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**Relationship between Volunteerism and Empathy
among Adolescents in Rwanda**

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the relationship between volunteerism and empathy among adolescents in Rwanda.

Materials and Methods: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study indicated that engaging in volunteer activities enhances adolescents' empathy levels, as these experiences expose them to diverse social situations and perspectives. Adolescents who volunteer tend to develop a greater understanding and sensitivity towards the needs and emotions of others. This empathy growth is attributed to the direct interactions and responsibilities involved in

volunteering, which foster emotional and cognitive empathy. Moreover, the sense of purpose and fulfillment derived from helping others further reinforces empathetic behaviors. Overall, volunteerism serves as a significant developmental tool in nurturing empathy among adolescents, promoting their social and emotional well-being.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social learning theory, empathy development theory and theory of planned behavior may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the relationship between volunteerism and empathy among adolescents in Rwanda. In practice, schools and community organizations should design volunteer programs that are both structured and reflective to maximize empathy development. Policymakers should prioritize integrating volunteerism into the educational curriculum as a key component of social-emotional learning.

Keywords: *Volunteerism, Empathy, Adolescents*

INTRODUCTION

Empathy, often defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, can be categorized into several levels, including cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and compassionate empathy. In the USA, research indicates that cognitive empathy levels have been relatively stable, with about 78% of high school students reporting the ability to understand others' perspectives (Schumann & Zaki, 2020). However, emotional empathy seems to be declining, as evidenced by a 14% drop in college students' self-reported empathy levels over the last decade. In Japan, a study showed that around 70% of high school students exhibit high levels of emotional empathy, though this is coupled with cultural nuances that may affect its expression (Yoshida, 2021). These statistics suggest a complex interplay between cultural context and empathy levels, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to nurture empathetic skills among youth in developed nations.

In the UK, trends indicate a growing concern about empathy levels among young people, with recent surveys revealing that only 60% of students feel comfortable expressing empathy towards peers (Goleman, 2022). This trend underscores a potential empathy gap that could affect social cohesion and mental health. To address these issues, educational programs focused on social and emotional learning have been implemented in various schools, showing positive outcomes in empathy development. For instance, a 2023 study found that schools incorporating empathy-focused curricula saw a 25% increase in students' emotional empathy scores (Hughes & Leavitt, 2023). Overall, these examples from developed economies illustrate the importance of fostering empathy as a critical component of education and social development.

In developing economies, levels of empathy often reflect broader socio-economic conditions and cultural contexts. For instance, in India, a survey indicated that around 65% of adolescents reported high emotional empathy, influenced by strong familial ties and community values (Sahu & Rao, 2020). However, economic disparities can lead to varied empathy levels, with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds exhibiting 20% lower empathy scores than their wealthier peers. Additionally, educational initiatives aimed at promoting empathy in schools are gradually gaining traction, with approximately 70% of teachers endorsing programs focused on social emotional learning (SEL). This growing emphasis on SEL is crucial for addressing empathy deficits and fostering a more compassionate society.

In Brazil, empathy levels among youth show promising trends, with about 68% of students demonstrating high cognitive empathy, particularly in urban areas (Lima & Costa, 2021). However, similar to India, significant disparities exist; rural students tend to score lower on empathy measures due to limited access to education and community engagement. Recent educational reforms in Brazil are focusing on integrating empathy training within the curriculum, aiming to enhance emotional intelligence among students. A 2022 study highlighted that schools implementing these reforms reported a 30% increase in students' overall empathy levels (Silva & Ferreira, 2022). Overall, these examples from developing economies illustrate the crucial need for targeted educational programs to nurture empathy among youth.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, empathy levels are influenced by various cultural and socio-economic factors. For instance, in Nigeria, a recent study indicated that approximately 60% of high school students possess high emotional empathy, largely attributed to communal living and social networks (Akinyemi & Owolabi, 2020). However, challenges such as poverty and conflict have led to significant variations in empathy levels, with students in conflict-affected regions showing up to 25% lower empathy scores. Despite these challenges, educational initiatives

promoting empathy and emotional intelligence are emerging, with 65% of teachers advocating for empathy-focused curricula in schools.

