The Effectiveness of a Psychoeducation Intervention Program for Enhancing Self-Esteem and Empathy : A Study of Emerging Adult College Student

Cintya Amelia Cathlin*, Rose Mini Agoes Salim
Educational Psychology Department, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia.
Corresponding Author. Email: cintya.amelia@ui.ac.id

Abstract: This research examines the effectiveness of psychoeducation intervention programs among emerging adult college students. We used the quantitative method with single-subject designs—Kirkpatrick evaluation model conducted by targeting two measurement levels: reaction and learning. Quantitative data analysis used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Basic Empathy Scale (BES). Qualitative data were measured through baseline, treatment, and follow-up assessments. The findings of this research demonstrated that enhancing self-esteem and empathy through this program was effective. Significant changes in the subjects' knowledge and attitudes were observed after the intervention. This research suggests that emerging adult college students can gain a deeper understanding of their potential and experience a positive mind and emotional states through increased self-esteem and empathy.

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a critical transition period, representing the stage where individuals reach adulthood yet struggle to adapt to existing demands, including those in education. Individuals in this stage are typically aged between 18 and 25, extending from their late teens to their 20s (Arnett, 2016a, 2024). Emerging adults display five key characteristics: (1) identity exploration, involving self-questioning like "Who am I?" and experimenting with various life possibilities before making long-term commitments; (2) experiencing instability in work, residence, and relationships; (3) *self-focus*; (4) a sense of being in-between, not fully a teenager but not entirely an adult; and (5) an inherent optimism about fulfilling numerous aspirations (Arnett, 2016a, 2024).

As life transitions into a new phase, emerging adulthood brings challenges, such as navigating the transition from school to college or making career and job decisions (Arnett, 2016a; Santrock, 2019). This period serves as a crucial phase in the maturation process. A significant aspect of this transition involves evolving perceptions of self and others, driven by the ongoing evaluation of self-identity or self-esteem (Chung et al., 2014). Although self-esteem is often considered stable, the emerging adulthood period is marked by potential fluctuations as individuals reassess their identities (Arnett, 2024; Chung et al., 2014).

Self-esteem is an individual's evaluation or assessment of their worth (Rosenberg, 1965). It encompasses two main components: self-competence (or self-efficacy) and self-worth (Mruk, 2013). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their abilities, a confidence that develops over time through practice and mastery of tasks. On the other hand, self-worth involves a person's positive or negative evaluation of themselves, which is critical in assessing one's academic qualities (Mruk, 2013). Healthy self-worth is not merely about

seeing oneself as flawless or entirely positive; it also includes recognizing one's uniqueness and accepting oneself as is.

Research indicates that high self-esteem significantly enhances student academic performance (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Arshad et al., 2015). In the academic realm, individuals with high self-esteem are noted for their ability to take risks associated with academic success and achievement (Arshad et al., 2015; Giofrè et al., 2017; Mruk, 2013), feeling content and happy with themselves (Salavera et al., 2020; Shubina, 2017), setting high standards and striving to achieve them (Mruk, 2013), and demonstrating resilience in the face of challenges or failures (Baumeister et al., 2003; Di Paula & Campbell, 2002). Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem tend to avoid risks to prevent failure (Mruk, 2013), exhibit dissatisfaction and self-doubt, lack confidence (Krause et al., 2016), have difficulty persisting through failures, and are more likely to give up when faced with adversity (Di Paula & Campbell, 2002). Additionally, they may struggle with forming healthy interpersonal relationships and are often vulnerable in social contexts (Bi et al., 2016; Sadovnikova, 2016). Low self-esteem in some individuals can stem from various sources, such as parenting styles, individual's beliefs about their self-concept, and life experiences (Arnett, 2024; Doinita, 2015; Jiao & Segrin, 2022; Sadovnikova, 2016; Stackert & Bursik, 2003; Swann et al., 2007; Szkody et al., 2021; Tetzner et al., 2016).

