How empathy styles mediate the relationship between responsive parenting and adolescent friendship quality?

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

How empathy styles mediate the relationship between responsive parenting and adolescent friendship quality?

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Abstract

Responsive parenting contributes to the friendship quality formed in adolescents. Previous studies failed to fully explain the relationship process between responsive parenting and friendship quality. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of empathy in responsive parenting relations with friendship quality. A total of 450 respondents consisting of the early, middle, and late adolescents aged 12-15, 15-18, and 18-20 years, respectively, were selected as participants. Meanwhile, responsive parenting, empathy style, and friendship quality was measured using the Parental Responsiveness Scale, Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and the McGill Friendship Questionnaires-Friend's Functions. The results showed that empathy act as a mediator in the relationship between responsive parenting and friendship quality. Also, responsive parenting does not directly predict friendship quality but first develops fantasy and personal stress styles. Adolescents with high personal distress show sensitivity to the feelings and thoughts of their friends because the relationships formed are of higher quality.

Keywords

Responsive parenting, empathy, fantasy, personal distress, friendship quality

Friendship functions significantly in the transitional phases of an adolescent's life. However, adolescent friendships cannot be separated from their physical locations. Urban adolescents enjoy better quality friendships because it is easier for them to interact in metropolitan areas, which accommodate young people in larger numbers (Kitchen, Williams, & Gallina, 2015). Kitchen et al. (2015) also found that urban areas offer a variety of interesting activities for adolescents, which enable the youth to engage in pastimes that facilitate interpersonal communication and establish peer relationships. Such continuous interaction processes allow adolescents to perceive that their existence is important to others like them (a sense of belonging). In other words, friendships between urban adolescents can offer support, protection, and closeness (Abdillah, Anindita, Permatasari, Nabillah, & Mujidin, 2020).

Generally, the presence of friends in their lives allows adolescents to develop diverse social skills because such relationships serve as sources of social support and facilitate understanding, insight, and social skills (Berndt, 2002; Buote et al., 2007). Therefore, adolescents usually spend more time with their friends than their families because peer support helps them deal with stressful life events (Hiatt, Laursen, Mooney, & Rubin, 2015; Santrock, 2018). Studies have shown that adolescents who have access to

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beneficial companionships tend to develop high self-esteem (Corsano, Musetti, Caricati, & Magnani, 2017; Kim, Parker, & Walker Marciano, 2017), subjective vitality (Akin, Akin, & Uğur, 2016; Akın & Akın, 2015), life satisfaction (Pang, 2018; Raboteg-Saric & Sakic, 2014), and psychological well-being (Bakalım & Taşdelen Karçkay, 2016); they also feel less lonely (Corsano et al., 2017; Lodder, Scholte, Goossens, & Verhagen, 2017).

Friendship denotes the relationship between two interdependent individuals that fulfills socio-emotional, intimacy, and affection needs and contributes constructively to their mutual social and emotional development (Leibowitz, 2018). Parker and Asher (1993) have elucidated that the quality of friendship comprises companionship and recreation, help and guidance, intimate change, validation, caring, conflict and betrayal, and conflict resolution. Bukowski, Hoza, and Boivin (1994) proposed five aspects including companionship, conflict, assistance, security, and closeness. The concept of friendship quality postulated by Parker and Asher (1993) and Bukowski, Hoza, and Boivin (1994) is more suited to childhood friends (Verswijvel, Heirman, Hardies, & Walrave, 2018). Therefore, Mendelson and Aboud (1999) attempted to conceptualize positive peer associations in adolescence by stimulating companionship ("activities performed with friends to produce fun, entertainment, and excitement"), help ("providing help, direction, and information needed by friends"), intimacy ("sensitivity to friends' needs, thoughts, and feelings"), reliable alliances ("loyalty to friends"), self-validation ("valuing friends as a source of support for maintaining self-image"), and emotional security ("comfort and trust provided by friends").

Previously conducted studies have evinced that parents function significantly in the ability of adolescents to form quality friendships (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2019). In Indonesia, parents educate adolescents to be good human beings by forging intimate relationships so they can be socially respected (Hendriati & Okvitawanli, 2019). Further, Nie, Li, and Vazsonyi (2016) have illuminated that the attachment formed through early parenting experiences generates an internal work model that directs children to internalize closeness with their primary caregiver. This example affects the capabilities of children to establish friendships of quality with their peers because the interpersonal relationship experiences between guardians and their children vary (Boling, Barry, Kotchick, & Lowry, 2011; Dwyer et al., 2010). For instance, adolescents who grow up with parents who apply strict rules tend to develop low-quality friendships (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2019). However, parents who provide warmth and attention to their children enable adolescents to build positive peer relations (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018).

