

# Sociodemographic Differences in Empathic Tendency: A Sample of Religious High School Students

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**Abstract**

Previous empathy studies in Turkey mostly focused on specific samples, such as preschool, secondary school students, or medical staff, but less is known about religious high school students. The aim of this cross-sectional study was to examine the empathic tendency levels of Imam and Preacher Training High School students with respect to gender, grade level, perceived happiness, and most lived place. A convenience sample of 268 randomly selected religious high school students took part in the study. Study participants consisted of 156 (58.2%) males and 112 (41.8 %) females. The data were collected through the KA-SI empathic tendency scale adolescent form and the Personal Information Form. Four way between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for data analysis. Consistent with previous research, the results suggest that the empathic tendency levels of girls were significantly higher than those of boys, and no significant difference was found between grade level, perceived happiness, and most lived place. Researchers considering developing empathy intervention programs for Imam and Preacher Training High School students should focus on male students as a potential risk group.

**Keywords:** Empathic tendency, Imam and Preacher Training High School students, Sociodemographic differences, Turkey.

## 1. Introduction

The structure of the community, which has become increasingly complex with rapid technological developments, has made individuals' lives more automatic. As a result, individuals have started to alienate each other. In this case, it is desirable for every individual to develop effective communication skills. To communicate effectively, individuals need to have some basic communication skills, such as empathy, active listening, effective feedback, using I-language, correct understanding, and sending the message to others. The skill of correct understanding and expression is called 'empathic skill,' one of the necessities of communication (Taner-Derman, 2013).

Empathy can be defined as putting oneself in another's place and looking at events from that person's perspective, as well as correctly understanding and sensing the feelings and thoughts of that person and conveying these to him. It is necessary for a person who wants to develop empathy to get inside to the phenomenal field of another person (Dökmen, 2002). Also, when an individual starts to establish empathy, he devotes his interest to understanding another person by putting his own thoughts aside (Özbek, 2010). An individual's potential to establish empathy is expressed as empathic tendency (Dökmen, 1996). By means of empathic tendency, individuals have the ability to establish well-balanced dialogues (Stein & Book, 2003).

In the literature from Turkey, there are different studies related to empathy and empathic tendency. In these studies, some sociodemographic variables related to the empathic tendencies of pre-school teachers (Çelik & Çağdaş, 2010), the relationship between empathy and marital adjustment (Tutarel-Kışlak & Çabukça, 2002), empathic skill levels of pre-school teacher candidates (Akyol-Köksal & Çiftçibaş-Koçer, 2005), the relationship between the democratic attitudes and empathic skills of teacher candidates (Genç & Kalafat, 2008), levels for establishing the empathy of teacher candidates (Pala, 2008), the relationship between their empathic tendencies and loving children (Uğurlu, 2013), and the empathy levels of children (Taner-Derman, 2013) have been examined. However, the studies carried out in Imam and Preacher Training High School are limited in number.

Imam and Preacher Training High Schools (IPTHSs) is the name given to the secondary education vocational high schools, the formal foundational objective of which is to educate religious preachers and imams. There are also secondary schools of this type with four-year education and segregated education (girls and boys are educated in separate classes) as well as the normal and boarding school types. IPTHSs enroll students from the five secondary school grades. These schools operate linked to the Ministry of National Education General Management of Religion Education in Turkey. In addition to a normal high school curriculum in IPTHSs, courses concerning Islamic religion and religious education dependent on the Sunni-a sect of Islamic principals are taught. IPTHS graduates can work as religious officials in mosques and formal Quran courses. At the same time, graduates can receive higher education at any department they wish or continue their religious education in this area with the condition of success in university entrance exams.

Being sensitive to the needs and feelings of individuals, the role of empathic tendency in understanding and helping them, is a great asset for officials employed in religious

foundations. As IPTHS graduates will be working in places such as mosques and Quran courses, their understanding and ability to empathize with the feelings of the individuals with whom they are working may help them to offer a better quality service and become successful in their professions.

