

Examining the Relationship between Empathy and Subjective Well-Being among University Students

Nurul Athina Zakaria and Nor Azzatunnisak Mohd Khatib

Centre for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: namk@ukm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARAFMS/v14-i4/24222> DOI:10.6007/IJARAFMS/v14-i4/24222

Published Online: 19 December 2024

Abstract

Empathy is an important aspect of understanding socialization and human nature. Past studies also showed that research findings on empathy are inconsistent in explaining the relationship between empathy and subjective well-being. Hence, this study examines the relationship between empathy and subjective well-being among university students. A total of 272 students were selected as participants, which was retrieved using convenient sampling. Toronto Empathy Questionnaires and the Malaysian version of the Personal Well-Being Index (PWI) were used to measure empathy and subjective well-being. A cross-sectional descriptive correlational design was used in the present study. Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) is software for data management that is used in analyzing data using descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The results of the analysis found that there is a significant positive relationship between empathy and subjective well-being score ($r = .18$, $p < .003$). The results of the present study verify that empathy is related to the subjective well-being of a university student. Future studies have suggested focusing on the influence of empathy on subjective well-being from a larger perspective involves many domains.

Keywords: Empathy, Subjective Well-Being, Students, Pro-Social, Emotion, Cognitive

Introduction

Empathy is an important aspect of understanding socialization and human nature. It encompasses a range of emotional states, starting with the desire to care for someone, anticipating help, and continuing to the extent an experience of feelings that perfectly match with the others (Elena, 2020). Empathy is generally described as understanding feelings, possibly sharing, and responding to others' experiences. It is essential in maintaining good human relations. It can be stimulated by physical or expressed emotions. The concept of empathy is empirically proven linked to emotional regulation, which plays an important role in shaping individual feelings to match the emotional states of others (Zaki 2020). In that sense, both parties are mutually motivated to continue their life especially when facing misfortune or conflict. Geiger et al. (2024) found that the nature of empathy predicts whether a person forms the same goal to mutually feel better in everyday life.

According to Aghoubi Jami et al. (2021), empathy is a factor in shaping social life, especially in today's challenging life. There are two aspects in defining empathy which cover affective and cognitive. Affective refers to an ability to feel other people's emotions, while the cognitive aspect is the process by which individuals capability to understand other's emotions. The similarity of the two perspectives is sharing the same painful experience (Yaghoubi Jami and Walker 2022). Research by Kaltwasser et al. (2017) discovered that the ability to accurately interpret emotional expressions is based on the facial expressions exhibited by an individual. In particular, empathy is roughly understood to induce a greater knowledge about the other and to encourage prosocial behavior such as helping, comforting, and cooperating.

Empathy and sympathy are two words that vary significantly from each other (Bourgault et al., 2015). It is an overlap in meaning because they are both used to describe how we share another person's feelings or emotions. Although these two words are dissimilar, they are frequently used erroneously in interchange. Researchers often focus only on cognitive processes and ignore the emotional processes of the situations that explain empathy (Dohrenwend 2018; Winter et al. 2022). Besides, empathy is commonly understood to be a complex psychological construct (Coll et al., 2017). It refers to the capability to comprehend and share others' feelings, while sympathy is about feeling pity and sadness for someone's unlucky faith. Barker et al. (2022) described empathy as "a conscious mental effort to understand someone's story". Some researchers feel that empathy has a good influence but some believe that empathy will bring a negative influence to individuals. In contrast, sympathy is a process of emotional sharing between individuals who sympathize with other individuals, usually not resulting in altruistic behavior and this has indeed distinguished the meaning of sympathy from empathy (Greiner 2021). Therefore, empathy and sympathy have similarities which both are core components of social-emotional development (Yavuz et al., 2024).