Responsive parenting offers warmth and attention to children because it is oriented toward parental sensitivity and alertness to the needs of their children. Responsive parents are prompt in addressing their children's signals. (Brassai et al., 2013; Gafoor & Kurukkan, 2014). Adolescents who receive responsive parenting are more emotionally nurtured, foster secure attachments, and are comfortable interacting with their parents (Ahmad, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2013; Filus, Schwarz, Mylonas, Sam, & Boski, 2019). Moreover, the positive interactions between parents and children tend to become exemplars for adolescents when they make friends (Tjandra, Muttaqin, & Tondok, 2020).

The extant studies have shown that responsive parenting contributes in a small but effective manner, predicting friendship quality by 4.1% (Tjandra et al., 2020). Tjandra et al. (2020) have explained that responsive parenting initiates interpersonal skills because children internalize their closeness to their parents and apply it to their friendships (Slicker et al., 2005). Empathy is an interpersonal skill formed through responsive parenting and guardians who respond sensitively and tolerantly to their children's pressures and difficulties exhibit this attribute (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Kanat-Maymon & Assor, 2010). Further, children learn parental behaviors through observation and adolescents can apply them when they deal with their peers (Feist, Feist, & Roberts, 2018). The dependence of adolescents on gadgets, the Internet, and social media is expanding because of the current rapid development of technology. Such habits affect empathy and prosocial behavior in adolescents toward their peers, and teenagers are now too busy with social media and care less about the people surrounding them (Molchanov, 2014).

Empathy performs an important role in adolescent friendships (Dinić et al., 2016; Smith, 2015). This assertion aligns with the explanations of several developmental psychology personalities who have stated that empathy skills and perspective-taking abilities represent the initial foundations of intimate companionships (Chow, Ruhl, & Buhrmester, 2013). Further, Davis (1994) explained that empathy is the ability adolescents require to understand the feelings and thoughts of others. The empathy and friendship quality connection is illuminated by emotional socialization, which allows individuals to learn and understand emotions and teaches them to conduct themselves in a culturally appropriate manner during social interactions (Jin, Zhang, & Han, 2017; Shaffer, Suveg, Thomassin, & Bradbury, 2012).

Empathetic adolescents also tend to avoid conflicts with their best friends and create closer friendships because they do not focus on themselves. Rather, they try to understand the circumstances of others (Chow et al., 2013). Thus, empathy skills increase self-disclosure behaviors because empathetic adolescents endeavor to accept the ideas and emotions of their best friends (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Such skills are deemed reciprocal forces allowing more long-lasting peer relationships.

Responsive parenting can shape the quality of adolescent friendships, it does not directly predict friendship quality but develops empathy skills in adolescents. Therefore, this study aims to empirically examine how empathy functions in the relationship between responsive parenting and the quality of adolescent friendships. The proposed hypothesis states that empathy plays a role in the association of responsive parenting with the quality of adolescent friendships.

Method

Participants

A total of 450 adolescents aged 12–20 years (M = 16,477 and SD = 2.541) participated in this study, of whom 185 (41.11%) were male and 265 (58.89%) were female. The respondents were equally distributed between early, middle, and late adolescence with 150 participants assigned to each age range. Further, 33.33% of the participants were domiciled in Surabaya City.

Measures

The *McGill Friendship Questionnaires-Friend's Functions* (MFG-FF; Mendelson & Aboud, 1999) was applied to measure friendship quality. The MFQ-FF comprises 30 items encompassing six subscales, including stimulating companionship ("My friend has an interesting thought or idea to do"), help ("Friend helps me when I need it"), intimacy ("Someone I can discuss my personal things with"), reliable alliance ("My friend wants to be my companion if we do not see each other for a few months"), self-validation ("My friends make me feel smart"), emotional security ("My friends make me feel comfortable in new situations"). The MFQ-FF items offer eight response options ranging from never to always.

Parental responsiveness was determined through a subscale of the *Parenting Style* (PS; Paulson, 1994) questionnaire. PS contains seven items with statements including "My parents support me to see problems from both sides" and "My parents negotiate and talk to me while I'm misbehaving." This subscale uses five response options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) was administered to evaluate empathy skills. IRI consists of 30 items incorporating four subscales including fantasy ("I was very carried away by the characters in the novel"), perspective-taking ("I try to see people's opinion before making a decision"), empathic concern ("I often have tender feelings and care for others that are less fortunate than me"), and personal distress ("In an emergency, I feel worried and uncomfortable"). The IRI uses five response options ranging from does not describe me at all to very much describes me.

