

Self-Righteousness and Emotional Dynamics: Associations with Empathy, Positive Affect, and Negative Affect among College Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the relationship between self-righteousness, empathy, positive affect, and negative affect among college students. Young adulthood is a critical developmental stage characterized by emotional, cognitive, and social transitions. Psychological traits such as empathy and emotional affect significantly influence interpersonal relationships and behavioral outcomes. A descriptive quantitative research design was adopted for the study. A total of 120 undergraduate students aged 18–21 years were selected through simple random sampling from Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu, India. Standardized instruments including the Self-Righteousness Scale, Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) were used to measure the respective constructs. Statistical analyses including Pearson correlation and independent sample t-tests were performed. Results indicated a significant positive relationship between positive affect and empathy, while negative affect showed an inverse relationship with empathy. Gender differences were observed in empathy and self-righteousness levels, with females demonstrating higher empathy scores than males. The findings highlight the role of emotional states in shaping empathy and attitudes among college students. The study contributes to understanding emotional and interpersonal dynamics in young adults and provides implications for psychological counseling and educational interventions.

Keywords: Self-righteousness, empathy, positive affect, negative affect, college students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood, typically defined as the developmental period between the ages of 18 and 25 years, represents a critical transitional stage characterized by significant psychological, emotional, and social changes. During this phase, individuals experience increasing independence, identity exploration, and responsibility related to education, career choices, and interpersonal relationships. However, the pressures associated with academic expectations, social comparisons, and uncertainty about future prospects may also create psychological challenges for many young adults. As a result, emotional experiences and personality traits developed during this stage can have a substantial impact on their behavior, social interactions, and overall well-being (Reifman & Niehuis, 2023; Curran et al., 2022; Regan et al., 2022).

In contemporary society, young adults are highly influenced by social and environmental factors, including peer relationships and social media exposure. Social media platforms provide opportunities for communication, self-expression, and access to information; however, excessive exposure may also contribute to social comparison, anxiety, and emotional instability. Young adults tend to spend considerable time interacting with peer groups, and acceptance within these groups often becomes a significant determinant of self-esteem and emotional

stability. When individuals experience rejection, criticism, or exclusion from peers, they may develop feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, or other maladaptive coping behaviors such as substance use. These experiences can influence the way young adults perceive themselves and others, ultimately shaping their emotional responses and interpersonal attitudes (Olajide et al., 2026; Xing & Ge, 2025; Giordano et al., 2025).

One psychological trait that may emerge in such contexts is self-righteousness, which refers to the strong conviction that one's beliefs, values, or actions are morally superior or unquestionably correct in comparison to others. Individuals exhibiting self-righteous tendencies often demonstrate rigidity in their opinions, resistance to alternative viewpoints, and a tendency to judge others harshly. Scholars have suggested that self-righteousness may negatively influence harmonious social relationships because it limits open-mindedness and constructive dialogue. Psychological explanations suggest that self-righteous attitudes may arise from underlying insecurities or fear of criticism, leading individuals to defend their beliefs aggressively in order to maintain a sense of confidence and control (Klein, 2024; Golden, 2022; Lancer, 2022).

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In contrast to self-righteousness, empathy represents a key psychological capacity that facilitates healthy interpersonal relationships. Empathy involves the ability to perceive, understand, and respond to the emotional experiences of others (Barker, 2008). It encompasses both cognitive and emotional components, allowing individuals to recognize another person's perspective while also experiencing concern or compassion toward them. Empathetic individuals tend to develop stronger social connections, exhibit prosocial behavior, and demonstrate greater emotional regulation in stressful situations (Barnett & Mann, 2013). Empathy therefore plays an important role in promoting social harmony and mutual understanding among individuals (Robinson, 2025; Grignoli et al., 2022).

