



Intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students in Yogyakarta: A correlational study

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Abstract

This study examines the association between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Using a quantitative correlational design, the research involved 208 students who completed standardized instruments measuring intellectual humility and empathy. We analyzed the collected data using Pearson's product moment correlation. The results indicated a statistically significant and positive correlation between intellectual humility and empathy ($r = 0.642$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher levels of intellectual humility are associated with higher levels of empathy. Within the cultural context of Yogyakarta, which emphasizes politeness, mutual respect, and communal harmony, these findings provide empirical insight into the relationship between cognitive and socio-emotional dispositions. The study underscores the relevance of intellectual humility in adolescent character development and socio-emotional learning initiatives in school settings.

Keywords: adolescent, character education, empathy, intellectual humility, socio-emotional development

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INTRODUCTION

Yogyakarta is widely recognized as a cultural and educational hub in Indonesia, characterized by strong communal values such as politeness, tolerance, and gotong royong (mutual cooperation). These cultural norms emphasize harmonious social interaction, respect for others, and attentiveness to collective well-being. Within such a sociocultural context, the development of empathy becomes particularly relevant for adolescents navigating increasingly complex peer relationships in junior high school settings. Empathy defined as the capacity to understand and respond to others' emotional experiences encompasses both affective and cognitive dimensions (Brazil et al., 2023; Porter et al., 2024). It plays a central role in fostering inclusive classrooms, reducing interpersonal conflict, and strengthening peer cooperation (Al Farabi et al., 2025; Dillon-Owens et al., 2022).

Despite its recognized importance, challenges in cultivating empathy among adolescents remain evident. Reports of bullying, intolerance, and reduced peer solidarity continue to surface in Indonesian schools (Damayanti & Ismail, 2024; García-Díaz et al., 2023; Polanin & Vera, 2013). National data from the Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI), or Indonesian Child Protection Commission, further indicate that school-based bullying cases remain concerning. These conditions highlight the need to identify psychological factors that may strengthen empathy and promote healthier interpersonal dynamics among students.

One construct that has gained increasing scholarly attention in socioemotional and educational psychology is intellectual humility. Intellectual humility refers to the awareness of the limits of one's knowledge and a willingness to revise beliefs in light of new evidence (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2018; Li & Hu, 2023). As an epistemic virtue, it promotes reflective thinking, openness to alternative viewpoints, and reduced defensiveness in social interaction. Although often examined within philosophical or adult learning contexts, intellectual humility is increasingly recognized as developmentally relevant during adolescence, a stage marked by identity exploration and heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation (Guo et al., 2021).

Theoretically, empathy and intellectual humility are closely interconnected through the mechanism of perspective-taking and self-reflective cognition. Perspective-taking, a core component of cognitive empathy, enables individuals to recognize alternative viewpoints and reconsider their own assumptions (Van Doesum et al., 2013). Empathic concern and social mindfulness have been shown to promote reflective evaluation and reduce rigid thinking, thereby fostering epistemic openness (Cheng et al., 2023; Fischer et al., 2025; Porter et al., 2022). In this sense, empathy may provide the affective-cognitive foundation for the development of intellectually humble attitudes.

Empirical research further supports this interrelationship. Intellectual humility has been associated with prosocial tendencies, including empathic concern and perspective-taking (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2018). Similarly, empathy predicts constructive conflict resolution and collaborative dialogue (Rowatt et al., 2014; Tomaszek, 2022). During adolescence, empathy tends to increase and contributes to improved social competence and relational quality (Allemand et al., 2015), while intellectual humility may function as a counterbalance to egocentrism by encouraging openness to diverse perspectives (Guo et al., 2021). Educational studies also demonstrate that modeling intellectual humility in classrooms enhances student engagement and empathetic interaction (Porter et al., 2024; Van Tongeren, 2024).

