

# Impact of Workplace Empathy Training on Employees' Helping Behavior

Bunga Indira Artha<sup>1</sup>, Arum Etikariena<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author, Email: [arum.etikariena@ui.ac.id](mailto:arum.etikariena@ui.ac.id) / [arum.hidayat@gmail.com](mailto:arum.hidayat@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

Helping coworkers outside one's main job description has a positive impact on organizational achievement, a behavior known in industrial psychology research as *helping behavior*. Helping behavior is an employee's activities that are performed but are not part of the main job function and that are focused on helping to solve personal problems or complete the work of colleagues. Empathic concern is an important factor related to the emergence of helping behavior and describes the emotional response of compassion and concern experienced by employees when they see a colleague in need. This two-part, applied research study sought to determine the factors associated with these behaviors. Study 1 was conducted to determine the relationship between empathic concern and helping behavior within an organization. Data were collected from 40 employees using the Interpersonal Citizenship Behavior scale and the Empathic Concern subscale of the International Reactivity Index. A significant positive relationship between empathic concern and helping behavior was observed. Study 2 was conducted to determine the results of an empathy at work training program. On the basis of the evaluation of the five participants, the program was effective with a significant increase in participants' understanding of empathic concern. Participants also showed a more positive attitude toward empathic concern and helping behavior. From the observations of coworkers and direct supervisors, the research found that participants were able to demonstrate empathic concern and helping behavior by meeting more than half of the expected indicators.

**Keywords:** *empathic concern, empathy training, helping behavior.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of an organization is individuals performing a variety of unique functions in collaboration to achieve a common goal; therefore, the success of an organization depends on the contribution of these individuals. Industrial and organizational psychologists distinguish work performance into tasks and other performance dimensions (Bandura & Lyons, 2012). In general, employee performance dimensions consist of *task performance*, *citizenship performance*, and

*counterproductive performance* (Stewart & Brown, 2011). Whereas task performance contributes by directly fulfilling every job function in the organization, citizenship behavior contributes by building a positive organizational environment. Ahmed et al. (2019) argued that citizenship behavior is considered a critical manifestation of ethical conduct, which can ultimately improve the context of task performance. Organ (1988) noted that individual behavior has the power to promote

efficient and effective organizational functions. The interpersonal orientation of this behavior is also essential for team success because it supports the social context and motivation in which organizational work is carried out (Dalal, 2007). Furthermore, in many cases, citizenship performance is what distinguishes “top players” from others (Stewart & Brown, 2011).

Common examples of citizenship behavior include volunteering to perform tasks that are not formally part of one's duties, following organizational procedures even when the behavior is uncomfortable, and supporting and maintaining the organization. In general, previous studies have classified these behaviors on the basis of their intentions. *Organizational citizenship behavior* seeks to help the organization as a whole. In contrast, *interpersonal citizenship behavior* has a beneficial effect on specific people. Existing theories and empirical research show that employees do not uniformly carry out all types of citizenship behavior (Barling & Cooper, 2008). Most recently, Gabriel et al. (2018) reported that scholarly attention is currently focused on organizational behavior aimed at helping coworkers. This set of voluntary actions is defined as “volunteering to help others with or [to] prevent work-related problems” (Organ et al., 2006). Helping behavior will not only promote active social cooperation but also bring psychological benefits to the helper (Li & Xie, 2017).

Bandura and Lyons (2012) explained that some individuals are more likely to offer voluntary and helpful behavior than are others. Whereas some people choose to volunteer help regularly, others decide not

to try to do more than the work requires. Citizenship behavior, given its voluntary nature, does not depend on specific knowledge and skills but instead on motivation (Stewart & Brown, 2011). This basis means that employees with motivational characteristics such as dependence, cooperation, empathy, and being proactive are more likely in general to exceed the minimum expectations. Emotional connection is a prerequisite for individuals to have empathic concern for others. In turn, this empathic concern acts as an emotional impulse that motivates interpersonal citizenship behavior (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). Davidov (2018) explained that empathic concern is an important motivator of interpersonal citizenship behavior because this emotional response encourages behavior that seeks to alleviate the distress of others by offering help.