Emerging adults who encounter diverse identities related to gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, religion, ethnicity, and culture in college settings must develop skills beyond self-esteem (Arnett, 2016b, 2024; Gerson & Neilson, 2014). Therefore, to fostering the growth of self-esteem, emerging adults must have the ability to embrace the diversity they might encounter in higher education. One crucial skill is empathy, the ability to recognize and/or feel what others are experiencing (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). Empathy is initiated through emotion recognition, identifying others' emotions (Preston et al., 2020). It is a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive empathy—the understanding of others' thoughts and feelings (Cuff et al., 2016; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Preston et al., 2020; Slavny & Moore, 2018))—and affective empathy, which involves feeling or sharing the emotions of others and closely related to the situations those individuals are experiencing (Cuff et al., 2016; Healey & Grossman, 2018; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). The presence of cognitive empathy enables individuals to recognize and understand the differences between themselves and others. Conversely, affective empathy allows individuals to comprehend and engage with the emotions experienced by others (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004, 2006).

Empathy plays a vital role in enhancing social interactions, enabling individuals to establish positive interpersonal relationships and frequently exhibit prosocial behavior (Decety, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2021). This empathetic inclination can often be understood through a cost-and-reward mechanism, wherein empathy is more readily engaged during low-cost activities but yields high rewards (Ferguson et al., 2021). For example, empathizing with a partner's sadness due to the death of a parent is relatively low cost and results in automatic empathy, which in turn can increase trust and intimacy between partners (high reward). Furthermore, empathy fuels the desire to assist others in distress (Krol & Bartz, 2022; Myers et al., 2014), and enhances satisfaction within relationships (Perrone-Mcgovern et al., 2014). Consequently, highly empathetic individuals are often driven to understand others deeply and engage in acts of assistance, whether through donating money, time, or emotional support (Cameron et al., 2019; Krol & Bartz, 2022).

To cultivate empathy effectively, individuals should practice expressing it towards others. Regular practice builds self-efficacy—believing in one's ability to perform actions—

and fosters a sense of competence (self-worth), both crucial components of self-esteem (Mruk, 2013). This practice is essential for accurately interpreting others' emotional states, thereby reducing misunderstandings (Cameron et al., 2019). Successful interpretation acts as a reward, motivating further empathetic engagement (Ferguson et al., 2021).

Healthy self-esteem enhances an individual's sensitivity to feelings, allowing them to empathize more deeply and maintain a balanced self-view that fosters respect for others (Huang et al., 2019). Research supports this, showing a significant positive correlation between empathy and self-esteem (Huang et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2024; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2019). Therefore, developing programs that focus on nurturing empathy and self-esteem can be beneficial in fostering these qualities in individuals. Numerous intervention programs aimed at boosting self-esteem have been developed, employing a range of methods, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychoeducation, positive psychology, support groups, and varying formats such as individual or group sessions (Niveau et al., 2021). Cognitive behavioral therapy, in particular, has demonstrated high efficacy in enhancing self-esteem (Kolubinski et al., 2018; Niveau et al., 2021). Similarly, programs focusing on empathy training have been extensively crafted using diverse instructional techniques (e.g., experiential training, lecturing, skills training), intervention durations (ranging from one hour to several days), participant types, and targeted aspects of empathy such as cognitive, affective, or behavioral empathy (van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Additionally, Life Skills Training (LST) programs have shown effectiveness in aiding teenagers to improve self-esteem, adjustment, and empathy through problem-solving (Yadav & Iqbal, 2009). However, limited research has explored the impact of alternative interventions, such as psychoeducation and positive psychology, on self-esteem and empathy at the individual level.