Although both constructs have been examined independently, research explicitly investigating the relationship between intellectual humility and empathy remains limited particularly in adolescent populations and non-Western contexts. Much of the existing literature has focused on adults or university students in Western countries. Studies conducted in Indonesia have linked intellectual humility to psychological well-being and reflective capacities, yet its direct association with empathy among junior high school students has not been sufficiently explored. This gap is especially notable in Yogyakarta, where cultural values emphasizing harmony and mutual respect may shape how these constructs interact.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students in Yogyakarta. Specifically, the research addresses the following question: Is there a significant relationship between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students?

This study offers two primary contributions. First, it integrates empathy and intellectual humility within a single empirical framework at the junior secondary level, extending prior research that treated these constructs separately. Second, it provides contextual insight from a Southeast Asian educational environment, thereby enriching global understanding of how epistemic and socio-emotional virtues interact within culturally embedded school systems. The findings could contribute as a foundation for character education that promote reflective openness and constructive social engagement among adolescents.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the association between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students. The correlational

approach was selected to assess the direction and strength of the relationship between the two psychological constructs without manipulating variables.

Participants

The participants consisted of 208 junior high school students (Grades 7-9, aged 14-16) from a public junior high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Participants were selected using simple random sampling from the student registry provided by the school administration. The students were representing both male and female students from diverse academic backgrounds.

Instruments

We administered two standardized self-report instruments as follows.

Intellectual humility scale

The intellectual humility scale consisted of 17 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) adaptation with permission from Krumrei-Mancuso theory. The instrument measures openness to revising one's viewpoint, respect for other viewpoints, and independence of intellect and ego. In the present study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.793$). Construct validity was supported by prior validation studies, and confirmatory analysis during adaptation indicated acceptable factor loadings (range between 0.364 and 0.809).

Empathy scale

Empathy was measured using a 40-item scale assessing both cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy. Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The instrument has been widely used in adolescent populations. In this study, the reliability coefficient was Cronbach's $\alpha = .908$.

Both instruments were translated into Bahasa Indonesia using a back-translation procedure involving bilingual experts. Content validity was evaluated by two experts in educational psychology to ensure cultural appropriateness and conceptual equivalence.

Procedure

We collected the data during regular school hours under the permission from the school. The study was coordinated through the school counselor, who supervised the implementation process. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. No identifying information was collected, and all data were analyzed anonymously.

Data analysis

We analyzed the collected data using Pearson's product-moment correlation to examine the association between intellectual humility and empathy. Assumptions of normality and linearity were tested prior to the main analysis. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study involved 208 junior high school students in Yogyakarta. Each participant completed two validated psychological instruments measuring intellectual humility and empathy. The data were analyzed to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between the two variables.

Assumption test

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted to assess the normality of the data distributions. Results showed the following p-values.

Table 1. Normality test results

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Intellectual Humility	0.087	Normal
Empathy	0.073	Normal

As presented in Table 1, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test showed that intellectual humility ($p = 0.087$) and empathy ($p = 0.073$) both had significance values greater than 0.05. This indicates that the distributions of both variables do not significantly deviate from normality. Therefore, the assumption of normality was satisfied, and Pearson’s correlation analysis was considered appropriate for examining the relationship between intellectual humility and empathy.

Table 2. Test of linearity

Variable Pair	Linearity Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Intellectual Humility → Empathy	0.001	Linear relationship

Table 2 shows that the significance value for the linearity test between intellectual humility and empathy was 0.001 ($p < 0.05$). This result indicates that a statistically significant linear relationship exists between the two variables. Thus, the assumption of linearity was met, supporting the use of Pearson’s correlation analysis to assess the strength and direction of the relationship.