This study aims to help researchers who want to develop group guidance, psycho-education, and psychological counseling programs geared towards the students of IPTHSs. In order to develop effective interventions for potentially at risk IPTHS students, it is necessary to investigate the empathic tendencies of the students at these schools according to various sociodemographic variables because religion is a kind of behavioral incentive for many people. As seen in the above mentioned studies, although there are many studies about empathy and empathic tendency, there is a scarcity of research about the empathic tendencies of the students of IPTHSs.

The aim of this study is to investigate the level of empathic tendencies of the students of IPTHSs according to gender, grade level, perceived happiness, and the place where they spent most of their lives.

## **2. Method**

### **Participants**

A cross-sectional study implemented with 268 first, second, third, and fourth year students registered at the Merzifon Imam and Preacher Training High School were selected by the convenience sampling method, which is based on including the participants who were to be investigated at the time of the research for the study (L. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). There were 156 (58.2%) male and 112 (41.8%) female students. More detailed information about the sociodemographic features of the students who participated in the research is presented Table 1.

### **Measures**

**KA-SI Empathic Tendency Scale Adolescent Form (KA-SIAF):** The KA-SI Empathic Tendency Scale, which was developed by Kaya and Siyez (2010) in the context of Turkish culture. This scale has two different forms for children and adolescents. This study used adolescent form. KA-SIAF is a self-report scale that assesses the empathic tendency in two dimensions, the cognitive and emotional, in adolescents. These subscales can be used both separately and as a total score. This study used the total score of KA-SIAF since the common empathic tendency levels of Merzifon Imam and Preacher Training High School students were under scrutiny. KA-SIAF consists of 17 items. While the cognitive empathic tendency subscale consists of 10 items, emotional empathic tendency subscale includes seven items. Participants answer the scale items by choosing one of the following anchors: “Totally disagree,” “Agree a little,” “Often agree” and “Totally agree.” Total scores ranged between 17 and 68. Higher scores indicated a higher level of empathic tendency. In terms of the validity and reliability of the KA-SIAF, exploratory factor analysis revealed that two factors explain the 43.59 % total variance. Confirmatory factor analysis also showed good fit to data (GFI: .96, AGFI: .95, CFI: .96, RMSEA: .02, SRMR: .03). Item-total scale correlations

ranged between .47 and .70. One week test-retest reliability of the scale was .75. Additionally, the Cronbach alfa internal consistency coefficient was .89 for the emotional empathy subscale, .81 for the cognitive empathy subscale, and .91 for the whole scale (Kaya & Siyez, 2010). For the current study, the Cronbach alfa internal consistency coefficient was .83 for the emotional empathy subscale, .82 for the cognitive empathy subscale, and .89 for the total scale. A reliability coefficient of .70 and above is considered adequate for research purposes (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

**Personal Information Form:** This form was developed by the researchers in order to determine the participants' gender, class level, perceived happiness, and the place where they spent most of their lives.

### **Procedure**

The principal of Merzifon Imam and Preacher Training High School was informed about the study, which was implemented after getting the necessary permission from the school administration. Teachers were clearly informed about the purpose of the study and administration procedure with a short meeting on the implementation day before the guidance lesson. The administrations were implemented under the supervision of teachers during the regular guidance lesson. At the top of the personal information form, the following information was given to students: participation was voluntary, answers would be secret and would not be shared with others, the data would not be used for any other purpose than the aim of the study, and they could withdraw from the research whenever they wished without any repercussions. The administration lasted about 25 minutes.

