

EXAMINING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN EMPATHY, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR AMONG EARLY ADULTS

Fatima Javed^{*1}, Marwa Bibi², Haider Dost³, Kainat Zia⁴

^{*1,2,3,4} Department of Psychology, University of Malakand Dir (L), KP, Pakistan

⁴universalpsyche@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
17 November, 2024	17 December, 2024	02 January, 2025	09 January, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the correlation between empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior in early adulthood, emphasizing gender disparities. Data was collected from 270 participants using correlational research design and convenience sampling at the University of Malakand. Data gathering utilizes standardized questionnaires including TEQ, MSPSS, and PBS. Strong significant relationships were identified between empathy and prosocial behavior ($r= 0.69, p<0.01$) and between social support and prosocial behavior ($r=0.56, p<0.01$). The findings indicate that empathy and social support are essential determinants of prosocial behavior in early adults, with significant gender differences observed. T-tests were performed to investigate gender disparities in prosocial behavior, indicating that females exhibited significantly greater empathy than males ($t = 3.516, p < .01$). In contrast, both genders demonstrated comparable scores on the prosocial behavior scale ($t = 5.548, p < .01$). The research underscores the significance of cultivating empathic and supportive environments to promote prosocial behavior in this demographic.

Keywords: Empathy, Social support, Prosocial Behavior, University students, Early Adults.

INTRODUCTION

Empathy, or the ability to comprehend and relate to the emotional experiences of others, is thought to be one of the primary drivers of prosocial behavior. Understanding the delicate interplay between empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior is critical to comprehending the complexity of human kindness. As we explore deeper into how empathy, social support, and prosocial tendencies relate, we want to shed light on the root causes of compassionate behavior in society. This research broadens our understanding of human behavior and has important implications for creating a more empathetic and supportive community. Empathy can be defined as one's capacity to share in another individual's emotional state and to feel affected by that state (Marinella, Roberta, Luca, Carlo, & Ellie, 2013). Several processes, including affective and cognitive empathic processes, are believed to play a role in the

development of empathy. Cognitive empathy is an individual's ability to understand another's mental state or perspectives (Adam, Andrew, Sharon, & Philip, 2013). Thinking about how frustrated the person is like the self is a crucial aspect of cognitive empathy, which can further proceed with an individual's prosocial behavior. Affective empathy possesses empathic concern and personal distress. Empathic concern is related to experiencing warm, caring feelings towards those in distress, while personal distress is associated with feeling other people's pain and suffering by witnessing their unpleasant experiences (YaLing, Chao & Chao, 2022).

Social support is the emotional feeling and gratification that an individual in a social circle acquires from being acknowledged, encouraged, and understood in interpersonal communications and involves the interaction between material support

and social interpersonal contact (Guo & Yuan, 2017). Prosocial behavior is a social behavior that benefits other people or society as a whole "such as helping, sharing, giving, cooperating, and volunteering (Li, Pamela, 2022). Humans are remarkably capable of prosocial behavior, or social behavior meant to help another person, even when those people are genetically unrelated (Patricia, Ana & Essi 2014). Empathy and social support are important components that significantly affect emotional well-being and social interactions among adults. Social support is important in encouraging prosocial behavior among individuals. Research showed that individuals who perceive a higher level of social support are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior, including helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating with others (Batson & Daniel, 2014). Social support encourages prosocial behavior by creating positive relationships and providing a sense of security, whereas engaging in prosocial behavior helps not only others but also one's emotional state and social connections. The relationship between social support and prosocial behavior emphasizes the significance of empathy, kindness, and community support in fostering a healthy and supportive environment.

