

The Relationships Between Aggressive Humor, Empathy, and Relational Bullying in High

School Students

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Abstract

This study examines the relationships between aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying among high school students in Istanbul. Using a sample of 124 high school students, aged 14–18, and employing validated measures such as the Aggressive Humor Scale Sensitive to Traumatic Experiences in Adolescents, Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, and Relational Aggression Scale in Friendship Relations, the study investigates these dynamics quantitatively. Findings suggest a negative correlation between empathy and relational bullying, a negative correlation between aggressive humor and relational bullying, and a negative correlation between empathy and aggressive humor. These results highlight the role of empathy as a protective factor and aggressive humor as a risk factor in relational aggression. The study underscores the importance of interventions targeting empathy enhancement and humor management to reduce relational bullying and improve school environments.

Keywords: aggressive humor, relational bullying, empathy, high school students

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Introduction

Background to the Study

Bullying among high school students has garnered significant attention due to its pervasive and detrimental effects on both individuals and communities. While physical and verbal bullying have been widely studied, relational bullying, a subtle yet damaging form of aggression, remains underexplored. This type of bullying, which includes gossiping, social exclusion, and manipulation, can profoundly impact emotional well-being and social dynamics (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The interplay between aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying presents an important area for investigation, particularly given the rise of aggressive humor as a socially normalized coping mechanism among adolescents.

Purpose of the Study

The primary goal of this research is to explore the relationships between aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying among high school students in Istanbul. By examining these variables, the study aims to provide insights into how humor styles and empathy levels influence relational aggression, potentially guiding interventions to mitigate bullying in school settings.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: There will be a negative association between empathy and relational bullying.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a positive association between aggressive humor and relational bullying.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a negative association between empathy and aggressive humor.

Significance of the Study

Relational bullying has significant effects on mental health, social integration, and academic achievement despite being less obvious than physical bullying. Studies indicate that victims may experience heightened emotions of anger, shame, and social disengagement (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002). A significant gap in the research is filled by this study, which examines the connections among aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying. The results could help guide proven strategies to improve their overall quality of life in schools through increasing empathy, reducing aggressive humor, and reducing relational aggression. Relational bullying is subtle and can have long-term detrimental impacts on the attitudes and behavior of both bullies and victims, even if it is less obvious than direct bullying (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002; Newman et al., 2005).

Definition of the Study Variables

The study of humor includes a range of perspectives, such as incongruity, criticizing, psychoanalytic, sociological, and psychological frameworks, leading to a number of operational definitions that often differ significantly. As highlighted in the theoretical literature, this diversity has enhanced humor research but also presented difficulties in integrating results from various studies (Martin, 1998; 2001; Ruch, 1998). Aggressive humor has been the subject of studies from these points of view. Aggressive humor is continuously linked to negative consequences. It is defined as “humor that teases, denigrates, criticizes, maligns, disparages, is rude, is mean-

spirited, intends to embarrass or ridicule individuals or groups of individuals” (Vinson, 2006, p. 1). Studies frequently highlight how demeaning it is and suggest that it is an unproductive use of humor that can have negative effects on both individuals and groups. Empathy has become central in psychological research since its origins in the 19th-century German concept of “*emfühlung*” (Wispé, 1990). Carl R. Rogers notably described empathy as the ability to “put oneself in another’s place” and accurately feel their emotions (Dökmen, 1988; Rogers, 1983). His definition highlights two dimensions: emotional empathy, or sharing others' feelings, and cognitive empathy, which involves understanding others’ perspectives (İkiz, 2006; Spreng et al., 2009; Yüksel, 2004). Recognized today as a multidimensional trait, empathy has been assessed with various scales, each capturing different aspects (Davis, 1979; Hogan, 1969; Lawrence, 2004). To address inconsistencies among these tools, Spreng et al. (2009) developed the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire to offer a unified measure of empathy.