In the data evaluation process, three students who did not completely fill in the form were excluded from the research. The data was transferred into SPSS 21, and statistical analyses were performed by this program. A preliminary data analysis was conducted on the data set for possible outliers and statistical test assumptions. KA-SIAF scores were converted into standardized z scores. Field (2013) states that z scores should be between -3 and +3, and the individuals who are outside of these values should be excluded from the data set. Two students had scores outside of these values, and were omitted from the data set. Four way between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to identify possible differences between empathic tendency scores and gender, grade level, perceived happiness, and most lived place. Compared to univariate statistical tests, such as t-tests and one way ANOVA, factorial ANOVA simultaneously analyzes independent variables as well as their interaction between each other and increases the power of the analyses. Before the four way ANOVA, the statistical assumptions were controlled. The assumption of normality was evaluated with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, Skewness and Kurtosis values, and also Histogram, Normal Q-Q plot, and Box-Plot graphics. Since the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test has a tendency to be meaningful even in small deviations from normal distribution (Pallant, 2011), researchers suggest using graphical approaches while testing the normality hypothesis (Garson, 2012; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

In this study, the normality hypothesis was tested by controlling the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, graphical approaches, and Skewness and Kurtosis values. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov

Test was meaningful for some variables in the data set. Histogram, Normal Q-Q plot, and Box-Plot graphics showed that the data was approximately normal. At the same time, Skewness and Kurtosis values changed between -1 and +1 in the study variables. The homogeneity of variance assumption was tested with the Levene Test and found tenable. Statistical results were reported with effect size estimates. The most frequently used effect size estimate for ANOVA is eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ). According to J. Cohen (1988), an  $\eta^2$  value close to .01 represents a small effect size, .06 represents a medium effect size, an .14 represents a large effect size. A significance level of  $\alpha = .05$  is assumed to be significant for statistical analysis.

### 3. Results

Descriptive statistics about study participants, KA-SIAF means, and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. 58.2% of the survey participants were male, and 23.5% were grade 10 students. 22% of the participants perceived themselves as unhappy, and 43.3% of participants spent a large part of their lives in a village. In order to determine whether KA-SIAF mean scores have a significant difference according to gender, grade level, perceived happiness, and most lived place, four way between subjects ANOVA was conducted on the KA-SIAF scores as the dependent variable and gender, grade level, perceived happiness, and the place where one has mostly lived as independent variables. Table 2 shows the four way between subjects ANOVA results. Gender had a significant effect on empathic tendency scores ( $F(1, 239) = 33.693, p = .000, \eta^2 = 0.124$ ). As seen in Table 1, girls' empathic tendencies (M: 55.72) were significantly higher than males' (M: 46.23), and the effect size was close to large. The main effect of most lived place ( $F(1, 239) = .693, p = .482, \eta^2 = 0.002$ ), grade level ( $F(3, 239) = .745, p = .546, \eta^2 = 0.009$ ), and perceived happiness ( $F(1, 239) = 3.16, p = .077, \eta^2 = 0.013$ ) was not significant. All other two, three, and four way interactions were also not significant. Effect sizes were also close to zero.

Table 1. Frequencies, percentages, KA-SIAF means, and standard deviations related to variables

Variable	Frequency	%	KA-SIAF	SD
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	156	58.2	46.23	9.10
Female	112	41.8	55.72	7.02
Total	268	100.0		
<b>Most Lived Place</b>				
Village	116	43.3	49.22	8.99
Town	152	56.7	50.95	9.86
<b>Grade Level</b>				
9	113	42.2	48.72	8.96
10	63	23.5	50.38	9.60
11	33	12.3	50.82	11.12
12	59	22	52.49	9.22
Total	268	100		
<b>Perceived Happiness</b>				
Happy	209	78	50.69	9.48
Unhappy	59	22	48.46	9.50
Total	268	100		

Table 2. Four way between subjects ANOVA results

Source	<i>df</i>	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Gender	1	2242.510	33.693	.000	.124
Most Lived Place	1	33.027	.496	.482	.002
Grade Level	3	49.555	.745	.526	.009
Perceived Happiness	1	210.319	3.160	.077	.013
G x MLP	1	94.327	1.417	.235	.006
G x GL	3	92.843	1.395	.245	.017
G x PH	1	58.631	.881	.349	.004
MLP x GL	3	2.852	.043	.988	.001
MLP x PH	1	42.179	.634	.427	.003
GL x PH	3	73.617	1.106	.347	.014
G x MLP x GL	3	45.876	.689	.559	.009
G x MLP x PH	1	17.712	.266	.606	.001
G x GL x PH	2	6.032	.091	.913	.001
MLP x GL x PH	2	129.476	1.945	.145	.016
G x MLP x GL x PH	1	13,224	.199	.656	.001
Error	239	66,557			
Total	268				
Corrected Total	267				

Note: G: Gender, MLP: Most Lived Place, GL: Grade Level, PH: Perceived Happiness, x: interaction.