Pearson correlation analysis

The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to analyze the relationship between intellectual humility and empathy. The result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlation between intellectual humility and empathy

Variables	r	Sig. (p)
Intellectual Humility ↔ Empathy	0.642	0.000

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.642$ with a significance value of $p < 0.001$. This suggests that intellectual humility and empathy are substantially associated in this sample. The positive direction of the correlation indicates that higher levels of intellectual humility tend to be accompanied by higher levels of empathy. In practical terms, students who report greater openness to revising their beliefs, recognizing their cognitive limitations, and considering alternative viewpoints also tend to report greater capacity to understand and respond to others’ emotions.

Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (r^2) was calculated to assess the proportion of shared variance between the two variables. The value of $r^2 = 0.412$ indicates that approximately 41.2% of the variance in empathy scores is statistically associated with intellectual humility. This represents a substantial proportion of shared variance in social science research, suggesting a meaningful overlap between the constructs while also indicating that other factors contribute to empathy development. Overall, these findings provide strong statistical evidence of a positive and meaningful association between intellectual humility and empathy in this adolescent population.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students in Yogyakarta. The findings revealed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.642$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students who demonstrate higher levels of intellectual humility also tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy. This finding provides empirical support for the growing body of literature emphasizing the close

interconnection between these constructs in social and educational contexts (Brazil et al., 2023; Li & Hu, 2023; Porter et al., 2024).

Empathy, defined as the capacity to understand and respond to the emotional experiences of others, encompasses affective and cognitive dimensions (Brazil et al., 2023; Porter et al., 2024). Intellectual humility, in contrast, refers to recognizing the limits of one's knowledge and remaining open to revising beliefs when confronted with new evidence (Li & Hu, 2023). Although conceptually distinct, the strong correlation identified in this study reinforces theoretical arguments that empathy may function as a psychological foundation for intellectual humility. Social mindfulness and empathic awareness enhance perspective-taking, which reduces defensiveness and promotes epistemic openness (Fischer et al., 2025; Porter et al., 2022; Van Doesum et al., 2013). Likewise, individuals capable of empathic concern are more likely to engage in reflective evaluation of their own beliefs during interpersonal interactions (Cheng et al., 2023), a process central to intellectual humility.

The present findings are consistent with prior empirical evidence. Krumrei-Mancuso (2018) found that adolescents with higher intellectual humility display greater empathic concern and prosocial tendencies. Similarly, Rowatt et al. (2014) demonstrated that empathy is associated with humble approaches to interpersonal conflict, leading to more constructive outcomes. Tomaszek (2022) further suggested that emotionally demanding collaborative contexts strengthen both empathy and cognitive openness. The strong correlation observed in this study extends these findings to early adolescents in a junior high school setting, highlighting the developmental relevance of these traits.

From a developmental perspective, adolescence represents a critical period for integrating socioemotional and cognitive capacities. Empathy tends to increase during adolescence and predicts later social competence and relational satisfaction (Allemand et al., 2015). At the same time, intellectual humility may counterbalance adolescent egocentrism by fostering openness to diverse viewpoints (Guo et al., 2021). The multidimensional nature of empathy: affective and cognitive, may interact differently with humility across developmental stages (Brazil et al., 2023). The present findings suggest that during early adolescence, intellectual humility may serve as a cognitive-emotional bridge that strengthens empathic engagement.

Importantly, this study contributes novel evidence from a non-Western cultural context. Much of the existing research on empathy and intellectual humility has been conducted in Western populations (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2018; Porter et al., 2024; Rowatt et al., 2014). By examining junior high school students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, this study broadens the cross-cultural scope of the literature. The strong positive association found in this collectivistic setting suggests that the relationship between empathy and intellectual humility transcends Western epistemic traditions.

Moreover, the cultural context of Yogyakarta provides meaningful nuance to global discussions. The region emphasizes politeness, tolerance, and *gotong royong*, a term referring to mutual cooperation. Those values deeply embedded in the family, community, and school environments. These norms encourage respectful dialogue, attentiveness to others, and harmony, practices aligned with both empathy and intellectual humility. While Western literature often frames intellectual humility as an individual epistemic virtue, findings from this context suggest it may also function as a culturally reinforced relational disposition. This perspective enriches theoretical understanding by situating intellectual humility within communal socialization processes.