Furthermore, as Decety (2015) explained, one phenomenon that has received much attention from social and biological sciences for its nature of connecting individuals is *empathy*. Empathy shapes the landscape of human social life by motivating desirable behavior, inhibiting aggression, and facilitating cooperation between members of the same social group. Empathy reflects an innate ability to understand and be sensitive to the emotional stresses of others and, in some cases, to have the motivation to maintain their well-being. Witnessing the distress of others can cause the observer to experience affective stimuli of hostility combined with physiologic stress responses. When the correct prosocial impulse is triggered, which depends on the context, this motivation can lead to helpful behavior (Decety et al.,

2015). The classic tension reduction model proposes a return to homeostasis as the main driver for helping others in distress. Thus, the main goal of empathy is to reduce the uncomfortable feelings that arise when witnessing other's difficulty. Another explanation is that helping can also be understood as a reward in which people report helping behavior as a pleasant experience.

Empathy has been considered in past research to reflect an innate nature and not a behavior that individuals can learn (Riess et al., 2012). Nevertheless, recent research shows this vital human competence can change and can be taught. Because empathy is an ability, current research has argued that empathy is an interpersonal skill that can be taught. Several studies have found that training programs prove useful to improve an individuals' ability to experience empathy (Kahriman et al., 2016). A literature search by Lam et al. (2011) across several databases identified 29 articles related to research on the evaluation of empathy training. More than 90% these studies reported positive findings, showing that individuals can learn about the concept of empathy regardless of the training method, which supports the proposition that training can increase one's empathy. A theoretical basis underlying the empathy training program is the social learning theory. This theory explains that behavior, including empathy, can be learned through the process of observation, imitation, and modeling.

This study aims to explore the relationship between employees' empathic concern and helping behaviors on the basis of two hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Empathic concern has a significant positive relationship with helping behavior.
- Hypothesis 2: A significant difference can be observed in the employee score for empathic concern and helping behavior before and after an empathy training program.

This research is expected to provide an overview of the relationship between employees' empathic concern and helping behavior. The results can provide insights for organizations regarding the forms of interventions that can promote employees' empathic concern to enhance helping behavior.

## 2. METHODS

Two separate studies were conducted to investigate the research hypotheses as described in the following text. Study 1 and Study 2 were conducted on the same population of employees of Directorate A at an Islamic Bank in Indonesia, hereafter referred to as *Bank XYZ*.

### 2.1. Study 1

Study 1 was conducted to determine the effect of empathic concern on helping behavior. This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational research design. The main emphasis in correlational studies is to find or establish the existence of relationships or associations or interdependencies between two or more research variables (Kumar, 2011). Participants in Study 1 were all employees of Directorate A at Bank XYZ. Invitations to participate in the study were sent via the company's intranet. The participant recruitment process was carried out using a total population sampling technique. All employees were also included in Study 2

to obtain a comprehensive picture of the conditions in Directorate A at Bank XYZ.

Study 1 follows the cross-sectional research design using a questionnaire consisting of the Interpersonal Citizenship Behavior scale (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002) and Empathic Concern subscale from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983). Respondents self-reported their level of agreement with each statement on task-focused and person-focused helping behavior on 14 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Their level of agreement with seven self-report items on empathic concern were measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“does not describe me well”) to 4 (“describes me very well”).

The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value was 0.87 and 0.74 for the Interpersonal Citizenship Behavior scale and the Empathic Concern subscale, respectively. Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis is used to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. This method of data analysis produces a correlation coefficient ( $r$ ). Perfect correlation 1 or  $-1$  indicates the value of one variable that can be determined by knowing the value of another variable. The sign before the variable indicates whether the correlation between variables is positive (when one variable increases, so do the other variables) or negative (when one variable increases, the other decreases). This analytical method was used to answer the research question, “Is empathic concern related to the helping behavior of Directorate A Bank XYZ employees?”

## 2.2. Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to develop an intervention program to increase empathetic concern and thereby improve the helping behavior of Directorate A employees at Bank XYZ. This study uses a quantitative research approach with a before- and after-study research design. On the basis of data collected in Study 1, the helping behavior score of each employee was known. On the basis of these empathy scores, a list of employees who were recommended to take the empathy at work intervention program was compiled. Employees on the list had low scores on helping behavior and empathic concern compared with the overall population in Directorate A at Bank XYZ; for this reason, they were prioritized to follow the intervention program.