In Kenya, research indicates that about 70% of secondary school students demonstrate high cognitive empathy, reflecting a growing awareness of social issues and community involvement (Karanja & Kihara, 2021). However, socio-economic disparities impact empathy expression, as students from impoverished backgrounds often report lower emotional engagement. Educational reforms aimed at incorporating social and emotional learning have been increasingly adopted, leading to a reported 40% increase in empathy levels among participating students (Ngoya & Mutiso, 2022). These trends highlight the need for sustained efforts to promote empathy in Sub-Saharan education systems, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate future.

In developing economies, the levels of empathy among high school students are shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors. For example, in India, a study revealed that approximately 65% of adolescents reported high emotional empathy, which can be attributed to strong family ties and community cohesion (Sahu & Rao, 2020). However, socio-economic disparities significantly impact empathy levels, with students from lower-income backgrounds showing 20% lower empathy scores compared to their wealthier peers. This suggests that while there are positive influences on empathy, systemic issues can hinder emotional development. Furthermore, educational initiatives aimed at promoting empathy, such as social-emotional learning programs, are gaining traction, with around 70% of teachers supporting such initiatives. These programs are essential for addressing empathy deficits and fostering a more compassionate society among youth in developing contexts.

In Brazil, trends indicate promising empathy levels among students, with about 68% of participants demonstrating high cognitive empathy, especially in urban settings (Lima & Costa, 2021). However, disparities remain, as rural students often score lower on empathy measures due to limited educational access and community engagement opportunities. Recent educational reforms have focused on integrating empathy training within the curriculum, aiming to enhance emotional intelligence among students. A 2022 study showed that schools implementing these reforms reported a 30% increase in overall empathy levels (Silva & Ferreira, 2022). Additionally, community programs that promote arts and collaborative activities have shown to significantly boost empathy among students. Overall, these examples from developing economies highlight the need for targeted educational programs that nurture empathy and address socio-economic barriers to emotional development.

In Kenya, research indicates that about 70% of secondary school students demonstrate high cognitive empathy, reflecting an increasing awareness of social issues and community involvement (Karanja & Kihara, 2021). However, socio-economic disparities still play a significant role; students from impoverished backgrounds often report lower emotional engagement and empathy levels. Educational reforms aimed at incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) have been increasingly adopted, leading to a reported 40% increase in empathy levels among participating students (Ngoya & Mutiso, 2022). Community initiatives that promote collaboration and peer support are also pivotal in enhancing empathy among students. Furthermore, the integration of empathy training into teacher education programs has shown promise in equipping educators to foster emotional intelligence in their classrooms. These efforts collectively highlight the critical need for sustained investment in educational practices that promote empathy and address the diverse challenges faced by students in developing economies.

In South Africa, recent studies have shown that around 62% of high school students exhibit high levels of emotional empathy, largely influenced by cultural narratives that emphasize community support (Moyo & Ndhlovu, 2023). Nonetheless, disparities persist, particularly among students in under-resourced schools, who often demonstrate significantly lower empathy scores. To combat these challenges, schools are beginning to implement programs that focus on emotional literacy and conflict resolution, showing a positive impact on student relationships and community cohesion. For example, a 2022 initiative aimed at integrating empathy training into the curriculum resulted in a 25% increase in students' emotional empathy levels (Mthembu & Dube, 2022). Such findings underline the importance of creating educational environments that prioritize emotional development, ensuring that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, can cultivate empathy as a fundamental social skill.

Engagement in volunteer activities significantly enhances levels of empathy among participants. One of the most likely forms of engagement is community service, where individuals actively contribute to local needs, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and challenges faced by others. Research indicates that individuals involved in community service report heightened emotional empathy, as they regularly interact with various community members and learn to appreciate their experiences (Bennett & McCarthy, 2020). Another form is peer mentoring, where volunteers provide support to younger or less experienced individuals. This engagement not only promotes altruism but also develops cognitive empathy, as mentors learn to understand and relate to the struggles faced by their mentees (Holt & Wiggins, 2019). Through these interactions, individuals often find a greater sense of connection and responsibility towards others, thereby enhancing their empathetic capacities.

Another significant avenue for engagement is environmental volunteering, which involves participants in conservation and sustainability efforts. Such activities encourage individuals to consider the broader implications of their actions on the community and the planet, thereby fostering a collective empathy for future generations (Greene & O'Brien, 2021). Additionally, participation in social justice initiatives often deepens individuals' understanding of systemic issues, prompting them to advocate for marginalized groups and enhancing their emotional responsiveness to societal challenges (Walker & Grace, 2022). Ultimately, engagement in various volunteer activities serves as a powerful catalyst for developing empathy, as individuals confront real-world issues and interact with diverse populations. These experiences not only enrich personal growth but also contribute to building more compassionate and empathetic communities.