Given this gap, a new program was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of psychoeducation-based interventions targeting self-esteem and empathy among emerging adults. Psychoeducation aims to equip individuals to navigate various life challenges by focusing on personal strengths and current realities (Chan, 2005; Lukens & McFarlane, 2006). This intervention teaches foundational theoretical concepts to help individuals manage crises and transitions, fostering the development of personal strategies and strengths (Grills et al., 2023; Lukens & McFarlane, 2006; Schmidt et al., 2013). Outcomes such as changes in knowledge and attitudes serve as indicators of intervention success (Lukens & McFarlane, 2006). One notable psychoeducational program, Competence and Worthiness Training (CWT), focuses on enhancing individual competence and worthiness using a positive psychology approach to foster healthy self-esteem (Mruk, 2013; Mruk & O'Brien, 2013). Inspired by two CWT sessions, this development program will (1) build an understanding of self-esteem and (2) engage participants in activities designed to enhance self-worth (Mruk & O'Brien, 2013). For the empathy session, the program will utilize reflective writing, a method proven to effectively increase empathy (Chen & Forbes, 2014; Moniz et al., 2015). Participants will engage with the program through workbooks specifically designed by the researchers.

This research aims to assess the effectiveness of the newly developed self-esteem and empathy intervention for students in their emerging adulthood, delivered individually. The intervention was administered by the first author during their psychology practicum, under the supervision of the second author, a licensed psychologist. It is anticipated that this research will fill a critical need for programs that concurrently develop self-esteem and empathy, particularly in Indonesia, where no such dual-focus studies have yet been published and where most research typically targets clinically diagnosed individuals.

Research Method

This research employed a quantitative approach with single-subject design to investigate the effects of a tailored intervention program on an individual's self-esteem and empathy, highlighting the personalized nature of the research and the unique experiences of the subject involved (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). The purpose of this design is to critically examine the intervention's effectiveness through a cause-and-effect analysis, using a detailed baseline assessment prior to the intervention and subsequent evaluations post-intervention as treatment assessment (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018).

The research participant, who is 20 years old and enrolled in a fourth semester of university in Indonesia, is falling within the emerging adult age range of 18–25 years (Arnett, 2016a). Prior to the intervention, the subject had undergone a series of psychological evaluations including observations, interviews, and assessments. These psychological evaluations indicated the subject displayed signs of low self-esteem, such as self-blame, a need for external validation, preference for comfort over challenge, defensive reactions to failure, and perfectionist tendencies. Additionally, the participants exhibited challenges in social interactions and empathy, impacting their academic performance and ability to forge and maintain social connections, despite possessing considerable intellectual capabilities and high educational aspirations.

The intervention program was specifically designed to address these issues. Its objective was to enhance the subject's knowledge and awareness concerning healthy self-esteem and empathy. The intervention promised substantial personal growth, potentially leading the subject to a better understanding of their own value, capabilities, and potential. Structured into three one-hour sessions, the program covered self-esteem, empathy, and action planning. Each session incorporated practical activities and reflective exercises facilitated through a workbook crafted by the researchers. These activities included exercises aimed at identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as tasks designed to improve empathic understanding through the examination of personal and others' experiences.

Table 1. Intervention Session Summary

Session	Session Name
1	Self-Introduction Covering self-esteem and its applicability in an academic setting
2	Self-Harmonization Covering empathy and its application in social life.
3	*Action Plan* Guide to help participants establish goals after the intervention put into practice

The intervention program was designed with a set of evaluations aimed at assessing changes in the participants, comprising both reaction and learning evaluations (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Lukens & McFarlane, 2006). The first level, reaction evaluation, focused on gathering participants' feedback at the program's conclusion to assess their reactions and satisfaction with the intervention's execution (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). This evaluation included various elements such as the quality of the materials, the effectiveness of the facilitators, the methodologies employed, and the overall training experience (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). The second level, learning evaluation, was intended to gauge the participants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes following their participation in the program (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Specifically, this evaluation tracked changes in knowledge related to self-esteem and empathy through multiple-choice questions and assessed shifts in attitudes using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Utami, 2022) and the Basic

Empathy Scale (BES) (Mawarni, 2017), both of which are validated and reliable self-report tools adapted for Indonesian contexts.