Empathy and social support play a significant role in molding how people interact and behave toward others, leading to prosocial behaviors (such as cooperating, donating, helping, and sharing) that benefit society at large. The ability to empathize with others increases the quality of social interactions and affects behavior toward others in social settings. Recognizing the complex relationship between empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior is necessary for encouraging positive social interaction and building a benevolent community. Empathy is understanding another person's emotional state and experiencing another person's affection as one's own. Many researchers have focused on affective empathy (i.e., empathic concern) and cognitive empathy (i.e., perspective-taking), which have been positively associated with one's interpersonal functioning (Ramzi, Tanja, Michela & Angela Merkl, 2015). In the last

years, researchers have become increasingly interested in revealing how child empathy could contribute to peer acceptance. (Mingzhong, Jing, Xueli & Wu, 2019) examined the mediating role of prosocial behaviors of children in the association between child empathy and peer acceptance. Children with higher empathy tend to be more liked by peers. Moreover, this relation was completely mediated by the child's prosocial behaviors. The path from empathy to child prosocial behavior in this study sustains the claim that highly empathetic children are better at putting themselves in other people's shoes to try and understand their emotional state. As a result, they are less likely to cause harm to other people and are more adept at lessening their discomfort.

Previous studies have linked the personality construct of empathy to individual differences in helping behavior. Research findings found that the tendency of an individual to show empathy toward others' distress can be connected to help-seekers' beliefs about the likelihood that others would help them if they were to ask. That is, empathic people may be more sensitive to the emotional motivation of others' prosocial behavior and, as a result, they may give higher estimates of others' willingness to provide help. According to this study, Help-seekers higher in trait empathy will expect higher rates of compliance with their help request. It was theorized that this relationship might emerge for two reasons. Help-seekers higher in trait empathy may be more accepting of other people's desire to help or they may be more aware of the discomfort their targets would experience saying "no" to the request. Both mechanisms mediated the link between empathy and expected compliance (Vanessa & Francis, 2021).

One study was conducted to clarify the debate that exists regarding the magnitude of the correlation between social support and prosocial behavior. The results showed a significant positive correlation between social support and prosocial behavior. When individuals have more social support, they show high levels of prosocial behavior (Yinlan, Guangming, Qi & Qiongzhi, 2024) Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals form inferences about others

and things based on social information, which can have an impact on the emergence of behavior. The more social support an individual has, the more supportive resources he or she perceives, which provides a good environment for promoting prosocial behavior (David, Gerdien, Marijn & Bartel, 2022). Moreover, when individuals perceive a cordial interpersonal environment and close organizational relationships, they will be prompted to produce positive behaviors, which was consistent with the results of the previous study. The more support they feel from various parties, the more willing they are to provide help to those in need and try to give back to society, which will stimulate more prosocial behaviors.

Purpose of study

This study seeks to investigate the correlation between empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior. Extensive research has been undertaken on prosocial behavior; yet, a gap persists between the factors of empathy and social support, which combine influence prosocial behavior in early adults. Prosocial behavior is a fundamental component of numerous positive mental attributes, while prosocial attitudes are crucial for a healthy personality and the enhancement of individual socialization, ultimately contributing to a thriving society. Therefore, research in this area must be adequately prioritized for the promotion of societal well-being. This research will examine the relationship between gender, empathy, and prosocial behavior. Numerous stereotypes prevalent in society fail to correctly represent the whole spectrum of human experiences and behaviors. Individuals exhibit significant variation in empathy and prosocial conduct, independent of gender, yet stereotypes perpetuate unclear views and disparities. Consequently, it is essential to evaluate the influence of gender empathy and prosocial behavior to dismantle associated preconceptions and uphold equality within society.

Methodology

Objectives

1. To examine the strength and direction of the relationship between the study variables among early adults.
2. To compare gender differences in empathy and prosocial behavior among early adults.

Hypotheses

There is a positive relationship between empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior among early adults.

Early adult females score higher on the empathy scale than early adult males.

Early adult females and early adult males are expected to score the same on prosocial behavior scales.

Research design

The relationship between empathy, social support, and prosocial conduct was investigated in this work using a correlational research approach.

Sample

Using a sample of 270 early adults, the researchers gathered data via a convenient sampling approach.

Inclusion Criteria: People aged 18 to 35 years were included in this study. The data was collected from married, unmarried, engaged, and divorced individuals.

Exclusion Criteria: People above or below this specific age range were excluded from the study. Moreover, the handicapped population was also excluded from the study.

Instrument

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) is a robust and reliable instrument for assessing empathy, exhibiting a reliability coefficient of 0.85. The TEQ is a self-administered questionnaire including 16 components. Participants are requested to respond on a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 4 (Nathan, 2009).

