



Effect of Social Interaction Intervention on Empathy among Public School Students and the National Question in Nigeria

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How to cite this paper: Onwuka, M.I. (2024) Effect of Social Interaction Intervention on Empathy among Public School Students and the National Question in Nigeria. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e12040.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112040>

Received: July 31, 2024

Accepted: August 20, 2024

Published: August 23, 2024

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Abstract

This study determined the effect of social interaction intervention on empathy among public school students, as a response to the national question in Nigeria. The study adopted the non-randomized pretest-posttest design method. The sample comprised of 99 participants who were found in 2 intact classes that were selected through random sampling method from the sampling frame of all the 14 public senior secondary schools in Akko LGA in Gombe State, Nigeria. One class was assigned to the control group and the other class to the experimental group by tossing a coin. One research question and one hypothesis provided guide to the study. Data was collected with the use of a questionnaire. The research question was answered using descriptive mean while the hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance using ANCOVA. The finding showed significant difference in post-test empathy mean score of participants in the experimental group. The finding was profound to enhance sufficient care and feelings for one another among participants in the experimental group. It was, therefore, recommended that activities and programmes which promote empathy among individuals and groups in society should be implemented across all levels of education in Nigeria.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Social Interaction, Empathy, National Question

1. Introduction

Sociologists have been at the forefront of social engineering about social stability

in society from the time of the industrial revolution in Europe till date (Sule, 2010 [1]; Government Girls' General Degree College Ekbalpur, 2023 [2]). Society and its challenges find expression in the works of renowned sociologists and philosophers like Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, Max Weber and George Simmel which offer realistic approaches to societal problems. The works of these sociologists not only analyze the social processes and social structure of society, but also offer conditions for stability of society (MacIver & Page, 2003 [3]). Social order is therefore the main concern of sociology (Sule, 2010 [1]; Ajuzie, 2011 [4]). Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, Max Weber and George Simmel, who are considered to be proponents of systematic sociology, have proposed the use of positive method of observation, experimentation and comparison to understand social issues and promote order and progress in society (Government Girls' General Degree College Ekbalpur, 2023 [2]).

Proponents of systematic sociology are of the view that abstract theory must be tested by empirical research (MacIver & Page, 2003 [3]). The implication of the postulation of systematic sociology suggests that all social problems must be seen to have been resolved beyond speculations. Most social problems, particular those emanating from social interaction, appear to be prevalent among school-aged children. One of the social values which promote healthy and peaceful living in society is empathy (Vogt, 2003 [5]), because it is prone to bias and its absence may lead to a distress and conflict situations.

Using Martin Hoffman's theory of moral character, Roboteg-Saric (2001 [6]) examines five social encounters that may lead to empathic distress. These social encounters according to Roboteg-Saric (2001 [6]) include situations where one is an innocent bystander, situations where one is a transgressor, real or virtual, to more complex situations where one is forced to choose who to help and caring versus justice dilemma where one must choose between helping an individual or following a moral principle, such as caring about those who have similar belief or faith. Illustratively, Baer (2017 [7]) reviewed a classic case of empathy involving some Florida teenagers who taunted a man as he drowned. It was observed that the teenagers had the tragedy recorded and in the recorded voice, the teenagers had told the man that they were not going to help him and they watched him drown. The conclusion derived from the classic case is that those teenagers were likely to grow older, being immoral.

Literature reveals that deliberate efforts to regulate social activities that students engage in in their daily social interaction helps to enhance empathy among the students (Azeez & Babalola, 2020 [8]; Bello, 2018 [9]; Bolu-Steve & Esere, 2017 [10]; Shady, 2020 [11]). Helping students enhance their empathy level has significant benefits. According to Sakalli, Altinay and Dagli (2021 [12]), enhancing empathy among students will help them avoid harming one another, be fair to one another, be able to help others, seek the happiness of others and love other people without discrimination. In other words, lack of empathy among students may promote selfishness, hatred and division among students and individuals in society.

Insufficient empathy among students portend danger to society. Lickona (2004 [13]) suggests that insufficient empathy is linked to cultural indicators which include violence, divorce, fatherless homes, unwed mothers, teens' cheating, stealing and lying. Cultural indicators could undermine empathy in society when there is poor funding of education (Nickerson, 2023 [14]; Lickona, 2004 [13]). The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN, 2013 [15]) recognizes the role of education to inculcate values in students. Poor funding of education could therefore have consequences on the socialization function of educational system. Focusing on structural socialization for instance, Robert Merton argues that individuals respond to issues depending on the type of socialization that they are exposed to in society (Nickerson, 2023 [14]). Since empathy promotes selflessness and consideration for others, Martin Hoffman in Vogt (2003 [5]) stresses that, for individuals to live together, empathy must be embedded in moral principles.