The analysis technique of this intervention's evaluation utilized both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative analysis was performed through descriptive analysis, comparing data from the baseline and treatment phases (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). Additionally, qualitative insights were gained by comparing observational data before and after the program, as well as from follow-ups conducted some time after the program's completion.

Results and Discussion

The intervention program was successfully implemented on subject at the emerging adult stage, aligning with the designed program specifications. Initial assessments of the subjects' self-esteem and empathy levels were captured during the baseline phase. Based on reaction evaluation, subjects were satisfied with all components of the intervention and found the material beneficial. Further, the learning evaluation showed an improvement in knowledge, with scores increasing from 8 to 9 (Graphic 1), demonstrating the subjects' ability to remember, recognize, and understand the new information regarding self-esteem and empathy presented during the intervention.
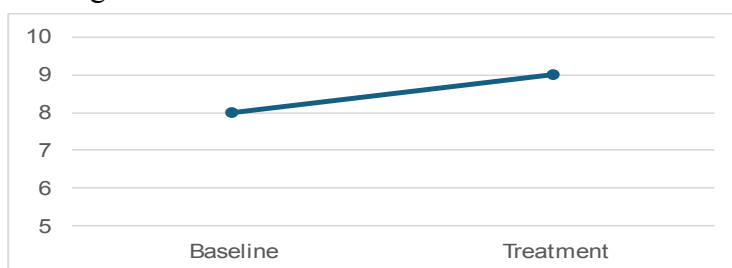
Graphic 1. Knowledge Evaluation Score Before and After Intervention

Additionally, there was a notable change in attitudes, as seen in the increased levels of self-esteem and empathy from pre-test to post-test results. Specifically, self-esteem, measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), increased from a score of 14 to 18, and empathy, assessed using the Basic Empathy Scale (BES), slightly rose from 69 to 70 (Graphic 2). Follow-up assessments conducted after a period of time post-intervention showed that subjects consistently and gradually implemented the action plan outlined during the program. This consistent application led to a better understanding of differences between themselves and others, which positively impacted their ability to meet academic demands and adapt to new environments. Subject felt confidence to be able to solve problems in the future with their own abilities. Additionally, subject gained positive response and support from others when showing empathy.
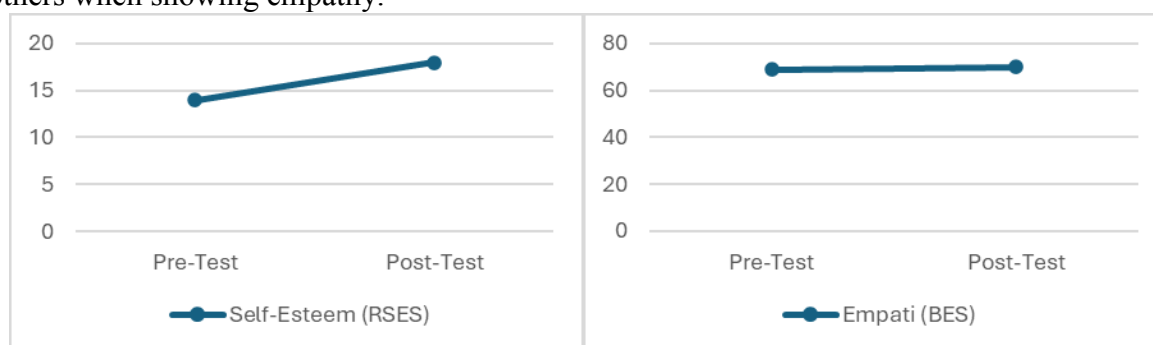
Grafik 2. Attitude Evaluation Score Before and After Intervention

This intervention, grounded in psychoeducation and a positive psychology approach, aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of developing self-esteem and empathy in emerging adult subjects. The conducted evaluations confirmed the program's success in enhancing both reactions to and learning about self-esteem and empathy, underscoring its positive impact on subjects at the emerging adult stage. The intervention program facilitates both theoretical and practical understanding of self-esteem and empathy among subjects. Subject, who possessing a high level of intelligence, encounter no difficulties grasping the intervention material due to their robust cognitive abilities, which aid in assimilating new information provided during the intervention (van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). It is important that individuals reach a certain level of neurological maturity to comprehend abstract concepts such as self-esteem and empathy effectively. As their understanding increases, individuals become capable of articulating the newly learned ideas and concepts (Krathwohl, 2002).