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support The instrument comprises 12 self-report items and exhibits a reliability coefficient of 0.83. Participants are requested to provide responses on a

Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7 (Zimet et al., 1988).

The Prosocial Behavior Scale This is a self-report measure including 16 items, exhibiting a reliability coefficient of 0.74. Participants are requested to react using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (Caprara et al., 2005).

Procedure:

The research topic was selected based on the researcher's interest and received approval from the department and supervisor. Subsequently, researchers examined prior studies pertinent to the current investigation. Subsequently, researchers identified valid and reliable instruments for the study variables. The sample size was determined using the Raosoft sample size calculator but was

subsequently restricted to 270 due to time constraints. The researchers employed correlational study design. Researchers received an authorization letter for data collecting. Researchers conducted data gathering over a period of up to four weeks by visiting multiple departments at the University of Malakand. Participants received explicit instructions regarding the study's goal and were provided with guidance prior to administration.

Ethical Consideration

The researchers adhered to all ethical standards of research before and throughout the investigation. The researchers obtained informed consent from participants to safeguard their privacy and confidentiality while informing them of the study's benefits and potential hazards.

Results

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Participants (n=270)

Demographic Variables	f	%
Gender		
Male	128	47.4
Female	142	52.6
Age		
18-23	207	76.7
24-29	54	20
30-35	9	3.3
Marital Status		
Unmarried	212	78.5
Married	36	13.3
Engaged	20	7.4
Divorced	2	.7

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of the participants' demographic data. The sample comprises 270 people, with females constituting 52.6% and males 47.2%. The predominant age group among participants is 18 to 23 years, at 76.7%,

followed by 24 to 29 years at 20%, and the 30 to 35 years group at 3.3%. The bulk of participants are unmarried (78.5%), followed by 13.3% who are married, 7.4% who are engaged, and a negligible 0.7% who are divorced.

Table 2: Psychometric properties of study variables (n=270)

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D	Alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis
TEQ	270	18.00	61.00	35.12	7.15474	0.85	.242	-.032
MSPSS	270	19.00	82.00	58.05	12.77870	0.83	-.708	.455
PBS	270	24.00	108.00	61.496	11.29126	0.74	.031	1.918

Table 2 presents the psychometric characteristics of the study scales. Analysis indicates that the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (M=35.12, S.D=7.15, alpha=0.85), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (M=58.05, S.D=12.77, alpha=0.83), and the Prosocial Behavior Scale (M=61.496, S.D=11.29, alpha=0.74) exhibit strong reliability scores.

Table 3: Correlation of Empathy, Social Support, and Pro-Social Behavior (n=270)

Variables	1	2	3
Empathy	1	.71**	.69**
Social Support		1	.56**
Pro Social Behavior			1

**p ≤ 0.01

The values (0.71, 0.69, 0.56) in the table denote the correlation coefficient (r), which spans from -1 to +1. All coefficients demonstrate a substantial positive connection between the variables. Empathy exhibits a robust positive link with social support (r=0.71, p<0.01) and a moderate positive correlation with prosocial activity (r=0.69, p<0.01). The findings indicate a moderate positive correlation between social support and prosocial conduct (r=0.56, p<0.01).

Table 4 Mean, Standard Deviation, and T-values for Study Variables (n=270)

Variables	Female (n=142)		Male (n=128)		t(270)	p	95%CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Empathy	36.46	7.05	32.43	7.33	3.516	.001	0.98	7.08	0.56
Pro Social Behavior	58.0	10.19	58.50	10.19	0.548	.081	-0.17	1.18	--

Table 4 presents the Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), t-values, p-values, and Cohen's d for the variables Empathy and Pro-Social Behavior based on gender Male (n=128) and Female (n=142). Results indicate that female adults (M=36.46, SD=7.05) scored considerably higher on empathy than male adults (M=32.43, SD=7.33), with t(270) = 3.516, p < .01. There is no significant mean difference in prosocial behavior scores between male early adults (M=58.5, SD=10.19) and female early adults (M=58.0, SD=10.19), with t(270) = 0.548, p > 0.01.