Various studies on empathy reveal a consistent higher empathy among groups who participated in programmes that focused on enhancement of social skills and moral character. For instance, Kaufman and Flanagan (2015 [16]) found out that exposure to "Awkward Moment" game had significant changes on social perspectives taking skills among the experimental group when compared to those in the control group. The Awkward Moment was a researcher-designed party game that requires players to choose solutions to thorny social problems. It was found that students who were randomly assigned to play the game showed improvements in their ability to imagine another person's perspective because they particularly showed more interest in confronting detrimental social stereotypes.

Equally, Gao, Weng, Zhou and Yu (2017 [17]) found out that reading text materials on empathy and watching violent game characters had significant empathy effect on aggression of those involved in playing the games and those who read the text materials. Specifically, the participants were tested on two parameters: playing on justifiable rule—killing others for moral reasons, and playing on unjustifiable rule—killing others for immoral reasons in the game. It was found out that empathy and morality of game characters had significantly higher influence on the aggressive behaviour of those who played the game by justifiable rule than those who played by unjustifiable rule. Furthermore, Flanagan (2019 [18]) suggested that engaging teenagers in activities that enable them explore ethical dilemmas helped them to make sound decisions, search for and evaluate their assumptions, evaluate the reasons behind those assumptions, examine without prejudice another's opinion and make a thoughtful decision with confidence.

Some of the major social challenges in Nigeria include lack of academic honesty, awarding of marks to students without proper conduct of assessment test, ethnocentrism and tribalism, corruption, political violence and electoral fraud (Oghi, 2013 [19]; Ogundele, Jimba, & Luka, 2016 [20]) which tend to undermine national integration and good democratic values. As a social interaction challenge, corruption for instance, has been perceived as an impairment of virtue and moral principles (Essien, 2012 [21]). Perhaps Robert Merton's strain theory (Nickerson, 2023 [14]) can be used to satisfactorily explain the persistence of social challenges

in Nigeria despite existing legal instruments.

Social interaction challenges can be the offshoot of long-standing social problems in society which include, tribalism, fanaticism, crime, and racism (Oghi, 2013 [19]; Marthaei, 2016 [22]; Siollun, 2016 [23]). The foregoing suggests that activities which promote peaceful coexistence in society can be initiated and regulated. Thinking about the issues begging the national question in Nigeria, could it be said that enhancing empathy among students, for instance, would provide repose to the divisions and various agitations across the regions of the country?

2. Statement of the Problem

There is a need for individuals to live peacefully together in society. Living peacefully together in society is essential for any meaningful development to be initiated and sustained. However, this cannot be said to be the case in Nigeria which continues to experience dissensions at different spheres of the polity probably due to insufficient empathy among individuals and groups in the society. Undoubtedly, a country where division and sectional struggle prevail, national integration, meaningful development might be a mirage. The concern of this study, therefore, is how to achieve national integration which has continued to be one of the challenges bedeviling Nigeria. This study is equally concerned about whether enhancing empathy among students through social interaction intervention can help to achieve national integration in Nigeria. These concerns necessitated the interest of this study.

2.1. Purpose of the Study

The study was carried out to determine the effect of social interaction intervention on empathy among public school students and the response to the national question in Nigeria. The objectives were to:

- 1) ascertain the difference that exists between the empathy mean scores of students exposed to social interaction intervention and those who were not;
- 2) highlight the implications of Social Interaction Intervention (SII) effect on empathy for the national question in Nigeria.

2.2. Research Question

What difference exists between the empathy mean scores of students exposed to Social Interaction Intervention and those who were not?

2.3. Hypothesis

There is no significant difference between the empathy mean scores of students exposed to Social Interaction Intervention and those who were not.

2.4. Method

This study was conducted in 2023 among public Senior Secondary School Two (SSS2) students in Akko Local Government Area of Gombe State, Nigeria. The

study adopted the quasi experimental design, specifically, the pretest–posttest design. The design was considered suitable for the study because intact groups were used in which one experimental group was exposed to the Social Interaction Intervention (SII) and then compared to the one control group which did not receive the intervention but a placebo, the Civic Education Values (CEV). The sample comprised of 99 participants found in two intact classes in two schools which were randomly selected using the hat and draw method from a sampling frame of 14 public Senior Secondary Schools in Akko LGA, Gombe State.

