



The effectiveness of solution-focused brief group counseling in enhancing students' empathy

Intan Laksmi Mayastuty^{1*}, DYP Sugiharto², Mulawarman³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: empathy, group counseling, interpersonal reactivity, solution-focused brief counseling.	Empathy is an essential social-emotional competency that enables students to understand others' perspectives, develop positive interpersonal relationships, and demonstrate prosocial behavior. However, difficulties in expressing empathy highlight the need for effective school-based counseling interventions. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC) in improving students' empathy. A quantitative experimental design was employed involving 24 students ($N = 24$) selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to measure empathy and the Solution-Focused Inventory (SFI) to assess solution-focused characteristics as part of the intervention evaluation. Data normality was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test, while hypothesis testing involved paired-samples t tests, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, and Mann–Whitney U tests. The results indicated a statistically significant improvement in students' empathy following the SFBGC intervention ($p < .001$), with higher posttest scores than pretest scores. These findings suggest that SFBGC may be a promising approach to enhancing students' empathy and social-emotional development. However, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, rigorous experimental designs, and mixed methods approaches to investigate the mechanisms underlying empathy development.

*Correspondence address:

E-mail: intanlaksmi24@students.unnes.ac.id

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.15294/jubk.v15i1.27543>

© 2026 Universitas Negeri Semarang

p-ISSN 2252-6889

e-ISSN 2502-4450

Introduction

Empathy is a fundamental social-emotional competency that enables individuals to understand others' perspectives, recognize emotional experiences, and respond appropriately to interpersonal situations. In educational settings, empathy contributes to positive social relationships, prosocial behavior, and students' psychological development. Kurniawan et al. (2024) emphasized that social concern involves demonstrating kindness, respect, tolerance, and sensitivity toward individual differences. Furthermore, Slote (2021) highlighted empathy as an essential foundation of moral and social behavior, while Stevens and Taber (2021) explained that empathic responses to others' suffering may involve either empathic concern or personal distress, potentially influencing prosocial motivation. These perspectives suggest that empathy extends beyond emotional understanding and plays an important role in shaping students' interpersonal behavior and social adjustment.

Empathy is a multidimensional construct encompassing both cognitive and affective processes. Davis (1983) identified four dimensions of empathy: (a) perspective-taking, referring to the ability to understand situations from another person's viewpoint; (b) fantasy, reflecting the tendency to imaginatively identify with fictional characters; (c) empathic concern, involving feelings of compassion and concern for others experiencing difficulties; and (d) personal distress, describing self-oriented feelings of discomfort or anxiety when witnessing others' suffering. These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding individual differences in empathic responses. Empirical studies have demonstrated that empathy is positively associated with prosocial behavior and interpersonal functioning. Ardhan and Satriadi (2022) reported a significant relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior among vocational high school students. Similarly, Cardona-Isaza et al. (2023) highlighted the contribution of empathy to social decision-making and prosocial tendencies. However, preliminary observations during group counseling activities indicated that some students experienced difficulties understanding others' perspectives, expressing concern, and responding appropriately to peers' emotional experiences. These conditions highlight the importance of developing structured counseling interventions to strengthen students' empathy.

Group counseling represents a potential intervention for facilitating empathy development through interpersonal interaction, emotional expression, and collaborative problem-solving. Within group counseling settings, students are encouraged to share experiences, recognize different perspectives, and develop supportive relationships with their peers. Alawiyah et al. (2019) emphasized the role of group counseling in promoting interpersonal competencies, while Sağar (2021) demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing students' social anxiety. Similarly, Asro et al. (2021) reported that group counseling interventions contributed to reducing bullying behavior among students. Corey (2023) further explained that group counseling provides opportunities for individuals to develop self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and constructive behavioral responses through structured group interactions. These findings suggest that group counseling may provide a supportive environment for developing the cognitive and affective components of empathy.

One counseling approach that may facilitate empathy development is Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC), which is grounded in the principles of solution-focused brief therapy developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. This approach emphasizes students' strengths, existing competencies, personal resources, and possibilities for positive behavioral change rather than focusing exclusively on problems and their underlying causes. Mulawarman (2023) explained that solution-focused counseling is based on the assumption that individuals possess the capabilities and resources necessary to construct solutions to their difficulties. Previous studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of solution-focused interventions across various psychological and educational outcomes. Hendriani and Mulawarman (2020) discussed the relevance of solution-focused counseling to psychological resilience, while Indriani et al. (2022) reported positive outcomes of solution-focused brief counseling and motivational interviewing in improving students' self-disclosure. Furthermore, Lestari and Astuti (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of solution-focused group counseling in reducing social anxiety among vulnerable children.

The application of SFBGC to empathy development can be understood through its emphasis on goal-directed behavior, identification of successful experiences, and constructive interpersonal interactions. Through solution-focused questioning, identification of exceptions, and collaborative goal-setting, students may be encouraged to recognize situations in which they have demonstrated understanding, concern, or supportive behavior toward others. Group discussions also provide opportunities to explore alternative perspectives, identify positive interpersonal experiences, and develop concrete strategies for responding empathically to peers. These processes may facilitate students' awareness of others' emotional needs while encouraging responsibility for their social behavior. However, the extent to which these solution-focused processes contribute to measurable improvements in empathy requires empirical investigation.