Problem Statement

The relationship between volunteerism and empathy among adolescents remains underexplored, despite the growing recognition of both concepts as essential components of social development. While volunteer activities are believed to foster empathy, there is limited empirical evidence directly linking the extent of engagement in volunteerism to measurable changes in empathetic behaviors and attitudes. Furthermore, existing studies often fail to account for contextual factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background, and the nature of volunteer activities, which can significantly influence both volunteerism and empathy levels. This gap in research is critical, as understanding this relationship can inform educational and community programs aimed at promoting social responsibility among youth. Consequently, investigating the nuances of how volunteerism impacts empathy among

adolescents is essential for developing effective interventions that cultivate a more empathetic generation (Fisher & Kossakowski, 2021; McCarthy & Bennett, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

Originated by Albert Bandura, social learning theory posits that individuals learn behaviors through observation and imitation of others within their social context. This theory is relevant to the study of volunteerism and empathy, as adolescents often model empathetic behaviors after observing peers or role models engaging in community service. By participating in volunteer activities, adolescents can witness and adopt empathetic actions, thereby enhancing their own emotional understanding and responsiveness (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019).

Empathy Development Theory

This theory, proposed by developmental psychologists, emphasizes that empathy is cultivated through social experiences and interactions. It suggests that engaging in volunteerism provides adolescents with opportunities to encounter diverse perspectives and understand the emotional states of others. This exposure is crucial for developing higher levels of empathy, particularly in formative adolescent years (Parker & Bering, 2022).

Theory of Planned Behavior

Developed by Icek Ajzen, the theory of planned behavior posits that individual behavior is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This theory can help explain how adolescents' intentions to engage in volunteerism are related to their empathetic attitudes. Understanding the factors that motivate adolescents to volunteer can provide insights into how these behaviors subsequently enhance their empathy (Smith & Johnson, 2023).

Empirical Review

Smith (2018) explored the impact of community service on adolescents' empathy levels in urban schools. The purpose was to assess whether structured volunteer programs enhance emotional and cognitive empathy. Using a quantitative approach, Smith surveyed 200 high school students and employed empathy scales to measure changes over six months. The findings revealed a significant increase in empathy scores among those who participated in community service activities compared to non-participants. Specifically, students who engaged in regular volunteer work demonstrated greater ability to understand and share the feelings of others. The study also noted improvements in students' social interactions and emotional well-being. Smith recommended integrating community service into school curricula to foster empathy development, arguing that such programs could play a crucial role in the holistic development of students. This study underscores the importance of structured volunteer opportunities in educational settings to enhance social-emotional skills, suggesting that empathy can be cultivated through intentional and sustained community engagement (Smith, 2018).

Gonzalez (2019) examined how continuous involvement in volunteerism affects empathy development in adolescents from low-income families. Using a mixed-methods approach, Gonzalez tracked 150 students over three years, combining surveys and in-depth interviews. The findings showed that sustained volunteer engagement significantly improved both affective and cognitive empathy. The study highlighted that repeated exposure to diverse social contexts and consistent interaction with individuals from various backgrounds were critical factors in empathy development. Participants reported a deeper understanding of social issues

and a stronger emotional connection to the people they helped. Gonzalez recommended creating long-term volunteer programs to ensure lasting empathetic growth, emphasizing that these programs can bridge social gaps and promote inclusivity. This research emphasizes the need for consistent and ongoing volunteer opportunities to maximize empathy benefits, especially for adolescents in underserved communities, by providing them with meaningful and transformative experiences (Gonzalez, 2019).

Patel (2020) investigated the differential impacts of various volunteer activities on empathy among high school students. The study aimed to compare the effects of direct service (e.g., working in shelters) versus indirect service (e.g., fundraising) on empathy levels. Using an experimental design, Patel assigned 250 students to different volunteer tasks and measured empathy using pre- and post-tests. Results indicated that direct service significantly enhanced empathy more than indirect service. Specifically, students involved in direct service reported greater emotional engagement and understanding of the individuals they assisted. Patel suggested focusing on direct service opportunities to maximize empathetic outcomes, as these experiences provide more immediate and personal interactions. This study highlights the importance of the type of volunteer activity in empathy development, suggesting that the nature of the volunteer work can significantly influence the depth of empathetic growth among adolescents (Patel, 2020).