Another important psychological dimension influencing interpersonal behavior is affect, which refers to the experience of emotional states. Affect is generally categorized into positive affect and negative affect. Positive affect includes emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, and contentment, which are associated with greater psychological well-being, social engagement, and adaptive coping strategies. Individuals with higher levels of positive affect often demonstrate openness, empathy, and constructive interpersonal interactions. In contrast, negative affect encompasses emotional states such as distress, anger, fear, and sadness, which may arise when individuals perceive obstacles to their goals or experience dissatisfaction with their current circumstances. Persistent negative affect has been associated with psychological difficulties including anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Coleman et al., 2024; Oliinyk et al., 2025; Christensen & Jafferany, 2023).

Understanding the relationships among self-righteousness, empathy, and emotional affect is particularly important in the context of college students, as these factors can influence social behavior, decision-making, and mental health outcomes. Investigating how positive and negative emotional states relate to empathy and self-righteous attitudes may provide valuable insights into the psychological functioning of young adults. This work explores the interrelationship between self-righteousness, empathy, positive affect, and negative affect among college students and their influence on interpersonal behavior and emotional well-being. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between self-righteousness, empathy, positive affect, and negative affect among college students, with the goal of better understanding how emotional experiences influence interpersonal attitudes and behavioral tendencies during young adulthood (Septianto et al., 2023; Mazhabdar et al., 2025).

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A descriptive research design was adopted, utilizing quantitative methods to examine relationships between variables. The researcher had no control over the variables,

focusing instead on describing characteristics of the population and answering "what" questions about the relationships under investigation.

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Sample

The present study included 150 undergraduate students from Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu, India. The participants were selected from a co-educational college, comprising both male and female students. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 21 years, representing the young adult population. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were selected from different undergraduate programs to ensure representation of the student population.

Sampling Technique

A simple random sampling technique was employed to select the participants for the study. Simple random sampling is a probability-based method in which each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected. This approach helps reduce sampling bias and improves the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of college students. The participants were chosen based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study (Ishienyi & Tafida, 2026; Novielli et al., 2025).

Variables of the Study

The present study examined four psychological variables: self-righteousness, empathy, positive affect, and negative affect. Self-righteousness refers to the belief that one's attitudes or behaviors are morally correct compared to others. Empathy is the ability to understand and respond to the emotional experiences of others (Spreng et al., 2009). Positive affect reflects the experience of positive emotional states such as enthusiasm and alertness, whereas negative affect represents emotional distress including fear, anger, and anxiety (Roy et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024).

Scoring and Interpretation

Each item of the scale is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The

scores for items 1–4 are summed to obtain the Self-Righteousness (SR) score, with a possible range of 4 to 20; items 3 and 4 are reverse scored, and higher scores indicate greater levels of self-righteousness. Additionally, items 5–7 are summed to obtain the Acceptance (A) score, with a score range of 3 to 15, where higher scores reflect greater acceptance of others (Septianto et al., 2023).

Instruments

Self-Righteousness Scale (SRS)

Self-righteousness was measured using the 7-item Self-Righteousness Scale developed by Toni Falbo and Russell W. Belk (1985), originally published in the *Journal of Personality Assessment*. The scale assesses the extent to which individuals believe their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors are morally correct compared with others. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items 1–4 measure self-righteousness (with items 3 and 4 reverse-scored), producing scores ranging from 4 to 20, where higher scores indicate greater self-righteousness. Items 5–7 measure acceptance of others, with scores ranging from 3 to 15, where higher scores indicate greater acceptance. The scale demonstrates moderate internal consistency ($\alpha \approx 0.58$ – 0.60) and test–retest reliability of 0.54 (Tse & Haslam, 2023; Septianto et al., 2023).

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)

Empathy was assessed using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) developed by Robert N. Spreng and colleagues (2009). The TEQ is a 16-item self-report instrument designed to measure empathy primarily as an emotional process. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Higher scores indicate greater levels of empathy. The scale has demonstrated strong reliability with internal consistency values ranging from $\alpha = 0.85$ – 0.87 and test–retest reliability of $r = 0.81$. Construct validity has been supported through positive correlations with measures of emotional intelligence (Chowkase, 2022; Natali et al., 2023).

Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

Positive and negative affect were measured using the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) developed by David Watson, Lee Anna Clark, and Auke Tellegen. The instrument consists of 20 self-report items, including 10 items measuring positive affect and 10 items measuring negative affect. Responses are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “extremely.” Scores for each dimension range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating higher levels of positive or negative emotional states. The PANAS demonstrates high internal consistency, with reliability coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 0.86$ – 0.90 for positive affect and $\alpha = 0.84$ – 0.87 for negative affect (Taleb et al., 2024; Llamas-Díaz et al., 2023).

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard

deviations) were computed for demographic variables and scale scores. Pearson's product-moment correlation examined relationships between variables. Independent sample t-tests compared means between groups (gender, family type). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (Pan et al., 2024).

3. RESULTS

Among the 120 participants recruited for the study, 59 (49.17%) were boys and 61 (50.83%) were girls. Of the participants, 65 (54.2%) belonged to nuclear families and 55 (45.8%) belonged to joint families. Regarding the year of study, 41 (34.2%) students were from the first year, 39 (32.5%) were from the second year, and 40 (33.3%) were from the third year of the Arts and Science departments of Sacred Heart College. With respect to marital status, 2 (1.7%) participants were married, while 118 (98.3%) were unmarried. In terms of residence, 6 (5.0%) participants were hostel residents and 114 (95.0%) were day scholars living at home. Furthermore, 97 (80.8%) participants were from rural areas, while 23 (19.2%) belonged to urban areas.

The gender distribution of the participants shows a nearly equal representation of males and females. Out of the total 120 participants, 59 (49.17%) were males and 61 (50.83%) were females. This balanced distribution ensures minimal gender bias in the sample.

The distribution of family type among the participants indicates that the majority belonged to nuclear families. Out of the total 120 participants, 65 (54.2%) were from nuclear families, while 55 (45.8%) belonged to joint families. This shows a slightly higher representation of students from nuclear family backgrounds in the study (Agrawal et al., 2023).

The distribution of participants based on the year of study shows a relatively balanced representation across all undergraduate levels. Among the 120 participants, 41 (34.2%) were from the first year, 39 (32.5%) were from the second year, and 40 (33.3%) were from the third year. This indicates that students from different academic levels were almost equally represented in the study (Mangoulia et al., 2024).

The marital status distribution shows that the majority of the participants were unmarried. Out of the total 120 participants, 118 (98.3%) were unmarried, while only 2 (1.7%) were married. This is expected as the study population consisted primarily of undergraduate students (Ebrahim et al., 2026).

The distribution of participants based on place of stay shows that the majority were day scholars. Out of the total 120 participants, 114 (95.0%) were day scholars, while only 6 (5.0%) were hostel residents. This indicates that most participants were commuting from home rather than residing in hostels (Murad et al., 2025).

The distribution of participants based on residency indicates that the majority were from rural areas. Out of

the total 120 participants, 97 (80.8%) belonged to rural areas, while 23 (19.2%) were from urban areas. This suggests that the study sample was predominantly composed of students from rural backgrounds (Wang et al., 2022).

Inferential statistics

Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis was used to understand the correlation between Self-righteousness, Empathy, Positive and Negative affect. Result indicates that there is a significant positive relationship between

positive affect and empathy in the early childhood, $r = .273, p = .00$. There is a negative relation with positive affect and empathy in social anxiety disorder patients, $r = .273, p = .00$. There is no correlation between Negative affect and Self-Righteousness, $r = .263, p = .00$. There is no correlation between empathy and self-righteousness in young adults, $r = .326, p = .00$. There is a positive relationship with the positive affect, empathy and social influence in children, $r = .273, p = .00$, and there is no correlation between positive affect and self-righteousness, $r = .628, p = .00$.