A growing body of research has established the importance of empathy in various disciplines. Past studies have introduced the idea that empathy affects responses to another person's emotions and it has been discussed in previous studies for a long time. (Geiger et al., 2023). It can be seen clearly in the contexts of living in a collectivist and socio-centric society practices in which each of society members cares for each other in all aspects of life. This situation will encourage members to have a high level of interdependence. This kind of attitude makes each individual have an emotional attachment and tend to have higher cognitive empathy (Yaghoubi Jami et al. 2019). Research on empathy also has been conducted from various perspectives including medical perspectives (Bourgault et al. 2015; Dohrenwend 2018), education (Bialystok & 2018), and psychology Depow et al., (2021). The diversity of definitions and measures continues to proliferate (Vachon & Lynum 2016) across both basic and applied research fields. Many researchers believe in the concept of empathy and its ubiquitous presence speaks to the important role it is seen to play in social interactions and human well-being. The impact of empathy is rarely discussed from a perspective that points out the negative impacts of empathy and most the opinions agree that empathy leads to positive emotion that will only bring good to mankind.

Various studies have shown that subjective well-being is positively related to empathy where empathy will have a positive effect on an individual's subjective well-being (Depow et

al. 2021). Subjective well-being is a multi-perspective construct explaining one's evaluations of everyday emotional experiences and life satisfaction and has been associated with different aspects of trait empathy. Despite previous research identifying subjective well-being and empathy which focuses on the mechanisms mediating the relationship between the two constructs remain largely unclear (Katsumi et al., 2021). According to O'Brien et al., (2008), people with higher empathy reported more satisfaction with their lives, more positive affect, less negative affect, and fewer depressive symptoms. It was found that people with higher empathy are more interested in positive relationships with others and are more inclined to see their social interactions as meaningful and positive which can bring them happiness and positive effects (Wei et al. 2011). However, several studies have shown that empathy is not always beneficial and even affects subjective well-being (Van Lissa et al. 2017). Most of the previous work tends to look at the fact that empathy is related to emotion, but the link with subjective well-being is somehow overlooked.

Some researchers believe that individuals with higher empathy have an interest in positive relationships with others and will be more likely to perceive their social interactions as meaningful and positive. This in turn can push the individual towards happiness and positive effects (Wei et al. 2012). However, several studies have shown that empathy is not always beneficial and may even lead to side effects (Van Lissa et al. 2017). Manczak et al. (2016) in his study also said that empathy has the potential to affect the physical because the attitude or behavior of empathy toward others may give an additional burden to the individual. In addition, Van Lissa et al. (2017) also stated that there is a comparison between teenagers with moderate and low empathy compared to teenagers with high empathy. This is because teenagers who have a high level of empathy are more likely to be involved in conflicts with their parents. Teenagers who have high empathy are more sensitive to disagreements with their parents, they can detect even small disagreements that other teenagers don't notice. Overall, the development of empathy is related to subjective well-being. However, excessive empathy may be harmful and require more attention through the conscious mind.

Previous studies have shown that empathy research mostly relates to the helping profession such as social work and also medical perspectives. These two perspectives closely need the person to relate to the practice that requires the worker to care for others to fulfill patient or client needs and conditions. It is an important skill for nurses and doctors because it allows them to understand and communicate with patients and their families on an emotional level, thereby making more positive outcomes possible and increasing patient satisfaction. Previous studies focus on empathy toward others as a mediator in the association between attachment avoidance and subjective well-being (Wei et al., 2011). Another study conducted on empathy and subjective well-being was in the form of a systematic literature review (Chan et al., 2021). Little research has examined the direct relationship between empathy and Subjective well-being (Hablado & Clark 2020). The present study sought to further explore the relationship between empathy and subjective well-being among university students. Besides, this study also examines whether students in the stream of study will increase subjective well-being in social sciences and sciences students. The hypothesis of this study specifically is to examine whether there is a significant relationship between empathy and subjective well-being in university students with non-medical backgrounds.

Method

Participants and procedures

This sample was recruited among undergraduate students (n=272) from one of the public universities in Selangor, Malaysia. The participants included 136 students from the social sciences and 136 from the sciences program. The age range was 19 to 25. Convenience sampling is one of the non-probability sampling techniques used in this study. The units are chosen for the sample based on their ease of availability for the researcher. Study participants were recruited via invitation to complete an online survey questionnaire using Google Forms. Participants who participated in the study were given chocolate as a small token of appreciation.

Measures

Demography

Participants were asked various questions related to the program of studies, academic year, age, and gender.