Bullying has been classified into two categories. Physical aggressiveness, such as striking and kicking, are examples of direct bullying. Indirect bullying can take the shape of repeated verbal abuse or ridiculing, conversation, or exclusion from a peer group. (Olweus, 1993, 2003). Relational bullying is another name for indirect bullying (Dukes, Zane, & Stein, 2009). Relational bullying is subtle and can have long-term detrimental impacts on the attitudes and behavior of both bullies and victims, even though it is less obvious than direct bullying (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002; Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2005). Higher levels of rage, embarrassment, shame, and sadness have been reported by name-calling victims. According to Crozier and Skliopidou (2002), these victims frequently disengage from friendships and school-related activities as a coping mechanism for relational bullying. In this context, aggressive humor through relational bullying is one of the variables.

Review of the Literature

Empathy and Relational Bullying

Kaukiainen et al. (1999) examined the relationships between social intelligence, empathy, and various types of aggression. Their findings revealed that while social intelligence was essential for both prosocial and antisocial conflict behaviors, empathy played a crucial role in mitigating aggression. Social intelligence was strongly associated with indirect aggression ($r = .67$) but had a weaker relationship with physical aggression, as indirect aggression requires advanced social manipulation skills. Empathy, on the other hand, showed a strong positive correlation with peaceful conflict resolution ($r = .86$) but was not significantly related to physical or verbal aggression. These findings highlight the dual role of social intelligence in conflict behaviors and the distinct aggression-reducing impact of empathy.

Stavriniades et al. (2010) conducted a six-month longitudinal study to explore the reciprocal relationship between bullying and empathy among 205 sixth-grade students. Using the Revised Bullying and Victimization Questionnaire and the Basic Empathy Scale, the study found that bullying at Time 1 negatively predicted the affective component of empathy at Time 2 ($\beta = -.20$), while affective empathy at Time 1 negatively predicted bullying at Time 2 ($\beta = -.15$). These results suggest a bidirectional model where bullying and empathy influence each other. Furthermore, gender analysis showed that girls exhibited higher levels of affective empathy than boys. These findings underline the importance of enhancing empathy as part of interventions to reduce bullying.

Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) investigated the correlation between bullying and emotional and cognitive empathy and surveyed 376 boys and 344 girls around the age of 15 in Hertfordshire. They found that bullying was substantially correlated with low affective empathy

in girls but not for boys. However, frequent bullying, as opposed to infrequent bullying, was associated with reduced affective empathy in both boys and girls. Indirect bullying by girls and violent bullying by boys were both associated with low overall empathy. Bullying by boys or girls did not substantially correlate with cognitive empathy.

Humor and Relational Bullying

Bowker and Etkin (2013) investigated the mediating role of humor in the association between relational aggression and popularity among 265 sixth-grade students. The study revealed that relational aggression was positively linked to popularity, mediated by humor. This relationship was particularly strong for boys and adolescents with highly relationally aggressive friends. The findings suggest that humor may help relationally aggressive individuals maintain their status by reframing socially deviant behaviors in a more acceptable and entertaining way. These results emphasize the need for further research on humor's role in peer dynamics and its potential for reinforcing aggressive behavior.

Empathy and Aggressive Humor

Hampes (2010) explored the relationship between humor styles and empathy among 103 undergraduate students using the Humor Styles Questionnaire and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. Significant positive correlations were observed between affiliative humor and empathic concern ($r = .23$) as well as between self-enhancing humor and perspective-taking empathy ($r = .28$). Conversely, aggressive humor negatively correlated with empathic concern ($r = -.29$) and perspective-taking empathy ($r = -.40$). Self-defeating humor showed no significant associations with empathy measures. These findings emphasize the adaptive nature of affiliative and self-enhancing humor in promoting empathy and stress the detrimental effects of aggressive humor on emotional and cognitive empathy.