Procedure

Data were collected using quota and convenience sampling techniques. This study established an equal number for each participant and disseminated information on social media. The respondents were asked to fill out the informed consent and questionnaire, which were presented online.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS version 22 program to test the functioning of empathy as a mediator in the relationship between responsive parenting and friendship quality. The mediator analysis was carried out using the approach proposed by Kenny's (2014). Therefore, several regression analyzes were carried out which included (1) responsive parenting to empathy, (2) responsive parenting by father/mother and empathy to friendship quality, as well as (3) parenting responsiveness of father/mother to friendship quality. The Sobel test (1982) was also conducted to determine direct and indirect effects. The results revealed that empathy becomes a mediator between responsive parenting and friendship quality if the indirect role significance is less than 0.05.

Results

Table 1 shows that responsive parenting and the empathy styles of fantasy and personal distress were significantly related to friendship quality. Responsive parenting by fathers was positively correlated with personal distress ($r=.148$ & $p<.01$), perspective-taking ($r=.195$ & $p<.01$), empathic concern ($r=.242$ & $p<.01$), as well as friendship quality ($r=.186$ & $p<.01$). However, it was negatively correlated with fantasy ($r =-.108$ & $p<.05$). Responsive parenting by mothers was positively related to personal distress ($r=.288$ & $p<.01$), perspective-taking ($r=.446$ & $p<.01$), empathic concern ($r=.376$ & $p<0.01$), as well as friendship quality ($r=.96$ & $p<.05$) but was negatively correlated with fantasy ($r=-.124$ & $p<.01$).

Table 2 elucidates that responsive parenting predicts four styles of empathy and friendship quality. Specifically, responsive parenting by fathers predicted fantasy ($R^2=.012$, $\beta= -.108$, & $p<.05$), personal distress ($R^2=.022$, $\beta=.148$, & $p<.001$), empathic concern ($R^2=.059$, $\beta=.242$, & $p<.001$), perspective-taking ($R^2=.038$, $\beta = .195$, & $p<.001$), as well as friendship quality ($R^2=.035$, $\beta=.186$, & $p=.001$). Maternal responsive parenting tended to predict fantasy ($R^2=.015$, $\beta= -.124$, & $p<.05$), personal distress ($R^2=.083$, $\beta=.288$, & $p<.001$), empathic concern ($R^2=.142$, $\beta= .376$, & $p<.001$), perspective-taking ($R^2= .199$, $\beta= .446$, & $p<.001$), as well as friendship quality ($R^2=.009$, $\beta= .096$, & $p< .041$).

Table 3 illuminates that the fantasy style acted as a mediator in the associations of responsive parenting with friendship quality (indirect effect of father's responsiveness = −.024, $z = -2.066$, & $p<.05$; indirect effect of mother's responsiveness = −.031, $z = -2.288$, & $p<.05$). The personal distress style also performed as a mediator in relationship of responsiveness parenting with friendship quality (indirect effect of father's responsiveness = −.031, $z = -2.288$, & $p<.05$; indirect effect of mother's responsiveness = .067, $z = 3.488$, & $p<.001$).

Table 1. *Correlation between Responsiveness Parenting, Empathy Styles, and Friendship Quality*

Variable	Mean	Range	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
FR	3.980	1–5	.846	.917**						
MR	4.444	1–5	.728	.539**	.923**					
PD	3.825	1–5	.581	.148**	.288**	.700**				
Fan	3.102	1–5	1.109	−.108*	−.124**	.207*	.901**			
PT	4.321	1–5	.707	.195**	.446**	.451**	−.137**	.864**		
EC	4.289	1–5	.582	.242**	.376**	.530**	−.167**	.710**	.744**	
FQ	6.748	0–8	.831	.186**	.096*	.214**	.208**	.021	.076	.970**

Note. FR: Father's Responsiveness; MR: Mother's Responsiveness; PD: Personal Distress; Fan: Fantasy; PT: Perspective-Taking; EC: Empathic Concern; FQ: Friendship Quality

Table 2. *Regression Analysis Between Responsiveness Parenting, Empathy Styles, and Friendship Quality*