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was developed by Spreng (2009) and administered to measure empathy. This questionnaire contains 16 items and is measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The participants indicated the degree to which 0=Never and 4=Every Time. The measures were translated into Malay before disseminating to the participants. A Cronbach's Alpha (α) of 0.79 reported good internal consistency for the 16 items of empathy scale in the current study. Mean is used to calculate the score by adding the results of each item and dividing the total by four. High self-reported empathy is indicated by higher scores, and below-average empathy is indicated by scores below 45.

Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)

Subjective well-being was assessed using the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) introduced by Cummins and Lau (2005) which consisted of two parts, namely Part 1 is about Overall Life Satisfaction, and Part 2 consists of eight questions each from the eight domains. The measures were measured using a Likert scale which is 0 = not satisfied and 10 = Very Satisfied. The translation of this PWI test tool into the Malay version was done by Sazlina Kamarulzaman and Nor Ermalina Hanita Md Tajudin from the Occupational Therapy Program at the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The convergent validity of this test tool is 0.78 with the Life Satisfaction scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin 1985) reported by Thomas (2005). The mean score of 28 surveys from the population in Australia has produced a maximum variation of 3.2 percent in subjective well-being (Australian Unity Wellbeing Index Report 28.0) and it has been found that the Cronbach's alpha reliability of the test instrument ranges from 0.70 to 0.85 in Australia and overseas. This scale assesses the quality of an individual's life through eight domains, namely standard of living, health, achievement, personal relationships, security, community, future assurance, and spirituality.

Results

Descriptives

The gender distribution shows, female participants are more than male participants. Descriptive statistics regarding the characteristics of the sample are expressed in percentages, averages, and standard deviations. The age range of the participants was between 19 to 25

years (Mean= 21.75, S.P.=1.06). The year of study shows the majority are 1st year students' 39.3 percent (n=108) while the second highest number is made up of 3rd year which is a total of 84 people (30.5%).

Table 4.1

Demographic Information of Participants

Description	Variables	N	(%)
Study Stream	Social sciences	136	49.5
	Sciences	136	49.5
Gender	Men	47	17.1
	Female	225	81.8
Academic Year	1	108	39.3
	2	78	28.3
	3	84	30.5
	4	2	0.7
Age	19	3	1.1
	20	36	13.1
	21	75	27.3
	22	84	30.5
	23	62	22.5
	24	11	4.0
	25	1	0.4

The results of the study show that the mean for Empathy (Mean = 47.28, S.D. = 7.24). The minimum score for the Empathy variable is 22 while the maximum score is 64. Next, subjective well-being showed Mean= 58.54, while S.D.= 16.66). The minimum score for this variable is 9 while the maximum score for this variable is 90. The details of empathy and subjective well-being mean and standard deviation are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Study Variables

Variables	Min	Standard Deviation	Minimum score	Maximum score
Empathy	47.28	7.24	22	64
Subjective Well-Being	58.54	16.66	9	90

Correlational Analysis

The relationship between empathy and subjective well-being was analyzed using Pearson Correlation. The results of the analysis found that there is a significant positive relationship between empathy and subjective well-being score ($r = .18, p < .003$). The result showed a weak relationship between both variables. The positive direction demonstrated that participants with higher empathy scores tend to have higher subjective well-being. The results supported the hypothesis that there was a significant relationship between empathy and subjective well-being among undergraduate students taking the social sciences and sciences stream.

Discussion

The present research aims to examine the relationship between empathy and subjective well-being among public university students in Selangor. The objective of the study is to measure

whether there is a relationship between empathy and subjective well-being. The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation analysis. The results show a significant positive relationship between Subjective Well-Being and Empathy ($r = .181, p < .003$). The positive relationship means, if the student's empathy level is high, the subjective well-being level also is high. In the present study, the relationship is weak but significant between empathy and subjective well-being.

According to Tran et al. (2022), empathy plays an important role in increasing the subjective well-being of university students the sample tested is the same as the present study which involves university students at bachelor's degree students. Empathy in previous studies is also related to positive attitudes and many positive outcomes. The hypothesis stated that empathy correlates with subjective well-being is supported. The finding shows there is a relationship between empathy and subjective well-being. The findings of this study are in line with a study conducted by Wang Q et al. (2023) which discussed social empathy functions as a partial mediator between social trust and subjective well-being. The results of the present study are also constant with previous studies (Wei et al. 2011; Segal, 2012; Zhao et al. 2013; Petrocchi et al. 2021). According to Tran et al. (2022), empathy plays an important role when it comes to the subjective well-being of university students.