Jovančević et al. (2019) investigated the predictive role of personality traits and empathy in determining different humor styles among high school students. For this, they collected data through questionnaires applied to 217 students aged 16-20 from technical high school, art high school, and regular high schools from the cities of Niš and Leskovac. Although empathy contributed to explaining humor styles among the surveyed high school students, its influence was relatively minor compared to the impact of personality traits. Adaptive humor styles, such as self-enhancing humor, were found to have a positive association with perspective-taking ($r = .235$), indicating that students who can adopt others' viewpoints are more likely to use humor to maintain a positive outlook. Conversely, self-enhancing humor showed a negative association with personal distress ($r = -.171$), suggesting that students less prone to feeling overwhelmed by others' emotional experiences are more inclined toward this adaptive humor style. On the other hand, maladaptive humor styles, such as aggressive humor, demonstrated a negative association with both empathic concern ($r = -.230$) and perspective-taking ($r = -.230$). This implies that students who exhibit lower levels of emotional concern for others and struggle to understand others' perspectives are more likely to engage in aggressive humor. These findings emphasize the complex interplay between empathy components and humor styles, highlighting the greater role of personality traits in shaping humor behaviors.

Wu et al. (2016) investigated, using empathy as a mediator, the gender differences in humor styles in adolescents. For this, they collected data through the Interpersonal Reactivity Inventory and Humor Styles Questionnaire, which was applied to 431 adolescents (of whom 195 were boys) 13-14 years old in Taiwan. They found that while girls were more empathetic, boys used aggressive and self-enhancing humor. Perspective-taking and empathic concern were favorably connected with positive humor styles but negatively correlated with negative ones. The

three humor styles were linked to whether or not one can see or empathize with another's point of view. In contrast, aggressive humor was strongly associated with one's capacity to accept the pain of others.

Bullying can occur among students at the elementary, middle, and high school ages, depending on many factors. The gap is the lack of research specifically examining how aggressive humor and empathy interact with and impact relational bullying. While bullying research often focuses on physical and verbal forms of aggression, relational bullying, which involves social exclusion, rumor-spreading, and damaging relationships, has received less attention. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how these factors influence relational bullying among students and examines the relationship between humor, empathy, and relational bullying.

Method

Participants

A total of 291 students participated in the survey. However, 167 students were deleted from the dataset because they did not meet the participation criteria ($n = 167$). Thus, the final sample consisted of 124 students, aged between 14 and 18, from grades nine through 12 at Hisar Schools, a private school in Istanbul. Among these students, 67 (54%) identified as girls, 56 (45.2%) as boys, and one (0.8%) preferred not to identify gender. The grade-level distribution was as follows: 33 (26.6%) students in 9th grade, 44 (35.5%) in 10th grade, 32 (25.8%) in 11th grade, and 15 (12.1%) in 12th grade.

Data Collection Instruments

Aggressive humor is measured by the “Aggressive Humor Sensitive to Traumatic Experiences in Adolescents Scale.” It was developed by Saç (2021). The total questionnaire

comprises 20 items. Participants evaluate each item by choosing on a five-point response scale: "Very true of me," "True of me," "Neutral," "Untrue of me," and "Very untrue of me." Higher scores in each of the subscales indicate higher aggressive humor. Some examples of items found on the scale are, "Birine öfkelendiğimde onunla alay etmek beni rahatlatır." or "Şakanın olumsuz/kötü duyguyu ifade etmek için uygun bir yol olduğunu düşünürüm." Expert opinions were used for surface validity. The construct validity was assessed using the "comparison of known groups" method and explanatory factor analysis (principal component analysis) in adolescents with and without traumatic experiences. The test-retest method and internal consistency analysis were employed to assess the scale's reliability. The scores of adolescents with traumatic experiences and non-adolescents exhibit a significant difference within the scope of the validity study, which encompasses five sub-factors and 63.4% of the total variance. In other terms, a 20-item scale was developed to differentiate between groups. Test-retest analysis revealed that the scale was reliable, with a Cronbach Alpha reliability rating of .88. As a result, it is thought that the produced scale is reliable and valid, can be used in future studies, and can contribute to research in this field (Saç, 2021).