Variable	R²	β	B	S.E.	t	p
Father's Responsiveness						
FR => Fantasy	.012	−.108	−.142	.062	−2.306	.022
FR => PD	.022	.148	.102	.032	3.167	.002
FR => PT	.038	.195	.163	.039	4.204	.001
FR => EC	.059	.242	.166	.032	5.277	.001
Fantasy => FQ	−.024	.231	.173	.034	5.078	.001
PD => FQ	.028	.191	.273	.066	4.141	.001
PT => FQ	−.003	−.016	−.019	.056	−.334	.738
EC => FQ	.007	.033	.047	.068	.687	.492
FR=> FQ.Fantasy	.039	.211	.207	.045	4.638	.001
FR => FQ.PD	.029	.158	.115	.045	3.417	.001
FR => FQ.PT	.034	.186	.185	.047	3.987	.001
FR => FQ.EC	.033	.178	.175	.047	3.715	.001
FR => FQ	.035	.186	.182	.046	4.003	.001
Mother's Responsiveness						
MR => Fantasy	.015	−.124	−.190	.071	−2.654	.008
MR => PD	.083	.288	.230	.036	6.375	.001
MR => PT	.199	.446	.433	.041	1.555	.001
MR => EC	.142	.376	.301	.035	8.598	.001
Fantasy => FQ	−.027	.223	.167	.035	4.831	.001
PD => FQ	.058	.203	.291	.069	4.219	.001
PT => FQ	−.012	−.027	−.032	.062	−.523	.601
EC => FQ	.017	.046	.066	.072	.911	.363
MR => FQ.Fantasy	.011	.124	.142	.053	2.683	.008
MR => FQ.PD	.003	.038	.043	.055	.780	.436
MR => FQ.PT	.010	.109	.124	.060	2.064	.040
MR => FQ.EC	.007	.079	.090	.058	1.554	.121
MR => FQ	.009	.096	.110	.054	2.048	.041

Note. FR = Father's Responsiveness; MR = Mother's Responsiveness; PD = Personal Distress; EC = Empathic Concern; PT = Perspective-Taking; FQ = Friendship Quality

Table 3. *Indirect Effect of Responsiveness Parenting to Friendship Quality*

Variable	Value	S.E	z	p
FR => *Fantasy* => FQ	−.024	.011	−2.066	.038
FR => *Personal Distress* => FQ	−.027	.011	2.470	.013
FR => *Empathic Concern* => FQ	−.007	.001	.669	.503
FR => *Perspective-Taking* => FQ	−.003	.009	−.324	.745
MR => *Fantasy* => FQ	−.031	.013	−2.288	.022
MR => *Personal Distress* => FQ	.067	.019	3.488	.001
MR => *Empathic Concern* => FQ	.019	.022	.899	.368
MR => *Perspective-Taking* => FQ	−.014	.026	−.519	.603

Note. FR = Father's Responsiveness; MR = Mother's Responsiveness; FQ = Friendship Quality

Discussion

This study examined how empathy functioned in mediating the relations between responsive parenting and the quality of adolescent friendships in Surabaya City. The results disclosed that the aspects of fantasy and personal distress mediate between responsive parenting and friendship quality. Also, responsive parenting does not directly predict friendship quality but develops empathy skills in adolescents, including the facets of fantasy and personal distress. Empathetic adolescents tend to understand the thoughts and feelings of others because such skills help to sustain friendship quality.

Previous studies have failed to examine the intermediary variables between responsive parenting and friendship quality because the results become an alternative to the relationship dynamics. Indirectly, these results clarify studies conducted by Tjandra et al. (2020) and Baumgardner and Boyatzis (2018) on responsive parenting and friendship quality. The present investigation revealed the aspects of fantasy and personal distress as intermediary variables between responsive parenting and friendship quality. Therefore, responsive parenting may help adolescents develop varied interpersonal skills.

This result aligns with the findings reported by Krauthameret al. (2019) that responsive parenting develops overall empathy skills. According to Davis (1983), people can imbibe fantasy, personal distress, perspective-taking, and empathic concern skills. The study results demonstrated that responsive parenting tends to predict the four empathy styles. Therefore, responsive parents tend to react tolerantly and sensitively to resolve difficulties faced by adolescents (Riana Lestari, 2019). Adolescents internalize this learning by developing the ability to place themselves in the positions of others by manifesting the aspects of perspective-taking and fantasy (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Davis, 1983). Therefore, adolescents tend to worry because they show compassion to people experiencing difficulties without feeling pressured. This ability is demonstrated through empathic concern and personal distress skills (Davis, 1983; Kanat-Maymon & Assor, 2010).