The present study which focuses on the program of the study is quite different from the perspective of medical study. From a medical student's perspective, empathy is much easier to explain because the field of study is related to saving people's lives and treating patients. Research by Wu et al. (2021), shows that medical students face stress and so many challenges in handling their patients especially related to death and workloads. The strain also came from excessive empathy when treating patients. The results of the previous study show indirect effect of resilience is greater than the subjective well-being that influences empathy when completing their duty among medical university students. In any circumstances, empathy needs to be balanced and if it becomes excessive, then resilience should be checked in a way to achieve subjective well-being (Xiao 2017). The previous study also shows that empathy has a relationship with the individual's subjective well-being which can lower the level of subjective well-being and also increase subjective well-being. This can also be supported by the statement of Shi et al (2021), that university students majoring in medicine will have a more emotional attachment and be able to balance excessive empathy to ensure that career demands are balanced. Various studies have also shown that empathy is positively related to well-being (Chen-Bouck et al. 2021; Depow et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Empathy is important to everyone in maintaining good human relations and an understanding of human nature; which relates to a variety of emotional states. This study has several important implications that can make a meaningful contribution to the understanding of the influence of empathy and subjective well-being. The results of this study can provide additional information to the existing study that relates to empathy and subjective well-being. Even though the information is not so rich and only examines the relationship between empathy and subjective well-being, however, this information is very important to help in understanding that empathy has compromised a multi-dimensional construct which is a cognitive and affective component. It is important to know whether empathy and subjective

well-being are intercorrelated. Besides, In this research note, we bring clarity to the concepts of empathy and sympathy.

We also found that the included studies were limited by common methodological flaws, including a lack of control groups and small sample sizes. Limitations also in terms of the gender proportion which leads to an imbalance in data between male and female students. Despite facing various limitations of the study, the researcher managed to obtain data that can successfully answer the research objective. Future studies can focus on a person's socioeconomic factors because individuals with low socio-economic status may be more empathetic towards others because they have experienced stressful and difficult situations, so they more easily understand the perspective of other individuals who are in trouble, compared to those who have a high socioeconomic status.

In conclusion, our results provide preliminary evidence that a basic understanding of the link between empathy and subjective well-being can lead to another understanding of more complicated aspects that can explain both perspectives of empathy and subjective well-being. Based on this finding, one might think society would be best served by increasing empathy across all individuals and contexts, but the available evidence is limited. Yet, future researchers also can investigate which components of empathy move us toward important goals such as sustaining multi-dimensional well-being.

Author Contributions

N.A.Z conducted the survey and analysis and N.A.M.K prepared the manuscript; all authors contributed to improving the manuscript writing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Corresponding Author

¹ Nor Azzatunnisak Mohd Khatib *Centre for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia. Email: namk@ukm.edu.my

References

- Barker, M. E., Crowfoot, G., & King, J. (2022). Empathy development and volunteering for undergraduate healthcare students: a scoping review. *Nurse Education Today, 116*, 105441.
- Bialystok, L., & Kukar, P. (2018). Authenticity and empathy in education. *Theory and Research in Education, 16*(1), 23-39.
- Bourgault, P., Lavoie, S., Paul-Savoie, E., Grégoire, M., Michaud, C., Gosselin, E., & Johnston, C. C. (2015). Relationship Between Empathy and Well-Being Among Emergency Nurses. *Journal of Emergency Nursing, 41*(4), 323–328.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jen.2014.10.001>
- Chan, H. H. K., Kwong, H. Y. C., Shu, G. L. F., Ting, C. Y., & Lai, F. H. Y. (2021). Effects of experiential learning programs on adolescent prosocial behavior, empathy, and subjective well-being: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 709699.
- Coll, M. P., Viding, E., Rütgen, M., Silani, G., Lamm, C., Catmur, C., & Bird, G. (2017). Are we really measuring empathy? Proposal for a new measurement framework. *Neuroscience*