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was developed by Spreng, Kinnon, Mar, and Levine (2009). The scale was adapted to Turkish by Toten, Dogan and Sapmaz (2012). The total questionnaire comprises 13 items. Participants evaluate each item by choosing on a 5-point response scale "Absolutely inappropriate", "Inappropriate", "Slightly inappropriate," "Appropriate," and "Absolutely appropriate". Items on the scale (1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12) are odd-numbered. The lowest score on this scale is 13, and the highest is 65. A high score indicates that the empathy level is high. Some examples of items found on the scale are, "Birisine haksızca davranıldığını gördüğümde, ona acımam." or "Birisine saygısızca davranıldığını görmek, beni

üzler." 115 university students were given the The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, Basic Empathy Scale, and Empathic Tendency Scale in order to show the criterion-related validity of the test (Dökmen, 1988; Topçu et al., 2009). As a result, it was shown that the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire had a positively significant ($p \leq .001$) correlation of .47 with the cognitive dimension, .59 with the affective dimension, .68 with the total the Basic Empathy Scale, and .35 with the Empathic Tendency Scale. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency method and test-retest were used to determine the reliability of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. A correlation of .73 was found between the two applications of the questionnaire, which was administered to 77 students enrolling in Sakarya University's Faculty of Education once every three weeks for the test-retest study. The questionnaire's Cronbach- α internal consistency value was .79. These findings indicated that the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire's reliability was acceptable (Totan, Dogan, & Sapmaz, 2012).

The Relational Aggression in Friendship Relations Scale is developed by Kurtyılmaz (2011). The total questionnaire comprises 16 items. Participants evaluate each item by choosing on a 5-point response scale "Always," "Often", "Sometimes", "Rarely", or "Never". Some examples of items found on the scale are, "Onunla ilgili olumsuz yaşantılarımı başkalarıyla paylaşarak onu zor durumda bırakırım." or "Grup içinde kendisini yabancı hissetmesi için ilgisi dışındaki konulardan söz ederim." Exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the construct validity; the correlation coefficients ranged from -.009 to .74; the Bartlett test ($\chi^2 = 12487.98$, $SD = 1128$, $p < .05$) and the KMO test (.94) indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis; the basic components analysis revealed the eight-factor structure of the Relational Aggression Scale in Friendship Relations, which explained 56.76% of the total variance; however, a three-factor structure was preferred based on the results of the screen plot test and the literature; the

correlation coefficients of the Relational Aggression Scale in Friendship Relations were found to be .55 and .56, respectively, within the scope of the validity of similar scales. Reliability studies revealed that the Relational Aggression Scale in Friendship Relations internal consistency coefficient ($\alpha = .91$), the test's halving method reliability ($r = .77$, Cronbach $\alpha = .85$ and $.83$), the uneven length Spearman-Brown two-half test reliability, and the Gutman test reliability $.87$ were all strong. The correlation coefficient between the two applications in the test-retest method research was found to be $.93$. These results demonstrate the validity and reliability of the Relational Aggression Scale in Friendship Relations Scale (Kurtyılmaz, 2011).

Data Collection Procedure

This quantitative study examines the role of humor and empathy in relational bullying in high school students. It used an online questionnaire, and participants were not offered any incentives to complete the survey. Since the participants were under the age of 18, the parental consent form was sent first. Participants and parents were informed about the purpose, procedure, confidentiality, and volunteering rights of the research. The data collection process took approximately two months. A total of 291 people participated in the study.