The sample was made up of two groups: experimental and control groups. The experimental group comprised of 46 participants consisting of 21 male and 25 female students while the control group comprised of 53 participants consisting of 27 male and 26 female students to make a total sample of 99 participants. All the students found in the two respective classes gave a written consent to participate in the study. The assigning of the participants to either experimental or control group was by non-randomization. Thus, one class was assigned to the control group and the other class to the experimental group by the tossing of a coin.

Prior to the experimental treatment and the placebo, pre-test was administered on the two study groups in their respective classes. The participants were required to complete the instrument 20 minutes after it was administered on them. The completed instrument was sorted and computed to obtain the pre-test mean scores. There was interval of a day between the administration of the pre-test on the experimental and control groups. The one day interval afforded the researcher opportunity to supervise the administration of the instrument as well as clarify probable issue(s) arising from the instrument to the participants. The researcher supervised the administration of the pre-test and the post-test as well as the treatment sessions which were administered by two recruited and trained research assistants, who are each qualified graduate teachers in the two respective schools in which the study was carried out. There was an eight-week interval between the pre-test and the post-test; the participants were given the treatment package and the placebo in-between the pre-test and the post-test.

The intervention commenced the week following the administration of the pre-test. The treatment was administered on the study participants by the trained research assistants under the guidance of the researcher. The Social Interaction Intervention package was administered on the experimental group while the Civic Education Values was administered on the control group as placebo. The Social Interaction Intervention adopted the social skills and character development programme developed by Jennifer L. Scully (2000 [24]). The SII was provided to help enhance students' moral character disposition in the moral character variables of the study.

The SII was divided into fifteen sessions; there were eleven lesson sessions, two review sessions, an introduction session and a closing session, making a total of fifteen sessions for the eight weeks of intervention. Each lesson session had its activities for the research participants as well as challenges for the research assistants. Only the participants in the experimental group were exposed to the eight

weeks intervention. However, the control group was engaged with the placebo (CEV) using the conventional classroom teaching-learning method for five weeks of two sessions per week. The Civic Education Values is one of the core themes in Civic Education for Secondary School Students, which is a compulsory subject in the school curriculum.

Civic Education Values is meant to provide students with the knowledge and skills in the key areas on civil rights and responsibilities, social values, relationships and drug abuse. The CEV was divided into ten sessions comprising of an introduction session; seven lesson sessions two review sessions with the general review culminating in closing session making a total of ten sessions. At the end of the eight weeks of the intervention, a post-test was given to the two study groups. One specific subsection of the instrument was used to measure empathy and provide answer to the research question and test the hypothesis. The post-test mean scores of the two groups were obtained and compared with the pre-test mean scores. Any mean score difference in the post-test was attributed to the effects of the treatment package.

The instrument used for the study is a rating scale that was developed by the researcher (see **Appendix**). The instrument was developed using ideas from literature review, and by applying the five basic steps in the development of an instrument which are: the consideration of the objectives of the study, literature review, consultation of experts, writing of the items, corrections of draft instrument and validation. The instrument has two sections: a section that elicits the demographic information of the respondents and a section that contains 28 traits/items that measure four subsections of moral character development components which include tolerance, honesty, punctuality, and empathy. The instrument items are structured to yield numerical data that measure each of the four subsections of moral character development levels of secondary school students and to test the corresponding hypotheses for each of the moral character development variables. The instrument was interpreted based on any observed difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores obtained on the specific moral variable it measured among the participants in the experimental group of the study.

The instrument items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from highest score of 4 to lowest score of 1 (that is, 1 = "Never True," 2 = "Sometimes True," 3 = "Usually True" and 4 = "Always True). The moral subsections measured by the instrument include: tolerance which has 5 items (for example, "I love to solve conflict fairly and peacefully," "I relate easily with other people of different religion and culture"); punctuality which has 8 items (for example, "I am embarrassed when punished for lateness", "I encourage my peers to come early to school") honesty which has 6 items (for example, "I do the right things no matter what others may think," "I tell the truth even if I know I will get punished") and empathy which has 9 items (for example, "I have the urge to help someone who is hurt at school or somewhere else", "I get strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset").

Content validity of the instrument was determined by three experts who are senior lecturers in Educational Psychology and Research, Test and Measurement,

and Sociology of Education units of the University of Jos, Nigeria. While, the construct validity was established using the statistical method of factorial analysis to determine the extent to which the statements in the instrument measured the specific factors of moral character development variables. However, a pilot study was conducted on a small sample of 40 students who were not part of the main study in order to determine the reliability of the instrument. The data obtained from the pilot study was used to establish the reliability of the instrument using Cronbach's alpha statistical method which yielded alpha coefficient index of 0.840 which is considered effective reliability for judging a scale. Thus, the instrument was found suitable for the study.