To enhance the grasp of self-esteem and empathy, the intervention utilizes worksheets and homework assignments, encouraging subjects to identify personal strengths and weaknesses and reflect on empathetic interactions with others (Moniz et al., 2015; Otero et al., 2015). This method has proven effective in helping subjects learn and internalize these concepts, facilitating cognitive and emotional perspective shifts (Garland & Scott, 2002; Kazantzis & Lampropoulos, 2002; Otero et al., 2015). Significant changes were observed as subjects began to alter negative self-perceptions after independently writing about themselves and receiving feedback from others. Similarly, demonstrating empathy by listening and respecting others' opinions not only garnered positive responses and support from peers but also fostered an awareness and motivation to increase positive behavior patterns (Casal et al., 2017; Kelley & McLaughlin, 2012).

By strengthening self-esteem and empathy, the intervention brings about positive benefits such as better adaptation to environments and maximization of academic potential. Supported by a positive psychology approach, this program encourages the development of positive thoughts and emotions, thereby enhancing overall psychological well-being and readiness to tackle life's challenges (Leontopoulou, 2015; Moskowitz et al., 2021; Mruk, 2013). Initially, subjects in the intervention program often responded judgmentally to others who faced similar challenges, struggling to understand the contexts and reasons behind others' actions and feelings. However, through the intervention, subjects began to recognize that people's responses to situations are influenced by their unique experiences. This emerging awareness has helped subjects develop empathy, particularly in diverse environments, evidenced by increased prosocial behavior and decreased prejudice (Decety, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2021; Gerson & Neilson, 2014).

The intervention programs were structured using single-subject designs, which are significant in establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between the treatment and the behavior of research subjects (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). This design also allows researchers to tailor interventions based on the subject's ongoing responses, addressing specific needs effectively (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). However, consideration must be given to the limits of this research, (1) the absence of a control group limits the ability to generalize the research results to broader populations (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018; Niveau et al., 2021), and (2) solely examines the subject's knowledge and attitudes both before and after the intervention (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Conclusion

The conclusions derived from this research indicate that the intervention program effectively enhances self-esteem and empathy. Significant changes in knowledge and attitudes were observed after the intervention. This program has positively impacted the participants by developing their self-esteem and empathy. The implications of these findings suggest that, with increased self-esteem, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their potential by recognizing positive aspects within themselves. Furthermore, enhanced empathy allows individuals to understand better the thoughts and feelings of others, which positively improves social relationships. However, several limitations should be considered for future research on related topics. These include the limited generalizability of the results due to the use of single-subject designs and the absence of behavioral change measurements after intervention to evaluate the concrete application of the intervention in daily life.

Recommendation

The self-esteem and empathy development intervention program, designed for emerging adults and using a single-subject design, offers valuable theoretical and practical contributions to enhancing individual self-esteem and empathy. To improve this program's quality and impact, psychologists and researchers should implement the intervention in a group setting. It would enable the generalization of the program's effectiveness across similar subjects and allow for the generation of statistical data necessary to determine the effect size of the research (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). Future research is encouraged to do behaviour evaluation post-intervention. Although there was an increase in empathy as measured by the Basic Empathy Scale (BES), the rise was not substantial from the baseline to the treatment phase. Previous studies suggest empathy interventions yield better outcomes in subjects with clinical conditions (Carr et al., 2021). Therefore, incorporating behavioral evaluations could provide deeper insights into how individuals apply cognitive and affective empathy in real-world interactions (van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Additionally, encouraging participants to repeat the exercises at home would deepen their understanding and application of self-esteem and empathy skills in a structured manner, thereby reinforcing the benefits gained during the intervention.

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