After approval from the Bank XYZ management representative and the direct supervisor of each Directorate A employee was obtained, an invitation was sent to each prospective participant to be involved in a series of empathy at work intervention programs. This step shows that the process of selecting respondents in Study 2 used a purposive sampling technique.

The same questionnaire used in Study 1 was completed by participants 2 months after the training program. The Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted to determine any changes in the participant's empathic concern and helping behavior scores before and after participating in the training program. In addition, The Four Levels of Training Evaluation model by Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007) was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program for achieving its goals for participant reactions, learning, and behavior outcomes.

In the Kirkpatrick model, Level 1 evaluation measures the participant's

assessment of several training aspects, including facilities, materials, and facilitators. The evaluation was carried out using the paper-and-pencil method in which participants assigned grades ranging from 1 (“very poor”) to 6 (“very good”) on each assessment item. The learning level evaluation was conducted to find out how familiar participants were with the principles, facts, techniques, procedures, and processes emphasized during the training activities (Noe, 2010). The evaluation was conducted using the repeated-measures design in which the participants were measured in two different conditions—before and after the program. Participants completed 15 items to test achievement, which covered all topics presented in training. The data were then analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed rank test to compare participants' scores before and after the training. In the Level 3 evaluation, the participants' affect and behavior were measured. The affective domain was evaluated by administering the same questionnaire used in Study 1. The data from 1 month before the training and 2 months after the training were then

analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed rank test.

The behavior domain was evaluated using a checklist developed on the basis of the behavioral indicators of organizational values. The 11 behavioral indicators included in the list were those that reflect empathic concern and helping behavior. Coworkers and direct supervisors of the participants were asked to report whether the participants showed each behavior in the past 2 months. The Wilcoxon signed rank test analysis was used to compare the two measurements at different times. This data analysis method produces the *Z* value and *p* value; statistical significance for the difference between the two scores was defined as  $p \leq 0.05$ . This analysis method was conducted to answer the research question, “Is there a significant increase in empathic concern and citizenship behavior among Directorate A Bank XYZ employees after participating in the empathy intervention?”

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Study 1

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviation, and Correlation for the Study Variables

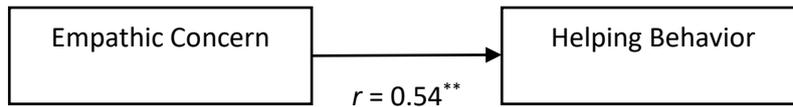
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Age	36.33	7.17	1.00			
2. Tenure	4.23	4.28	0.37*	1.00		
3. Helping Behavior	55.65	6.51	0.18	0.21	1.00	
4. Empathic Concern	22.05	3.28	0.11	0.23	0.54**	1.00

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  (two-tailed).

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Of the Directorate A Bank XYZ employees, 40 participants from five different functions across the organization were enrolled in Study 1. Most were men (24 participants, 60%), and the remaining 16 were women (40%). A total of 35 participants had a bachelor's degree (87.5%), and the other five had a master's

degree (12.5%). The average age was 36, 33 years (standard deviation [*SD*] = 7.17), and the average working period was 4.23 years (*SD* = 4.28). At the organizational level, 5 participants were employees at the level of Head of L1 (12.5%), 15 were at the level of Head of L2 (37.5%), 16 were bank officers (40%), and the remaining 4 were staff (10%).



**Figure 1.** Relationship Between Empathic Concern and Helping Behavior

A significant correlation between empathic concern and helping behavior was observed ( $p < 0.05$ ;  $r = 0.54$ ). Other interpersonal citizenship behavior factors explained the other variance (70.84%). These results show that the relationship between the two variables is linear and positively correlated—the higher the empathy score, the higher the helping

behavior score; the lower the empathy score, the lower the helping behavior score.