Discussion

The study sought to examine the correlations among early adults between empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior as well as to look at variations in prosocial behavior depending on gender. The first hypothesis of the present investigation is that among early adults, empathy and prosocial conduct show a noteworthy correlation. The study supports the hypothesis and reveals a noteworthy positive link between empathy and prosocial behavior, so showing that empathy favorably predicted the prosocial behavior of early adulthood. This was in

line with earlier studies showing that people with sympathetic emotions might influence their prosocial conduct by supporting others in need of it when facing problems. Empathetic emotions in one person will inspire sharing, understanding, and caring for the internal problems of others (Kurt & Jesse, 2019). Another previous research shows that empathy positively predicts prosocial behavior in adolescence in the Chinese context which states that teenagers with high empathy are more likely to perceive the emotions and feelings of others and make others feel friendly and warm, so, shortening the distance between people (Wangqian, Chongqao, Hongqin & Rui, 2022).

The second hypothesis of this research is that among early adults, social support and prosocial behavior show a noteworthy correlation. The study supports the hypothesis and reveals a notable positive association between social support and prosocial behavior, so indicating that social support favorably predicted the prosocial behavior of early adulthood. This was consistent with earlier research studies which show that social support and interpersonal trust have a positive predictive effect on prosocial behavior indicating that the more social support a

student gets, and the more harmonic an individual's interpersonal relationships are, the more inclined the person is to prosocial behavior. According to another research, children's and young people's prosocial behavior was protected by teacher support, parent encouragement, and peer support. Those who get good social support, that is, compliments from teachers, encouragement from peers, etc. are more confident and will have a strong sense of belonging that supports prosocial actions (Jing, Meilin & Hongrui, 2021). Early adult women score higher on the empathy scale than early adult men, according to the third hypothesis of this study. The findings of the study coincide with earlier studies showing that female participants judged themselves as notably more sympathetic than male participants (Greitemeyer, Charlotte & Tobias, 2023). Another earlier study supports this theory, which holds that women show more caring behaviors and are linked to "Type E" brains whereas men usually show more methodical behavior (Okoro, Chukwuji & Udo, 2020). The fourth hypothesis of the research is that on prosocial conduct scales, the mean scores of early adult men and women are not significantly different. Notwithstanding gender variations, the present study also supports the concept and shows that both male and female participants score similarly on prosocial behavior characteristics (Isah Aliyu Abdullahi, Dr. Pardeep Kumar, 2016). Previous research confirms the theory that prosocial activity is positively correlated with life satisfaction and that gender has no appreciable effect on prosocial behavior inclination. One study, for example, revealed a strong correlation between prosocial behavior and life satisfaction among university students, with no clear gender variations in these behaviors (Rabia, Saima & Farida, 2022).

Limitations and Suggestions

The study's limitations encompass biases inherent in self-report questionnaires, which compromise accuracy due to social desirability and recollection difficulties. The emphasis on young adults limits generalizability to other age cohorts, and non-probability sampling may introduce

inaccuracies. A quantitative design constrains comprehension of participants' experiences, while a limited time frame diminishes the study's scope.

Future studies should encompass a variety of populations beyond young people and employ probability sampling to enhance accuracy. Utilizing qualitative methodologies may improve comprehension of variables, and research across many places would yield more extensive insights.

Implications

Practically, educational institutions can utilize these findings to develop programs aimed at enhancing empathy and social support among students. For instance, integrating emotional intelligence training and community service into curricula can promote a culture of empathy and cooperation. Activities such as peer mentoring and group projects can facilitate social connections, allowing students to practice empathy in real-world contexts. Furthermore, interventions designed to strengthen social support systems during transitional periods, such as college or early career stages, can enhance interpersonal skills and foster supportive relationships. By translating these theoretical insights into actionable strategies, the research can contribute to cultivating more empathetic and socially responsible communities among early adults.