Data collected for the study were analysed using the descriptive and inferential statistics respectively. Specifically, descriptive mean was used to analyse the data obtained to answer the research question. While, inferential statistics, particularly the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 alpha level of significance. All the data obtained for the study were manually sorted and coded and statistically analysed with the aid of statistical package for social sciences (SPSS.24).

3. Results

Table 1. Differences in Empathy Mean Score between Intervention and Control Groups.

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean Difference
		\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	
Control	53	17.1	50.82	19.47	5	2.32
Experimental	46	16.9	81.03	31	4.04	14.02

Result summarized in **Table 1** presents analysis of the differences in empathy mean score of students exposed to SII and those who were not. Result shows that students exposed to SII gained mean empathy score of 14.02, while the mean empathy score of students who were not exposed only increased by 2.32. The result reveals that students exposed to SII gained higher mean empathy score than those who were not exposed (14.02 versus 2.32). This result implies that students exposed to SII show more empathy than those not exposed to the intervention.

Table 2. Tests of Between Subjects Effects on Empathy Post-test.

Source	Type III	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-calc.	Sig.
Corrected Model		3332.423	2	1666.211	79.407	0.000
Intercept		330.595	1	330.595	15.755	0.000
Empathy Pretest		21.840	1	21.840	1.041	0.310
Group		3231.767	1	3231.767	154.017	0.000
Error		2035.367	97	20.983		
Total		67319.00	99			
Corrected Total		5367.790	99			

a. R Squared = 0.621 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.613), F-critical= 3.94.

Table 2 shows the summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of post-test empathy score between students exposed to SII and those who were not exposed to the intervention. The F-calculated of 154.017 was obtained, which is greater than the F-critical of 3.94. The P-value is 0.000 at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the P-value = 0.000 < 0.05. The null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is a significant difference in empathy mean score of students exposed to SII and those who were not. This means that after adjusting for the covariance (pre-test empathy score), there is significant difference in empathy mean score of students exposed to SII and those who were not. Based on the mean gain in empathy score, students exposed to SII gained significant higher empathy than students who were not exposed to SII (14.02 versus 2.32).

4. Discussion

This study was carried out to determine the empathy effect of SII among students as a response to the national issues in Nigeria. The Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of students' post-test empathy score between students exposed to SII and those who were not exposed to the intervention showed that there is a significant difference in empathy mean score of students exposed to the intervention and those who were not (F-calculated = 154.017 > F-critical = 3.94) with the P-value = 0.000 < 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis is, therefore, not retained because significant difference exists in empathy mean score between students exposed to SII and those who were not. This means that after adjusting the covariance (pre-test empathy score), there is significant difference in empathy mean score of students exposed to SII and those who were not. Based on the mean gain in empathy score, students exposed to SII gained significant higher empathy than students who were not exposed to SII (14.02 versus 2.32).

The finding is consistent with Kaufman and Flanagan (2015 [16]) and Flanagan (2019 [18]) who found that students involved in programmes that enhance empathy made situational application of empathy despite their levels of aggression. Such individuals were able to evaluate and rationalize their actions which resulted in their ability to make thoughtful decisions. The finding is equally consistent with Gao, Weng, Zhou and Yu (2017 [17]) who found that reading text materials on empathy and watching violent game characters had significant empathy effect on aggression of those involved in playing the games and those who read the text materials. The participants exposed to the intervention may have also showed higher empathy than those not exposed because they were helped to understand their emotions by which they were able to make out meanings of situations involving rules and perspective-taking.

The finding of this study, no doubt, is consistent with existing literature on the discourse pertaining to social interaction intervention and character development. It buttresses the functionalists' stance on attitudes of individuals who are found in groups, to be a function of institutional processes, involving the school and family as socialization agencies. The school as a component of educational institution, for instance, is necessary for the harmonization of not only justice and

rights of individuals but also of their welfare. These roles, collectively, are the precursor of healthy social interaction which could enhance empathy and reduce aggression among groups in society.