The survey had five sections: the voluntary participation and information form approval section, the demographic information form, the Aggressive Humor Sensitive to Traumatic Experiences in Adolescents Scale, the Toronto Empathy Scale, and the Relational Aggression Scale in Friendship Relations Scale.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using SPSS 23.0 software. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to

examine the relationships between aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying. This method was chosen to identify the strength and direction of linear relationships between the variables. The significance level was set at $p < .05$ for all statistical tests.

Results

As shown in Table 1, empathy was positively associated with tension-lowering humor ($r = .247, p < .01$), retaliatory humor ($r = .335, p < .01$), humor attacking relationships ($r = .205, p < .05$), humiliating humor ($r = .249, p < .01$), and humor pressuring emotion ($r = .287, p < .01$). Empathy was negatively correlated with relational bullying ($r = -.187, p < .05$). Tension-lowering humor was positively correlated with retaliatory humor ($r = .748, p < .01$), humor attacking relationships ($r = .716, p < .01$), humiliating humor ($r = .661, p < .01$), and humor pressuring emotion ($r = .596, p < .01$). However, it was negatively correlated with relational bullying ($r = -.411, p < .01$). Retaliatory humor was positively associated with humor attacking relationships ($r = .791, p < .01$), humiliating humor ($r = .775, p < .01$), and humor pressuring emotion ($r = .662, p < .01$). It showed a significant negative correlation with relational bullying ($r = -.513, p < .01$). Humor attacking relationships demonstrated strong positive associations with humiliating humor ($r = .758, p < .01$) and humor pressuring emotion ($r = .701, p < .01$), while being negatively associated with relational bullying ($r = -.535, p < .01$). Humiliating humor showed a positive correlation with humor pressuring emotion ($r = .713, p < .01$) but a negative correlation with relational bullying ($r = -.463, p < .01$). Humor pressuring emotion was negatively correlated with relational bullying ($r = -.481, p < .01$).

– Please insert Table 1 near here –

Discussion

I hypothesized that there would be a negative association between empathy and relational bullying, and the data supported it. Individuals with lower levels of empathy were more likely to engage in relational bullying, which mirrors the findings in the literature (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Stavrinides et al., 2010). Empathy, particularly its affective component, plays a crucial role in inhibiting behaviors that harm others' social connections, as it fosters emotional resonance and understanding of others' feelings (Björkqvist et al., 1999). When this capacity is diminished, individuals may find it easier to engage in acts such as gossiping or social exclusion without guilt or concern for their victims' emotions (Stavrinides et al., 2010). These findings highlight how important empathy is in lowering relational bullying and indicate that programs that promote empathy, especially emotional sensitivity and concern, may be successful in ending the cycle of relational aggression.

I hypothesized that there would be a positive association between aggressive humor and relational bullying, and the data supported it. Individuals who frequently used aggressive humor were more likely to engage in relational bullying, which mirrors the findings in the literature (Bowker & Etkin, 2013). Aggressive humor often serves to undermine others and assert dominance in social interactions. Similarly, relational bullying relies on subtle but harmful tactics, such as gossiping or social exclusion, to damage relationships and social standing. The findings suggest that humor may help relationally aggressive individuals maintain their status by reframing socially deviant behaviors in a more acceptable and entertaining way (Bowker & Etkin, 2013). The findings highlight how humor, when weaponized, can contribute to relational aggression by masking hostility in seemingly acceptable social exchanges.

I hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between empathy and aggressive humor, and the data supported this. Individuals with lower levels of empathy were more likely to engage in aggressive humor, which includes behaviors such as teasing, ridicule, or sarcasm that may harm others, which mirrors the findings in the literature (Hampers, 2010; Jovančević et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2016). This finding mirrors previous research, emphasizing empathy's role in reducing behaviors that disregard others' emotions. When empathy is reduced, individuals are less attuned to the emotional impact of their humor, making it easier to use humor in ways that assert dominance or belittle others without guilt or concern (Jovančević et al., 2019). These results highlight the importance of fostering empathy to mitigate aggressive humor and promote more positive and prosocial communication styles.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the initial sample of 291 participants was reduced to 124 after excluding those who did not meet the participation criteria, which could affect the representativeness of the findings. In addition, the distribution of participation was uneven, with only 12.1% of participants in the twelfth grade, potentially limiting the generalizability of the participation at all high levels. In the study, convenience sampling was used based on participants who may not represent students from different socioeconomic or cultural contexts, such as those attending public schools and who are easily accessible from a single private school in Istanbul. Since 54% of the participants were women, the gender imbalance that could affect the observed relationships was another limitation, especially given the potential gender differences in empathy and relational bullying dynamics. The correlational research design used in this study does not allow causal inferences; that is, the relationships defined between

aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying cannot establish direct cause-and-effect connections. Finally, reliance on self-report scales may have introduced response biases, such as social desirability bias, in which participants may have given responses that they considered socially acceptable rather than exactly accurate, and differences in how participants interpreted survey items may further affect the reliability of the data.

Suggestions for Future Research

Since the initial sample included 291 participants but was reduced to 124 after excluding those who did not meet participation criteria, efforts should be made to address this substantial attrition in future studies. Additionally, the grade-level distribution was uneven, with 9th-grade students making up 26.6% of the sample, while 12th-grade students accounted for only 12.1%. Researchers should aim for a more balanced representation of students across all high school levels to better capture the dynamics of aggressive humor, empathy, and relational bullying throughout the full spectrum of adolescent development. One strategy to achieve this could be to offer a small incentive, such as giving participants plus points or bonus points in relevant courses, to encourage participation in all classes, especially among underrepresented groups such as seniors. Thus, it can increase participation, and the careful response rate of the given surveys can also be increased.

Suggestions for Mental Health Practitioners

Based on the findings, mental health professionals can take several actionable steps to address relational bullying and its associated factors. First, empathy enhancement programs can be implemented in school settings, focusing on developing emotional sensitivity and perspective-taking skills. Techniques such as role-playing and guided imagery could help adolescents understand and resonate with others' emotions. Second, interventions targeting aggressive humor

are recommended, including psychoeducation sessions that teach adolescents the difference between constructive and destructive humor. Group counseling or social skills training can help students adopt more affiliative humor styles while discouraging aggressive humor. Additionally, schools can benefit from establishing a clear bullying policy to address issues such as relational bullying and non-aggressive humor. This policy should define behaviors like bullying, aggressive humor, and prosocial humor, providing explicit examples to help students, staff, and parents understand acceptable and unacceptable actions. Mental health professionals can collaborate with school administrators to develop and implement this policy, which may include consequences for violations and guidance on creating a supportive school culture. Practitioners can also design workshops or programs that address relational dynamics and foster prosocial behaviors in classrooms.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations among Study Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Empathy (1)	1	.247**	.335**	.205*	.249**	.287**	-.187*	51.927	8.411	.848
Tension Lowering Humor (2)	.247**	1	.748**	.716**	.661**	.596**	-.411**	15.709	3.368	.655
Retaliatory Humor (3)	.335**	.748**	1	.791**	.775**	.662**	-.513**	15.717	3.562	.701
Humor Attacks Relationships (4)	.205*	.716**	.791**	1	.758**	.701**	-.535**	15.790	3.485	.738
Humiliating Humor (5)	.249**	.661**	.775**	.758**	1	.713**	-.463**	14.975	3.958	.669
Humor Pressionpure Emotion (6)	.287**	.596**	.662**	.701**	.713**	1	-.481**	12.177	2.544	.738
Relational Bullying (7)	-.187*	-.411**	-.513**	-.535**	-.463**	-.481**	1	36.895	12.6945	.848

Note. ** $p < .01$, level two-tailed.*Note.* * $p < .05$, level two-tailed.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A5ZtiCgk6RITkLq02YQ9p78TpaJ-0KIP/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100800456911030673863&rtpof=true&sd=true>