Table 1. Pearson's Correlation among Positive effect, self-righteousness and empathy

Variables	1	2	3
1. Positive Affect	—		
2. Empathy	.273**	—	
3. Self-righteousness	.326	.628	—

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Among the 120 participants, 40 scored low in self-righteousness, 33 had moderate self-righteousness, and 47 had high self-righteousness. Regarding empathy, 14 participants scored at a low level, 86 at a moderate level, and 20 at a high level. In terms of positive affect, 30 participants had low positive affect, 30 had moderate positive affect, and 60 had high positive affect. With respect to negative affect, 31 participants scored low, 30 had moderate negative affect, and 59 had high negative affect (Ahn, 2022).

Note: Frequency represents the number of participants in each level category.

The distribution of self-righteousness levels among the participants shows that a higher proportion exhibited high self-righteousness. Out of the total 120 participants, 47 were classified under the high level, followed by 40 with low levels and 33 with moderate levels of self-righteousness. This indicates a relatively higher prevalence of self-righteousness among the participants in the study (Frisby, 2022).

The distribution of empathy levels indicates that the majority of participants exhibited a moderate level of

empathy. Out of the total 120 participants, 86 were categorized under moderate empathy, while 20 showed high levels and 14 demonstrated low levels of empathy. This suggests that most participants possessed a balanced level of empathic tendencies (Bętkowska-Korpala et al., 2022).

The distribution of positive affect among the participants shows that the majority exhibited high levels of positive affect. Out of the 120 participants, 60 were categorized under high positive affect, while 30 participants each fell under low and moderate levels. This indicates a generally higher presence of positive emotional states among the participants (Pavic et al., 2023).

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine the difference in the level of empathy between male and female participants. The results indicated that the level of empathy among girls ($M = 41.03, SD = 7.16$) was significantly higher than that of boys ($M = 39.10, SD = 6.73$), $t(118) = -3.06, p < .05$. This finding suggests a significant gender difference in empathy, with female participants demonstrating higher levels of empathy compared to male participants (Pang et al., 2023).

Table 2. Results of independent sample *t* test to compare mean score of Boys and Girls

Variable	Male (N=59) Mean	SD	Female (N=61) Mean	SD	t	p
Empathy	39.10	6.73	41.03	7.16	-3.06	.003

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine the difference in the level of self-righteousness between male and female participants. The results indicated that boys ($M = 23.44, SD = 2.97$) reported significantly higher levels of self-righteousness compared to girls ($M = 21.92, SD = 2.66$), $t(118) = 2.96, p = .003$. This finding suggests a significant gender difference in self-righteousness, with male participants demonstrating higher levels than female participants (Septianto et al., 2023).

Table 3. Results of independent sample *t* test to compare mean score of Boys and Girls

Variable	Male N	Mean	SD	Female N	Mean	SD	t	p
Self-righteousness	59	23.44	2.97	61	21.92	2.66	2.96	.003

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine the difference in the level of empathy between participants from joint and nuclear families. The results indicated that participants from joint families ($M = 42.00, SD = 7.11$) reported significantly higher levels of empathy compared

to those from nuclear families ($M = 39.17, SD = 7.06$), $t(118) = 2.18, p = .031$. This finding suggests a significant difference in empathy levels based on family type (Elmaoğlu & Şimşek, 2025).

Table 4. Results of independent sample *t* test to compare mean score of Joint and Nuclear family

Variable	Male N	Mean	SD	Female N	Mean	SD	t	p
Empathy	55	42.00	7.11	65	39.17	7.06	2.18	.029

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine the difference in empathy levels between participants from joint and nuclear families. The results indicated that participants from joint families ($M = 42.00$, $SD = 7.11$) reported significantly higher levels of empathy compared to those from nuclear families ($M = 39.17$, $SD = 7.06$), $t(118) = 2.18$, $p = .029$. This finding suggests that family structure has a significant influence on empathy levels among the participants (Ulloque et al., 2023).

4. DISCUSSION

Relationship between Positive Affect and Empathy

The present study found a significant positive correlation between positive affect and empathy ($r = 0.273$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals who experience higher levels of positive emotions are more likely to demonstrate empathic tendencies. Positive emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, and contentment may enhance individuals' ability to connect with others and understand their emotional experiences. This finding is consistent with earlier research by Volbrecht et al. (2007), which indicated that positive emotional experiences contribute to the development of empathy and prosocial behavior.

