking (14 statements), empathic concern (12 statements), personal distress (16 statements) and fantasy (7 statements). The data were collected personally with the help of self-structured interview schedule after making a good rapport with the students and the principal of the concerned school.

After collection of data from the respondents, all the questionnaires were scored. The scores were then categorized in three levels (that is, low, medium and high) depending on the various ranges formed. The obtained scores were arranged systematically and master tables were prepared. From these master tables, various final result tables were generated on the basis of objective of the study. Frequency and percentages were calculated for preparing personal, socio-economic profile and distribution of adolescent's empathy life skill. 't-test' was used to test the differences between the male and female respondents on empathy skill at 5 percent level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to assess the empathy life skill of adolescents in Baijnath and Panchrukhi blocks in Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh. The collected data were analyzed to achieve the objectives of the study and results have been discussed under the following sections and subsections.

1. Levels of Empathy Life Skills among Adolescents

i) Overall Empathy Skill

The perusal of data in Table 1 revealed cent percent males and eighty seven percent females in medium category of empathy, whereas in high level of empathy skills there was no male respondent and only thirteen percent of females. Overall, the percentage scored in medium level category of empathy skills was ninety three and

Table 1: Levels of overall empathy skills of the respondents

Category	Male (n=60)	Female (n=60)	Total (n=120)
Low	0 (00.00)	0 (00.00)	0 (00.00)
Medium	60 (100.00)	52 (86.67)	122 (93.33)
High	0 (00.00)	08 (13.33)	8 (6.67)
Total	60 (100.00)	60 (100.00)	120 (100.00)

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage of respondents

almost seven percent were in high level of empathy, whereas no respondent belonged to low level category of empathy skills.

The present study finds support from study by (Pujar and Patil 2016) revealed that at pretest, majority of the adolescent girls experienced medium level of empathy skill. After the intervention, majority of adolescent girls had high level of skill.

2. Levels of Measures of Empathy Skills of Male and Female Respondents

Empathy skills were measured by four measures as listed below and has been presented in Table 2.

a) Perspective Taking

Under this measure of empathy majority of male (80%) and female (96.67%) respondents were at medium level of perspective taking and rest twenty percent male and rest (3.33%) female re-

spondents were at high level of perspective taking. Overall data revealed that eighty eight percent of respondents had attained medium level of perspective taking followed by (11.67%) who were at high level and none of the respondents was at low level of perspective taking.

b) Empathic Concern

The data in Table 2 shows that majority of male (86.67%) and female (78.33%) respondents were at medium level of empathic concern succeeded by twelve percent male and twenty two percent female respondents at high level. Out of the total data, majority (83.33%) of respondents was at medium level of empathic concern, seventeen percent were at high level, whereas no respondent was at low level of empathic concern.

c) Personal Distress

It is evident from the information in Table 2 regarding the personal distress, majority of male

Table 2: Levels of empathy skills of male and female respondents

Category	Male (n=60)	Female (n=60)	Total (n=120)
<i>Perspective Taking</i>			
Low	00 (00.00)	00 (00.00)	00 (00.00)
Medium	48 (80.00)	58 (96.67)	106 (88.33)
High	12 (20.00)	02 (03.33)	14 (11.67)
Total	60 (100.00)	60 (100.00)	120 (100.00)
<i>Empathic Concern</i>			
Low	00 (00.00)	00 (00.00)	00 (00.00)
Medium	53 (86.67)	47 (78.33)	100 (83.33)
High	7 (11.67)	13 (21.67)	20 (16.67)
Total	60 (100.00)	60 (100.00)	120 (100.00)
<i>Personal Distress</i>			
Low	02 (03.33)	00 (00.00)	02 (01.67)
Medium	44 (73.33)	53 (83.33)	97 (80.83)
High	14 (23.33)	07 (11.67)	21 (17.50)
Total	60 (100.00)	60 (100.00)	120 (100.00)
<i>Fantasy</i>			
Low	09 (15.00)	08 (13.33)	17 (14.16)
Medium	39 (65.00)	47 (78.33)	86 (71.67)
High	12 (20.00)	05 (08.33)	17 (14.16)
Total	60 (100.00)	60 (100.00)	120 (100.00)

Notes: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage of respondents

respondents (73.33%) had scored medium level. 23.33 percent and 3.33 percent of male respondents were at high and low level of personal distress, respectively. Likewise, majority (83.33%) of female respondents was at medium level and 11.67 percent respondents had attained high level of personal distress. On studying overall data, majority (80.83%) of respondents were at medium level, 17.50 percent and only 1.67 percent respondents had scored high and low level of personal distress, respectively.

d) Fantasy

Further in the Table 2 it is shown that majority of male (65%) and female (78.33%) respondents had scored medium level of fantasy, (20%) of male and (8.33%) female were at high level of fantasy and fifteen percent male and thirteen percent female respondents were at low level of this measure of empathy.

Overall data showed that majority (71.67%) of respondents had scored medium level and similar percentage (14.16%) of respondents was at high and low level of fantasy. Study by Pujar et al. (2014) concluded that the intervention on life skill education is helpful for the rural adolescent girls to take positive actions and improving their coping skills of stress and problem solving ability.