Parents contribute to the empathy skills of adolescents. However, the maternal role is more significant. This function is inseparable from the accepting, supportive, and warm attitude that tends not to directly predict friendship quality. Mothers tend to provide more security and warmth for their children because they spend more time with adolescents than fathers (Lisa & Astuti, 2018). Meanwhile, fathers are considered authority figures in Asian society because their words are continuously heard and imitated (Li & Lamb, 2013). Wulandari and Tati (2018) elucidated that fathers inculcate attitudes that directly teach adolescents about interpersonal relationships that help establish good quality friendships.

Generally, urban parents view their parenting tasks differently from parents in rural areas. Dewanggi, Hastuti, and Herawati (2015) found that urban parents display higher levels of warmth and acceptance than rural parents. Parents in rural areas tend to abuse, neglect, and reject adolescents. Rural parents habitually interact with adolescents using harsh words, blaming, yelling, low affection, and neglecting questions asked by the teenagers (Dewanggi et al., 2015). Conversely, urban parents tend to encourage adolescents to learn the social skills they need to socialize with their peers, for instance, empathy (Nurkholida & Hakim, 2020) because they believe social skills are more important for the emotional and physical well-being of adolescents. Hence, urban adolescents can establish quality friendships with their friends.

This study evidenced that the quality of friendship fostered by adolescents with high fantasy skills is lower because this empathy style allows them to focus on fictional characters shown in books, movies, or dramas (Nomura & Akai, 2012). Several studies have also evinced the unconnectedness of fantasy to people's interpersonal skills (Nomura & Akai, 2012). Therefore, adolescents lack the sensitivity and the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of their peers because they focus only on fictional characters. The present study showed that adolescents with a personal distress empathy style tend to nurture good quality friendships.

Personal distress allows adolescents to feel uncomfortable and anxious when faced with other people in difficult situations. Hence, they tend to provide what is needed by their peers (Chow et al., 2013; Davis, 1983). This empathy

aspect prevents adolescents from being egocentric because their relationships are more satisfying (Chow et al., 2013). Low adolescent egocentrism allows them to form friendships with minimal conflicts and prevents them from taking destructive actions against their friends (Davis, 1994). Specifically, high empathy skills enable adolescents to adjust their behavior to the needs and desires of others and help to build intimacy in friendships (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2015). This finding supports Chow et al.'s (2013) discovery that empathy contributes to friendship quality.

However, this study showed that the perspective-taking and empathic concern styles do not predict friendship quality. The results revealed that individuals displaying high levels of these styles do not necessarily develop quality friendships because adolescents tend to pay more attention to their peers. Improper perspective-taking and empathic concern styles can cause adolescents to act in manipulative and aggressive ways (Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015). Such styles indirectly enable adolescents to become excessively involved with their peers (Man Chow & Buhrmester, 2011). Therefore, adolescents feel uncomfortable with friends because they lose control of their problems and find it difficult to make decisions using their abilities (Man Chow & Buhrmester, 2011; Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Hence, their existing friendship relations are low in quality.

This study clarified the relationship between responsive parenting and friendship quality (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018; Tjandra et al., 2020). The results indicated that parents must first develop empathy skills including perspective-taking, empathic concern, fantasy, and personal distress to enable adolescents to maintain positive peer relations. Responsive parenting indirectly facilitates the development of interpersonal skills in adolescents because parents react sensitively to the stressful situations confronting their children. Therefore, this study examined responsive parenting, attachment, emotional support, and warmth without understanding the dynamics that occur in predicting friendship quality (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018; Tjandra et al., 2020).

In conclusion, responsive parenting facilitates the development of empathy skills in adolescents, enabling them to engage in quality friendships with their peers. Responsive parenting allows parents to respond quickly to the needs of adolescents who confront difficult situations. This receptiveness enables the inculcation of fantasy, perspective-taking, personal distress, and empathic concern skills in adolescents. However, not all empathy styles can improve the quality of adolescent friendships because empathy is contextual. Adolescents who imbibe the personal distress style usually show sensitivity to the feelings and thoughts of their friends and offer responses aligned with their needs. Therefore, empathy skills are assets that help to establish quality friendships. The present study acknowledges the limitation of focusing only on individual empathy skills and failing to measure the dyadic nature of companionship relations. Leibowitz (2018) explained that friendship denotes an association of mutual dependence between two people to fulfill their socio-emotional needs. Further studies should utilize the actor-partner interdependence model to explain the dyadic attributes of companionship and should also test the role of empathy through responsiveness, overinvolvement, and disengagement.

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