Positive affect may facilitate empathy by promoting greater social engagement, openness, and emotional responsiveness. Individuals experiencing positive emotions may possess greater psychological resources for understanding others' feelings and responding with compassion. Therefore, emotional well-being may play a crucial role in strengthening interpersonal relationships and social functioning among young adults (Förster & Kanske, 2022; Vallette d'Osia, 2024).

Self-Righteousness and Its Correlates

The results also revealed positive correlations between self-righteousness and empathy ($r = 0.326$), as well as a stronger association between self-righteousness and empathy-related perceptions ($r = 0.628$). These findings indicate that individuals who strongly believe in the correctness of their beliefs or moral perspectives may still report empathic tendencies toward others. This relationship highlights the complex nature of self-righteousness as a psychological construct (Lee et al., 2025; Bachkirov, 2024).

One possible explanation is that individuals with strong moral convictions may perceive themselves as caring, ethical, and socially responsible individuals. As a result, they may express empathy particularly toward individuals who share similar beliefs or values. Additionally, the perception of moral correctness may reinforce positive self-evaluation and emotional satisfaction, contributing to positive emotional experiences (Poorhosseini Dehkordi, 2023; Mpama, 2025).

However, it is also possible that the relationship between self-righteousness and empathy reflects self-perception or social desirability influences in self-report measures.

Further research is needed to examine how self-righteousness influences empathy in different social contexts and interpersonal situations (Sun & Schwitzgebel, 2025).

Gender Differences

The findings of the study revealed significant gender differences in empathy and self-righteousness. Female participants reported significantly higher levels of empathy compared to male participants. This result is consistent with previous psychological research (Hegazi & Wilson, 2013; Volbrecht et al., 2007), which suggests that females often demonstrate greater emotional sensitivity and interpersonal awareness (Larouche, 2023).

These differences may be influenced by socialization patterns in which girls are encouraged to express emotions and demonstrate caring behaviors from an early age, whereas boys are often socialized to emphasize independence and emotional restraint. Biological factors, including hormonal influences and neurological differences in emotional processing, may also contribute to gender variations in empathy (Yeo et al., 2025).

Conversely, male participants reported higher levels of self-righteousness than females. This finding may reflect gender-related differences in confidence, assertiveness, and the tendency to strongly defend personal beliefs or opinions. Social norms and cultural expectations may encourage males to express greater certainty in their viewpoints, which could contribute to higher self-righteousness scores (Simandjuntak et al., 2023).

Family Type and Empathy

The study also identified significant differences in empathy levels based on family structure. Students from joint families demonstrated higher empathy compared to those from nuclear families. This finding may be explained by the social environment typically associated with joint family systems (Jamil et al., 2023).

Joint family structures often involve interactions with multiple family members across generations, including grandparents, cousins, and extended relatives. Such environments may provide greater opportunities for social learning, emotional sharing, and exposure to diverse perspectives. These interactions can facilitate the development of perspective-taking abilities and emotional understanding (Makris, 2024).

In contrast, nuclear families may provide fewer opportunities for extensive social interaction within the household. Although nuclear families offer advantages such as privacy and independence, the limited exposure to extended family relationships may influence the development of certain interpersonal skills. Therefore, family environment may play an important role in shaping empathy and social awareness among young adults (He, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationships among self-righteousness, empathy, positive affect, and negative affect among college students. The findings revealed a significant positive association between positive affect and empathy, indicating that positive emotional states may promote empathic understanding. Gender differences were observed, with female students reporting higher empathy and male students showing higher self-righteousness. Students from joint families also demonstrated higher empathy compared to those from nuclear families. These results highlight the influence of emotional experiences and social environment on interpersonal attitudes during young adulthood. The study emphasizes the importance of promoting emotional well-being and empathy among college students to support healthy social relationships.

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