3. t-test Showing the Mean Value Differences of Variables between Male and Female Respondents

The t value was calculated to find out the mean difference between male and female respondents on different sub skills of empathy and has been discussed under the following subheads in Table 3.

i) Overall Empathy Skills of the Respondents

On this test, the mean value of male respondents was found to be (80.48%) and mean value

of female respondents was found to be 84.5 percent with the standard error of difference of mean as 1.90. The difference between the mean value of empathy skill of male and female respondents was found to be significant showing that female respondents were more empathic than male respondents.

Similar to the study Weid et al. (2007) demonstrated sex differences in empathic tendencies, with girls being more empathic than boys. Sex differences were also established in conflict resolution strategies, with girls using problem solving, withdrawal and compliance more frequently than boys and Larden et al. (2006) stated that girls reported more mature moral judgments, less cognitive distortions and more empathy than boys did.

Likewise, Garaigordobil et al. (2009) presented a comparative analysis of empathy and adolescence gender differences and associated socio-emotional variables. The study had one of the objectives to carry out a comparative exploration of empathy and a set of socio-emotional variables in childhood and adolescence, analyzing gender differences. The sample was made up of 313 participants aged 10 to 14 years. The Anova's indicated that, for all ages, girls scored significantly higher in empathy, pro-social behaviour, assertive behaviour and ability for cognitive analysis of negative emotions, whereas boys presented more aggressive behaviours in their interaction with peers.

Generally speaking, females of all ages exhibited higher levels of empathy particularly affective empathy than do males (Barnett et al. 1980; Borden et al. 1988; Eisenberg-Berg and Mussen 1978; McDevitt et al. 1991; Mills and Grusec 1989; Siegal 1985).

ii) Mean Differences between Male and Female Respondents on Subscales of Empathy

a) Perspective Taking

In perspective taking measure of empathy, the mean value of male respondents was found

Table 3: Mean differences between male and female respondents on overall empathy skill

Category	Male		Female		Standard error of differences of mean	t-value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
Empathy	80.48	12.49	84.50	08.90	1.90	2.11*

*Significant at 5% level, Non-significant (NS)

to be twenty four percent and the mean value of female respondents found to be twenty three percent with the standard error of difference of mean 0.69. The difference between the mean value of perspective taking between male and female respondents was found to be significant. That is boys take other people's perspective more thoughtfully than girls.

b) Empathic Concern

The mean value of empathic concern of male respondents was found to be twenty one percent and the mean value of female respondents found to be twenty-two percent with the standard error of difference of mean 0.61. The mean value of empathic concern measure of empathy skills of female respondents was significantly higher than the male respondents.

c) Personal Distress

On personal distress, the mean value of male respondents was found to be (28.83%) and the mean value of female respondents found to be (26.93%) with the standard error of difference of mean 0.92. The difference between the mean value of between male and female respondents was found to be significant at 5 percent level. The boys can feel the distress more than the girls as the study indicates.

d) Fantasy

The mean value of male respondents was found to be (10.88%) and the mean value of female respondents found to be (11%) with the standard error of difference of mean 0.55. The difference between the mean value of between male and female respondents was found to be non-significant at 5 percent level.

Contrary to the study, when Catchpole et al. (2005) correlated perspective taking (PT) and empathic concern (EC) for both girls and boys, for boys this correlation was significantly higher ($r=.65^{**}$; $z=2.68^{**}$) than for girls ($r=.27^{*}$). The pattern of findings differed significantly by sex. Firstly, there was a significantly stronger relationship between EC and PT for boys. It seems that boys who were able to take another person's perspective cognitively were also more likely to connect emotionally with another's experience (and vice versa). For girls, these abilities, although still correlated, seem to be less strongly linked. Thalagala (2004) reported, in general life skills improved with increasing age and socio-economic status. No gender differences were seen in life skills (Table 4).

CONCLUSION

The present study entitled "Assessment of Empathy Life Skills among Adolescents" was undertaken as research endeavor to find out the empathy skills among adolescents in the study area. The way in which adolescents develop and exercise their personal efficacy during this transitional period can play a key role in setting the course their life paths take. Guiding children to practice these empathic responses within conflict situations can build habits of thinking and caring about other people's perspectives and feelings and help them to come up with nonviolent solutions instead of resorting to aggression. Thus, it is an important variable to be considered.

It can be concluded from the present study that the majority of respondents were at medium level of the empathy life skills. Empathy skills of female adolescents were better as compared to male counterparts. Significant difference was found in perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress measures among male and female adolescents.

Table 4: Mean differences between male and female respondents on different measures of empathy skills

Category	Male		Female		Standard error of differences of mean	t-value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
Perspective taking	24.25	4.15	22.73	3.41	0.69	2.20*
Empathic concern	21.21	3.90	22.43	2.68	0.61	2.0*
Personal distress	28.83	5.41	26.93	4.69	0.92	2.06*
Fantasy	10.88	3.24	11.00	2.75	0.55	0.22 ^{NS}

*Significant at 5% level, Non-significant (NS)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of this study have implications for counselors, educationists as well as parents that there is a need to facilitate good quality of home with proper communicative and supportive environment to their adolescents. To increase the empathy skills especially in violent areas an intervention program can be provided for enhancement of these skills. Teachers should be provided with knowledge and skills to impart life skill education to the adolescents and to enable them to deal with adolescents having high risk behaviour. Parents especially mothers appear to be a valuable resource and needs to be active participants in any programs planned for improving the wellbeing of adolescents. Revision of curriculum, training of teachers, and recognition of empathy as a skill in education as an integral part is required, so that it will be able to capture adequate adolescent attention.

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