#### 4. Discussion

This research examined the empathic tendency levels of IPTHS students in terms of gender, class level, perceived happiness, and place where they lived most of their lives. Results showed that the empathic tendency of girls is significantly higher than that of boys. These findings are consistent with studies conducted on different sample groups, which show that girls have a higher empathic tendency level than boys, such as the study conducted by Taner-Derman (2013), on fourth and fifth grade students. Such findings were also reached by Garaigordobil (2009) and Tello, Egido, Ortiz, and Gandara (2013) on adolescents, by Rueckert and Naybar (2008) on university students, and by Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) on adults.

Humans are not only biological but also social beings. Therefore, gender is not only biological but also has a social aspect. From childhood, individuals learn behaviors specifically associated with their gender in their culture by direct or indirect experiences. Behaviors expected of their gender form gender roles. In Turkey, as in many modern and traditional societies, while gender roles such as maintaining the household financially and being a strong individual are attributed to men, women, in accordance with traditional gender roles, are expected to be patient and understanding and manage human relations. This requires women to make good use of their capacity to understand others' feelings and share these feelings as part of their gender role.

This study revealed that empathic tendency does not change significantly according to grade level. Köksal (2000) reported that the empathic tendency of first, second and third year adolescent students at high school did not vary greatly. Similar findings were also obtained from adolescent students at the secondary school level (Salı, 2013). Age has an important function on the development of empathic tendency. However, Garaigordobil (2009) found that age does not have a significant effect on adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14. When all these research results are evaluated together, there were likely no significant differences between the students at different grades at IPTHS because they were very close in age.

In terms of individuals' perceived state of happiness (happy/unhappy), this study determined that it does not significantly influence empathic tendency levels. In a cross-sectional study, Totan, Doğan, and Sapmaz (2013) found that the more the emotional empathy level of individuals increased, the happier they felt. In this study, although there was not a significant difference, the empathic tendency of the individuals who felt happy was higher than that of individuals feeling anxious. Another result of the research is that there is not a significant difference between the place where the individuals lived most of their lives and their empathic tendency. In a similar study, Çekin (2013) stated that the prosocial behavior tendency of students at IPTHSs does not change according to the place where they lived most of their lives.

There are some limitations to this study. First, a self-report scale was used. Since the self-report scale is based on the principle of assessing oneself, a person's assessment of his or her empathy can be biased. The second limitation of this study is that a convenience sampling



method was used. While this method makes it easier to reach participants, and it is more efficient in terms of time, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Thus, the findings of the study can only be generalized with groups similar to the study participants. Lastly, this study was cross-sectional; therefore, the findings do not reflect the cause and effect relationship between the variables.

## 5. Conclusion

Consequently, this study revealed that gender is a variable possibly affecting the empathic tendency of the students in IPTHSs. Researchers who want to develop group guidance, psycho-education, and group counseling for developing empathic skills in the students in IPTHSs, can design activities specifically for male students. A psychological counselor can use individual counseling practices to develop their empathic skills. In recent years, one of the newest notions in psychological literature has been social appearance anxiety, which is a type of social anxiety. There is a limited number of studies about social appearance anxiety in Turkey (Şahin, Barut, & Ersanlı, 2013b; Şahin, Barut, Ersanlı, & Kumcağız, 2014). However, there are studies examining the relationship between self-esteem and sociodemographic variables (Şahin, Barut, & Ersanlı, 2013a), but fewer studies have examined the relationship between self-esteem and empathic tendency. Further studies should investigate the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem in the students of religious vocational high schools.

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