Nguyen (2021) synthesized existing research on volunteerism and empathy among adolescents. The purpose was to identify overarching trends and determine the robustness of the relationship. Analyzing 25 studies published between 2018 and 2021, Nguyen found a consistent positive correlation between volunteer participation and increased empathy. The meta-analysis underscored the importance of social interaction in fostering empathy, noting that programs emphasizing direct contact with beneficiaries were particularly effective. The aggregated data revealed that volunteerism not only enhances empathy but also contributes to broader social skills and emotional intelligence. Nguyen recommended policymakers support and fund volunteer programs in schools to enhance social-emotional learning, arguing that such initiatives are essential for developing compassionate and socially responsible citizens. This comprehensive review highlights the pervasive benefits of volunteerism on empathy development across different contexts and underscores the need for robust support for these programs (Nguyen, 2021).

Kumar (2019) explored the role of school-based volunteer programs in developing empathy among adolescents. Using a qualitative methodology, Kumar conducted focus groups with students, teachers, and program coordinators from five high schools. The findings indicated that students involved in volunteer programs exhibited higher empathy levels and greater social awareness. Participants reported that their volunteer experiences helped them understand and relate to the struggles of others, enhancing their emotional and social competencies. The study emphasized the importance of reflection and discussion in maximizing the empathetic benefits of volunteer work. Kumar recommended expanding school-based volunteer initiatives and providing training for teachers to facilitate empathy-focused programs. This study underscores the potential of educational institutions to promote empathy through volunteerism, suggesting that schools play a pivotal role in nurturing empathetic and socially aware students through structured and reflective volunteer experiences (Kumar, 2019).

Martinez (2022) examined the effects of international volunteer experiences on empathy among high school students. The study aimed to understand how cross-cultural interactions influence empathetic development. Using a pre-post design, Martinez surveyed 100 students before and after their participation in international volunteer trips. The results showed a

significant increase in empathy, particularly in understanding and appreciating cultural diversity. Students reported profound personal growth and a deeper appreciation for different cultural perspectives. Martinez recommended schools encourage international volunteer programs to enhance global empathy and cultural competence, emphasizing that such experiences can broaden students' worldviews and foster a sense of global citizenship. This research highlights the unique benefits of cross-cultural volunteer experiences in fostering empathy, suggesting that exposure to diverse cultures and global issues can significantly enhance students' empathetic understanding and social awareness (Martinez, 2022).

Lee (2023) assessed whether volunteer activities could serve as a tool for social-emotional development in this group. Using a mixed-methods approach, Lee surveyed and interviewed students, parents, and teachers from special education programs. The findings indicated that participation in volunteer activities significantly improved empathy and social skills among students with learning disabilities. Participants reported enhanced self-esteem and better communication skills as a result of their volunteer experiences. Lee recommended integrating inclusive volunteer opportunities into special education curricula to support holistic development, arguing that such initiatives can provide meaningful and empowering experiences for students with diverse learning needs. This study emphasizes the value of volunteerism in enhancing empathy among students with learning disabilities, highlighting the importance of providing accessible and supportive volunteer opportunities for all students (Lee, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gaps: The existing literature predominantly focuses on general measures of empathy, often combining emotional and cognitive empathy without distinguishing between the two. For instance, while Smith (2018) and Gonzalez (2019) highlight improvements in empathy through volunteer activities, they do not delve deeply into the specific mechanisms through which different types of volunteerism (e.g., direct vs. indirect service) uniquely contribute to these changes. Moreover, most studies do not consider the potential moderating effects of individual differences such as personality traits or prior empathic ability, which could influence how adolescents benefit from volunteer experiences. Addressing these nuances could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how volunteerism impacts empathy development.

Contextual Gaps: There is a lack of research exploring how the context of volunteer activities influences empathy outcomes. While studies like Patel (2020) suggest that direct service activities are more effective in enhancing empathy than indirect service, there is limited exploration of how different settings (e.g., rural vs. urban, high-resource vs. low-resource environments) and the nature of the beneficiaries (e.g., working with the elderly, individuals with disabilities, or refugees) affect empathy development. Additionally, research by Kumar (2019) and Lee (2023) touches on school-based and inclusive programs but does not extensively examine how the integration of volunteerism into various educational frameworks can optimize empathy outcomes across different student populations.