On the basis of each participant's total score on empathic concern and helping behavior, employees were grouped as “above average” or “below average” as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Total Score Categories for the Study Variables Based on Job Level

	Helping Behavior		Empathic Concern	
	Below Average	Above Average	Below Average	Above Average
Head of L1	2	3	3	2
Head of L2	10	5	8	7
Officer	10	6	8	8
Staff	2	2	2	2
Total	24 (60%)	16 (40%)	21 (52.50%)	19 (47.50%)

**3.2. Study 2**

On the basis of the recommendations of this study research team, five officers of Directorate A at Bank XYZ approved the employees who had a below average score to participate in the empathy at work training. The empathy at work training topics were developed on the basis of empathy theory explained by Goleman

(2017) in which empathy can be grouped into three types, namely, cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathic concern. The training was divided into three sessions, each representing the three forms of empathy as described in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Objective for Each Training Session

Session	Objective
1. Feeling Their Pain	To improve employee knowledge, attitude, and behavior to feel what colleagues feel
2. Seeing Their Side	To improve employee knowledge, attitude, and behavior to understand the perspective of colleagues
3. Helping Their Need	To improve employee knowledge, attitude, and behavior to understand what is needed by colleagues from themselves (empathic concern)

The empathy at work program was designed as a half-day training divided into three sessions. Each session consisted

of a simulation activity, group discussion, facilitator presentation, and self-development planning. Participants

performed three different functions across the organization; three participants were male (60%), and two were female (40%); all had a bachelor's degree as their highest education level; average age was 35.20 years ( $SD = 4.82$ ); and average work period was 3.6 years ( $SD = 1.12$ ).

The reaction level evaluation showed that participants were satisfied with the training facilitator (mean [ $M$ ] = 5.45,  $SD = 0.44$ ); the topic had congruence with their needs ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ), and the facilitator had mastery of the topic ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ). A statistically significant increase was noted in participants' familiarity of workplace empathy topics after the training program ( $p = 0.04$ ,  $Z = -2.03$ ), with a large effect size ( $r = 0.64$ ). The mean score on knowledge learning outcome score increased from the pre-program ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.095$ ) to the post-program ( $M = 14.00$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ).

Results of Level 3 evaluation showed a statistically significant increase in participants' self-report after training receiving for empathic concern ( $p = 0.04$ ,  $Z = -2.06$ ) and helping behavior ( $p = .04$ ,  $Z = -2.03$ ). A large effect size was found for both empathic concern ( $r = 0.64$ ) and helping behavior ( $r = 0.65$ ). The mean score on empathic concern increased from the pre-program ( $M = 21.40$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ) to the post-program ( $M = 26.60$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the relationship between empathic concern and helping behaviors among employees across an organization. Results for the 40 study participants showed that empathic concern and helping behavior had a significant and positive relationship. In another study of 213 participants, similar

The same pattern was also found in the mean score for helping behavior, which increased from the pre-program ( $M = 51.20$ ,  $SD = 7.95$ ) to the post-program ( $M = 63.20$ ,  $SD = 5.31$ ).

On the behavioral domain, results showed no differences between coworker and direct supervisor observations ( $p = 0.10$ ,  $Z = -1.63$ ). Two behavioral indicators for one participant each that coworkers reported were not observed in their behavior were "Exploring new ideas and actively conveying those ideas" and "Appreciating others." In comparison, according to the direct supervisors, behaviors that were not demonstrated by two or more participants were the following: "Gather information before taking a stand;" "Establish effective and continuous communication;" "Explore new ideas and actively convey those ideas;" "Give appreciation to others;" "Explore the needs of coworkers to provide productive solutions and advice;" and "Following up on complaints from colleagues in accordance with applicable regulations." However, in general, all participants were reported to successfully have shown most (>64%) of the evaluated behaviors as rated by both the coworkers and the direct supervisors.

results were reported (Sze & Gyurak, 2012) and showed that empathic concern is associated with higher helping behaviors.

Sze and Gyurak (2012) explained that seeing other people experience difficulty activates the observer's emotional responses. This emotional experience in

turn encourages helpful behavior for intrinsic reasons, which is reducing the discomfort felt by an individual when seeing others in need (Batson, 2011). Helping behavior can also arise for extrinsic reasons, one of which is to improve the welfare of beneficiaries. This process plays an essential role in motivating helpful behaviors that can benefit those who help and receive.