The finding equally lends credence to action perspective that places primacy on individuals who constitute the society. If individuals are to live in harmony, love, and care for one another, then there is a need to promote empathy among individual groups, be it the family, school, workplace, or religious groups. Thus, the finding portends a need for functional education and healthy social interaction skills that will engender we-feelings, role-feelings, and dependency-feelings among the various groups found in society. Put differently, the finding established that social interaction intervention promotes empathy which depicts selflessness and consideration for others. This suggests that, through social interaction intervention, empathy can be achieved as a moral value which cut across culture and sectional practices. Thus, sociological approaches to attitudes and behaviour of individual groups no longer need to be prescriptive in nature, but experiential, involving not only observation, but also proffering remedy to societal issues.

5. Conclusion

This study was concerned about how the empathy effect of social interaction intervention among public school students can be a response to the national question in Nigeria. This was conceived due to the recognition of the need for individuals to live peacefully together in society as an essential factor for any meaningful development to be initiated and sustained. It, therefore, proposed social interaction intervention as a treatment package for achieving the objective of the study. The result of this study is profound to ameliorate activities and incidents which can result in insufficient feelings for one another among individuals and groups in society. It is, therefore, important to lay emphasis on empathy as one of the conditions that can help to achieve social relationship and stability in Nigeria, particularly among students.

6. Implications of Social Interaction Intervention Effect on Empathy for the National Question in Nigeria

The finding reveals the need for concerted efforts to enlighten the population of Nigeria citizenry, through socializing agents in society such as school administrators, the national orientation agency, religious leaders and public speakers on the values of empathy for human social interaction and peaceful coexistence in society.

The finding equally underscores the importance of giving consideration to other people's feeling and how this consideration could help minimize the harm which one's actions may likely bring upon individuals/groups within the immediate community.

The finding suggests that activities and programmes which enhance empathy among individual and groups found in society should be implemented across all levels of education in Nigeria.

7. Limitations

The population of this study comprises of those already operating at the post conventional stage of moral reasoning; perhaps other group of individuals at the pre-conventional stage of moral reasoning or conventional stage (such as pupils at the upper level of primary school, or junior secondary school students) might be considered in a study adopting a longitudinal method which could serve as a follow-up assessment to evaluate the long-term effects of social interaction intervention on empathy. Also, empathy and aggression could be integrated and measured in a single study to further substantiate the effects of social interaction intervention. In addition, adopting triangulation method, instead of quasi experimental design, could yield advanced results on effects of social interaction intervention on empathy development and aggression reduction among students.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

Moral Character Development Rating Scale (MCDRS)

Dear Respondent,

Please, this moral questionnaire elicits your response for moral character intervention (Moral Character Development) among Senior Secondary School Students. Your response is for research purpose only and I promise to treat all responses with utmost confidentiality. Please, kindly respond to each statement with all sincerity.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Researcher

Instruction: Time Allowed: 20 Minutes

Section A: Biography

1) Participant Code Number: _____

2) Sex: (a) Male () (b) Female ()

Section B: Students' Moral Character Development Rating Scale (MCDRS)

Instruction: For each item, please tick (✓) the appropriate box to indicate the degree to which you feel the statement is true of you.

The response guide is as follows:

- 1) Never True
- 2) Sometimes True
- 3) Usually True
- 4) Always True

S/N	ITEMS	1	2	3	4
	Tolerance				
1	I work together with other students on school assignments/projects				
2	I love to solve conflict fairly and peacefully				
3	I reason with others opinion even when they are different from mine				
4	I relate easily with other people of different religion and culture				
5	I apologize for things, so that others won't be mad at me				
	Empathy				
6	I have the urge to help someone who is hurt at school or somewhere else				
7	When I see someone having a problem, I offer to help				
8	I help other students choose between what is right and what is wrong				
9	I can rely on other students for help when I face challenge(s) (e.g. inability to buy text material)				
10	I care about others, irrespective of religion/cultural differences				
11	I try to stop other students from picking on others				
12	I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset				

Continued

- 13 Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in his/her "shoes"
- 14 I don't feel sad when others are celebrating their success
- Punctuality**
- 15 I feel sad when I come late to school
- 16 I feel embarrassed when punished for lateness
- 17 I encourage my peers to come early to school
- 18 I feel I missed a lot when I'm not early for the lessons
- 19 If I am late on House Inspection Day, I feel the point will drop for my House
- 20 I don't like to sweep the classroom late
- 21 I like to personally hear all that the Principal has to say on the assembly
- 22 I hate to be told what happened at the assembly
- Honesty**
- 23 I do the right thing no matter what others may think
- 24 I don't like to cheat during tests or assignments
- 25 I admit when I do something wrong
- 26 I tell the truth even if I know I will get punished
- 27 When I find lost item(s), I try to locate the rightful owner
- 28 I don't feel comfortable keeping what does not belong to me
-

Thank you.