Educational implications further strengthen the contribution of this study. Teachers who model intellectual humility by acknowledging mistakes and demonstrating openness to correction foster higher student engagement and motivation (Porter et al., 2024). Collective intellectual humility within groups enhances respectful dialogue and empathetic collaboration (Van Tongeren, 2024). Educational programs designed to cultivate humility have been shown to

buffer intolerance and reduce polarization (Welker et al., 2023; Zainab et al., 2025), while immersive technologies such as virtual reality can strengthen perspective-taking and empathy (Starke et al., 2025). The present findings support these intervention-oriented studies by demonstrating that humility and empathy are already strongly linked at the foundational adolescent level.

Additionally, intellectual humility has been associated with lower academic anxiety and greater psychological comfort in social interactions (Huynh et al., 2023). When empathy and intellectual humility are balanced, socioemotional outcomes are optimized (Shalev et al., 2025). Within the current study, the strong correlation suggests that cultivating one of these traits may simultaneously reinforce the other, offering practical pathways for socioemotional learning programs.

Consistent with prior research demonstrating the role of intellectual humility in psychological well-being (Naini et al., 2024), the present findings further highlight its relevance in adolescent development. Strengthening intellectual humility through character education, reflective dialogue, peer discussions, and counselor-guided interventions (Hariyono et al., 2024; Naini et al., 2024; Siswanto et al., 2024), may simultaneously enhance empathy and broader socioemotional competence.

Overall, this study affirms a strong and meaningful association between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students in Yogyakarta. By integrating developmental, educational, and cultural perspectives, the findings extend global scholarship beyond Western samples and demonstrate the relational significance of humility within a Southeast Asian context. The convergence of theoretical and empirical evidence underscores that intellectual humility and empathy are dynamically interconnected virtues essential for fostering socially responsible, cognitively flexible, and emotionally attuned adolescents.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between intellectual humility and empathy among junior high school students. Students who reported higher levels of intellectual humility also tended to report higher levels of empathy, highlighting a meaningful association between cognitive openness and socio-emotional responsiveness during adolescence. Based on these results, future researchers are encouraged to explore the relationship between intellectual humility and empathy using larger and more diverse populations to enhance generalizability across different educational and cultural settings. Employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs could offer deeper insights into how these traits evolve over time and interact with other psychological constructs. Researchers may also consider developing and testing targeted interventions, such as digital games or character education modules that explicitly promote intellectual humility, to assess their potential association with empathy development. Additionally, examining mediating or moderating factors such as perspective-taking or moral reasoning could enrich understanding of the mechanisms underlying this relationship. These directions may further strengthen the empirical foundation of social-emotional learning and inform educational and counseling practices.

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DECLARATION

Author contribution

All authors contribute in the research and/or writing the paper, and approved the final manuscript.

<i>Rohmatas Naini</i>	Conceptualizing the research idea, leading the investigation, setting up the methodology, and writing the original draft.
<i>Ulfa Danni Rosada</i>	Assisting the investigation, reviewing the validity of the methodology, collecting data, and analyzing the data.
<i>Diki Herdiansyah</i>	Assisting the investigation, reviewing the validity of the methodology, collecting data, and analyzing the data.
<i>Mutiara Noor Kamila</i>	Assisting the investigation, preparing the research participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data.
<i>Wahid Aditiono</i>	Assisting the investigation, preparing the research participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethics declaration

We as authors acknowledge that this work has been written based on ethical research that conforms with the regulations of our institutions and that we have obtained the permission from the relevant institutes when collecting data. We support the International Journal on Education Insight (IJEI) in maintaining the high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.

The use of artificial intelligence

We do not use any generative AI tools to write any part of this paper.

Additional information

Not available.

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