In this current two-part study, the results of Study 1 were followed up for a subset of the 40 participants in Study 2 by providing an empathy at work training program and analyzing pre-training and post-training scores. The goal of the program was to increase empathic concern to improve helping behavior and to resolve uncooperative communication barriers for employees of Directorate A at Bank XYZ. On the basis of evaluations at the levels of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, this training program was found to be effective. These results aligned with those of previous studies on empathy training programs. The training program in this current study was designed to teach individuals about the meaning of empathy, to recognize the emotions of others, to consider the perspective of others, and to show empathy in a variety of social situations (Van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Results of meta-analysis studies on the effectiveness of training for increasing empathy also showed positive results.

Lam et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 29 articles, including qualitative papers, randomized controlled trials, and quasi-experimental studies. The review concluded that, in general, the empathy training was successful because participants learned about the concept of empathy. Another meta-analysis study

conducted by Van Berkhout and Malouff (2016) in 18 randomized experimental studies showed an overall effect size from 19 studies that were reviewed significantly. These results support the hypothesis that empathy training is effective to increase empathy. The overall effect size ranges from 0.51 to 0.73. All measures of the overall effect of the training are in the medium-effect category.

Much of the social psychology research on empathy shows the empirical relationship between empathy and helping behavior (Bettencourt et al., 2001). When people show empathy for others, the empathetic individual understands how others feel, can process information, and can respond effectively (Riess & Neporent, 2018). This explanation emphasizes the appropriate response given by individuals to others on the basis of the conditions experienced by that person. Davidov (2018) explains that empathic concern is an essential motivator of helpful behavior because this emotional response encourages behavior that seeks to alleviate the distress of others by helping or entertaining.

The success of a work team in an organization depends not only on the talent of the team members and available resources but also on the interactive, collaborative process that members use in completing their work (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). For this reason, employees who try to help coworkers complete work assignments, even when those efforts are not formally included in the job description, are very important for the success of the organization (Clercq, Haq, & Azeem, 2019). One way to achieve synergy among employees when working together is to cover individual weaknesses

with other strengths (Miller, 1996). Thus, when a team shows good cooperation by helping each other, the strengths of each member can be used intensively while their weaknesses are minimized.

Schneider (as cited in Ghosh et al., 2016) explained the support of colleagues as part of social support in the workplace to form a positive work environment because it is associated with emotional and instrumental assistance. This support generally takes the form of concern among colleagues, providing tangible assistance, and sharing useful information. In the environment of coworkers helping one another, employees can discuss ideas more openly and honestly (Fass et al., cited in Ghosh et al., 2016). Interpersonal relationships among individuals who trust and support each other form psychological security, which may occur between employees within an organization.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this two-part study, the results of Study 1 confirmed Hypothesis 1: Empathic concern has a significant positive relationship with helping behavior. With a higher sensitivity to coworkers' difficulties, there is a higher likelihood of employees providing support for their coworkers. A follow-up to these findings in Study 2 showed a significant difference in employee score for empathic concern and helping behavior before and after the empathy training program, which are results that confirmed Hypothesis 2. According to three levels of training evaluations, the empathy at work training program is beneficial for promoting empathic concern and, in turn, helping behavior.

The following suggestions are presented for organizations as recommendations based on the results of this study. First, the monitoring process of employees' interpersonal citizenship behavior can be integrated with existing programs in the organization, for example, through M-Coaching. *M-Coaching* is a discussion between employees and their immediate supervisors about the monthly target achievement. In every session, managers can include a discussion about employees' contributions outside the job description. This consistent monitoring can help the transfer of the learning process after the training participation. In addition, the relationship between employees and superiors is an essential factor that influences relationships between coworkers. Furthermore, given the importance of empathy in workgroups in which one's work is interdependent of the contributions of others, empathy can be included as a company core competency. In this way, empathy can be linked to training and development plans, performance management and appraisal, and reward systems that apply in organizations.

Although Study 2 used a before/after research design, measurement of the behavioral evaluation was only performed once—at 2 months after the training. Because the purpose of this study was to evaluate the increase in helping behavior before and after employees' participation in the training, to discover the changes in participants' helping behavior using comparative data, future research should also implement the behavioral checklist before the training. Furthermore, the selection of participants in Study 2 is ideally based on the employees' scores in

Study 1. However, in its implementation, participants who participated in the empathy at work training were not entirely selected on the basis of the researchers' recommendation. In future research, it is

suggested that employees who take part in the training are those who should be prioritized to ensure the training is right on target.

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