Geographical Gaps: Most empirical studies have been conducted in developed countries, primarily in urban settings within the United States, as seen in Smith (2018) and Martinez (2022). There is a significant gap in research from developing countries and sub-Saharan Africa, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Studies like those by Gonzalez (2019) in low-income contexts provide valuable insights, but more research is needed to understand how cultural, socioeconomic, and infrastructural differences influence the relationship between volunteerism and empathy. Investigating these dynamics in diverse geographical regions can shed light on unique challenges and opportunities, contributing to a more global perspective on the topic.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

The relationship between volunteerism and empathy among adolescents is robust and multifaceted, revealing significant positive outcomes across various contexts and methodologies. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that engaging in volunteer activities enhances both emotional and cognitive empathy in adolescents. For instance, Smith (2018) and Gonzalez (2019) highlight that structured and sustained volunteer programs significantly increase empathy levels, improve social interactions, and contribute to emotional well-being. Furthermore, the type of volunteer work plays a critical role; direct service activities are particularly effective in fostering deeper empathetic connections, as noted by Patel (2020).

Longitudinal research underscores the lasting impact of volunteerism, showing that continuous involvement leads to sustained empathy growth, especially in diverse social contexts (Gonzalez, 2019). The importance of reflection and discussion in maximizing these benefits is also evident, suggesting that educational institutions should integrate volunteerism into their curricula to foster holistic development (Kumar, 2019). Additionally, cross-cultural experiences, such as international volunteer programs, significantly enhance global empathy and cultural competence, broadening adolescents' worldviews (Martinez, 2022).

Despite the substantial evidence supporting the positive impact of volunteerism on empathy, there are notable gaps in the literature. Conceptually, more research is needed to understand the specific mechanisms and individual differences that influence empathy development through volunteerism. Contextually, the influence of different volunteer settings and beneficiary types requires further exploration. Geographically, expanding research beyond developed countries to include diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts will enhance the generalizability of findings.

Volunteerism is a powerful tool for cultivating empathy among adolescents, with significant implications for educational policy and practice. By providing structured, reflective, and diverse volunteer opportunities, educators and policymakers can promote the development of compassionate, socially responsible citizens. Future research should address existing gaps to deepen our understanding of this relationship and optimize volunteer programs for empathy development.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

To advance the theoretical understanding of the relationship between volunteerism and empathy among adolescents, future research should delve into the underlying psychological mechanisms driving this connection. Investigating how different types of volunteer activities

specifically enhance emotional and cognitive empathy can refine existing theories of social development and empathy. Integrating insights from social learning theory, which suggests that behaviors are learned through observation and interaction, can provide a nuanced framework for understanding how adolescents develop empathy through volunteer work (Bandura, 2018). Additionally, exploring the role of self-determination theory in volunteerism can reveal how intrinsic motivation and a sense of autonomy contribute to empathy development (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These theoretical explorations will deepen our understanding of the psychosocial processes that foster empathy in young people.

Practice

In practice, schools and community organizations should design volunteer programs that are both structured and reflective to maximize empathy development. Programs should include direct service activities, such as working in shelters or tutoring, which have been shown to be particularly effective in fostering empathy (Patel, 2020). Incorporating regular reflection sessions where adolescents can discuss their experiences and emotions will enhance the empathetic learning process. Educators and program coordinators should receive training on facilitating these discussions to help students process their experiences and understand the impact of their volunteer work on others. Moreover, creating diverse volunteer opportunities that allow adolescents to interact with people from various backgrounds will broaden their social perspectives and deepen their empathetic connections (Martinez, 2022).

Policy

Policymakers should prioritize integrating volunteerism into the educational curriculum as a key component of social-emotional learning. This can be achieved by mandating volunteer hours for high school graduation, as is done in some educational systems, and ensuring these programs are adequately funded and supported. Policies should promote the inclusion of volunteer programs that provide meaningful, sustained engagement rather than one-time activities, as continuous involvement has been shown to yield greater empathetic development (Gonzalez, 2019). Additionally, policies should support the professional development of educators to equip them with the skills needed to guide and mentor students in their volunteer experiences. Funding should also be allocated to create partnerships between schools and community organizations to offer a wide range of volunteer opportunities. By embedding volunteerism within the educational framework, policies can help cultivate a generation of empathetic, socially responsible citizens prepared to contribute positively to society.

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