- and *Biobehavioral Reviews*, 83, 132–139.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2017.10.009>
- Depow, G. J., Francis, Z., & Inzlicht, M. (2021). The experience of empathy in everyday life. *Psychological Science*, 32(8), 1198-1213.
- Dohrenwend, A. M. (2018). Defining empathy to better teach, measure, and understand its impact. *Academic Medicine*, 93(12), 1754-1756.
- Elena, L. (2020). *Study Related to The Empathy Among Young Generation*. XX(2), 247–253.
- Geiger, E. J., Pruessner, L., Barnow, S., & Joormann, J. (2023). Empathy is Associated With Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Goals in Everyday Life. *Emotion*, 24(4), 1092–1108.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001332>
- Geiger, E. J., Pruessner, L., Barnow, S., & Joormann, J. (2024). Empathy is associated with interpersonal emotion regulation goals in everyday life. *Emotion*, 24(4), 1092.
- Greiner, R., & Greiner, R. (2021). Immersion and Empathy. *Cinematic Histospheres: On the Theory and Practice of Historical Films*, 115-149.
- Hablado, K., & Clark, M. (2020). A State of De-Stress: Examining the relationship between subjective well-being, self-compassion, and empathy. *Adv Soc Sci Res J*, 7(5), 412-26.
- Katsumi, Y., Kondo, N., Dolcos, S., Dolcos, F., & Tsukiura, T. (2021). Intrinsic functional network contributions to the relationship between trait empathy and subjective happiness. *NeuroImage*, 227(December 2020).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2020.117650>
- Kaltwasser, L., Hildebrandt, A., Wilhelm, O., & Sommer, W. (2017). On the relationship of emotional abilities and prosocial behavior. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 38(3), 298-308.
- Manczak, E. M., DeLongis, A., & Chen, E. (2016). Does empathy have a cost? Diverging psychological and physiological effects within families. *Health Psychology*, 35(3), 211–218.
- O'Brien, E., Konrath, S. H., Grühn, D., & Hagen, A. L. (2012). Empathic concern and perspective taking: Linear and quadratic effects of age across an adult life span. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 68(2), 168–175.
- Vachon, D. D., & Lynam, D. R. (2016). Fixing the problem with empathy: Development and validation of the Affective and Cognitive Measure of Empathy. *Assessment*, 23, 135–149.
- Van Lissa, C. J., Hawk, S. T., & Meeus, W. H. (2017). The effects of affective and cognitive empathy on adolescents' behavior and outcomes in conflicts with mothers. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 158, 32-45.
- Wei, E., Konrath, S. H., Grühn, D., & Hagen, A. L. (2012). Empathic concern and perspective taking: Linear and quadratic effects of age across the adult life span. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 68(2), 168–175.
- Wei, M., Liao, K. Y. H., Ku, T. Y., & Shaffer, P. A. (2011). Attachment, self-compassion, empathy, and subjective well-being among college students and community adults. *Journal of personality*, 79(1), 191-221.
- Winter, R., Leanage, N., Roberts, N., Norman, R. I., & Howick, J. (2022). Experiences of empathy training in healthcare: a systematic review of qualitative studies. *Patient education and counseling*, 105(10), 3017-3037.
- Yaghoubi Jam, P., Mansouri, B., Thoma, S. J., & Han, H. (2019). An investigation of the divergences and convergences of trait empathy across two cultures. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–16.

- Yaghoubi Jami, P., Walker, D. I., & Thoma, S. J. (2021). Young adults' empathic responses to others in psychological pain as compared to physical pain: does prior experience of pain matter? *Current Psychology*, 1–22.
- Yaghoubi Jami, P., Mansouri, B., & Thoma, S. J. (2021). Age, gender, and educational level predict emotional but not cognitive empathy in Farsi-speaking Iranians. *Current Psychology*, 40(2), 534–544.
- Yaghoubi Jami, P., & Walker, D. I. (2022). Exploring situational empathy and intergroup empathy bias among people with two opposing cultural norms: Collectivism and individualism. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 91, 282–296.
- Yavuz, H. M., Colasante, T., Galarneau, E., & Malti, T. (2024). Empathy, sympathy, and emotion regulation: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 150(1), 27.
- Zaki, J. (2020). Integrating empathy and interpersonal emotion regulation. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 71, 517–540.