REFERENCES

- Abdullahi, I. A., & Kumar, P. (2016). Gender differences in prosocial behaviour. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 3(4), 171-175.
- Batson, C. D. (2014). *The altruism question: Toward a social-psychological answer*. Psychology Press.
- Beauchamp, M. R., Crawford, K. L., & Jackson, B. (2019). Social cognitive theory and physical activity: Mechanisms of behavior change, critique, and legacy. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 42, 110-117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.11.009>
- Bohns, V. K., & Flynn, F. J. (2021). Empathy and expectations of others' willingness to help. *Personality and*

- Individual Differences, 168, 110368.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110368>
- Caprara, G. V., Steca, P., Zelli, A., & Capanna, C. (2005). A new scale for measuring adults' prosocialness. *European Journal of psychological assessment*, 21(2), 77-89. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1015-5759.21.2.77>
- Eisenberg, N., Fabes, R. A., Shepard, S. A., Guthrie, I. K., Murphy, B. C., & Reiser, M. (1999). Parental reactions to children's negative emotions: Longitudinal relations to quality of children's social functioning. *Child development*, 70(2), 513-534. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00037>
- Fatfouta, R., Gerlach, T. M., Schröder-Abé, M., & Merkl, A. (2015). Narcissism and lack of interpersonal forgiveness: The mediating role of state anger, state rumination, and state empathy. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 75, 36-40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.10.051>
- Fu, W., Wang, C., Chai, H., & Xue, R. (2022). Examining the relationship of empathy, social support, and prosocial behavior of adolescents in China: A structural equation modeling approach. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), 1-8.
- Gerace, A., Day, A., Casey, S., & Mohr, P. (2013). An exploratory investigation of the process of perspective-taking in interpersonal situations. *Journal of Relationships Research*, 4, e6.
- Gray, K., & Graham, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Atlas of moral psychology*. Guilford Publications.
- Guo, Y. (2017). The Influence of Social Support on the Prosocial Behavior of College Students: The Mediating Effect Based on Interpersonal Trust. *English Language Teaching*, 10(12), 158-163.
- Li, J., Yao, M., & Liu, H. (2021). From social support to adolescents' subjective well-being: The mediating role of emotion regulation and prosocial behavior and gender difference. *Child Indicators Research*, 14(1), 77-93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09755-3>
- Lockwood, P. L., Seara-Cardoso, A., & Viding, E. (2014). Emotion regulation moderates the association between empathy and prosocial behavior. *PLoS one*, 9(5), e96555. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0096555>
- Löffler, C. S., & Greitemeyer, T. (2023). Are women the more empathetic gender? The effects of gender role expectations. *Current Psychology*, 42(1), 220-231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-01260-8>
- Okoro, C. N., & Osisiogu, U. C. (2020). Gender Differences in Empathy: A study among Students of University of Nigeria Nsukka.
- Paciello, M., Fida, R., Cerniglia, L., Tramontano, C., & Cole, E. (2013). High cost helping scenario: The role of empathy, prosocial reasoning and moral disengagement on helping behavior. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 55(1), 3-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2012.11.004>
- Pamela, L. (2024). What are the 6 types of prosocial behavior? Retrieved from parenting for brain. <https://www.parentingforbrain.com/prosocial-behavior/>.
- Pang, Y., Song, C., & Ma, C. (2022). Effect of different types of empathy on prosocial behavior: Gratitude as mediator. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 768827. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.768827>
- Schunk, D. H., & DiBenedetto, M. K. (2020). Motivation and social cognitive theory. *Contemporary educational psychology*, 60, 101832. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2019.101832>
- Sprengh, R. N., McKinnon, M. C., Mar, R. A., & Levine, B. (2009). The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire: Scale development and initial validation of a factor-analytic solution to multiple empathy measures. *Journal of personality assessment*, 91(1), 62-71.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223890802484381>.
- Wang, M., Wang, J., Deng, X., & Chen, W. (2019). Why are empathic children more liked by peers? The mediating roles of prosocial and aggressive behaviors. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 144, 19-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.02.029>.
- Xue, S., Kaufman, M. R., Zhang, X., Xia, S., Niu, C., Zhou, R., & Xu, W. (2022). Resilience and prosocial behavior among chinese university students during COVID-19 mitigation: testing mediation and moderation models of social support. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 1531-1543. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S364356>
- Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of personality assessment*, 52(1), 30-41. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5201_2.