Although previous studies have examined the application of solution-focused counseling to psychological resilience, self-disclosure, and social anxiety (Hendriani & Mulawarman, 2020; Indriani et al., 2022; Lestari & Astuti, 2021), these findings do not directly establish its effectiveness in enhancing students' multidimensional empathy. This distinction highlights the need to examine empathy as a specific intervention outcome rather than assuming that improvements in other psychosocial competencies necessarily reflect increased empathy. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC) in improving students' empathy, as measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). By investigating the application of a strengths-based, solution-focused approach to empathy development, this study seeks to contribute empirical evidence to school-based guidance and counseling practices and inform the development of interventions that promote students' social-emotional competencies..

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design to examine the effectiveness of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC) in improving students' empathy. The research involved an experimental group receiving SFBGC and a control group serving as a comparison. The research procedure consisted of six stages: pretest administration, participant selection, intervention implementation, posttest administration, data analysis, and report preparation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

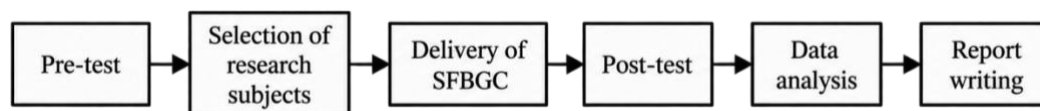


Figure 1. Research Flow

The study began with a pretest to identify students with low to moderate levels of empathy. Based on the screening results and predetermined inclusion criteria, 16 students were selected through purposive sampling and assigned to two groups: an experimental group ($n = 8$) and a control group ($n = 8$). The experimental group participated in four SFBGC sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, designed to strengthen students' empathy through goal-setting, identification of personal strengths, and solution-focused interactions. Following the intervention, both groups completed a posttest using the same empathy instrument to assess changes in empathy scores and differences between groups.

The study involved 16 11th-grade students selected based on their empathy levels and eligibility for participation. Students' empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis, which originally consists of 28 items assessing four dimensions of empathy: perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. Prior to the main study, an item validity assessment was conducted involving 60 respondents. Using a critical correlation value of $r = .254$, the analysis identified 26 items with item correlation coefficients meeting or exceeding the specified threshold. Two items, Item 15 ($r = .130$) and Item 19 ($r = .068$), did not meet the criterion and were excluded from the final instrument. Consequently, the 26 retained items were administered during the pretest and posttest assessments. The Solution-Focused Inventory (SFI), developed by Smock, was also administered to assess participants' solution-focused characteristics as part of the intervention evaluation. The instrument consists of 12 items reflecting psychological characteristics relevant to the solution-focused approach.

The quantitative data were analyzed to examine changes in students' empathy and evaluate differences between the experimental and control groups. The Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted to assess the normality assumption. Depending on the distribution and characteristics of the data, paired-samples t tests or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were employed to examine within-group pretest–posttest differences, while the Mann–Whitney U test was used for between-group comparisons. The SFI results were examined as supplementary information concerning participants' solution-focused characteristics. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$. The final stage involved interpreting the findings and preparing the research report.

Result and Discussion

The descriptive results presented in Table 1 indicate an overall increase in students' empathy scores following the implementation of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC). Improvements were observed across the four dimensions measured by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), including perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. These findings suggest that SFBGC may contribute to changes in students' cognitive and affective responses to interpersonal situations. However, the differences across dimensions indicate that the intervention may influence particular aspects of empathy in different ways.

Table 1. Pre-test and post test results in the experimental group ($N=8$)

Aspect	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Perspective-taking	16	3.891	21	2.672
Fantasy	17.25	3.655	22.625	19.5

Aspect	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Concern	18.75	3.196	24.25	3.770
Personal distress	13	2.726	18.375	3.292

The improvements in perspective-taking and fantasy suggest that students developed greater capacities to consider alternative perspectives and engage in imaginative identification with others' experiences. These changes may be associated with the strengths-based and collaborative characteristics of SFBGC, which encourage participants to reflect on interpersonal experiences, identify constructive responses, and explore alternative solutions to social difficulties. Through solution-focused questioning and group interactions, students may become more aware of how others perceive and respond to social situations. This interpretation is consistent with Davis's (1983) multidimensional conceptualization of empathy, which distinguishes cognitive perspective-taking from other emotional and imaginative processes.

The increase in empathic concern suggests that SFBGC may strengthen students' sensitivity to others' emotional needs through collaborative discussions and interpersonal reflection. This finding aligns with Yin and Wang (2023), who identified a positive association between empathy and prosocial behavior. However, increased personal distress should be interpreted cautiously, as it reflects self-oriented emotional discomfort rather than necessarily indicating adaptive empathy (Krol & Bartz, 2022; Siem, 2022). Therefore, these findings highlight the importance of evaluating empathy multidimensionally and incorporating emotional regulation strategies into group counseling interventions.

Overall, the findings provide preliminary support for the potential contribution of SFBGC to students' empathy development, particularly in cognitive perspective-taking and empathic concern. Nevertheless, descriptive improvements alone are insufficient to establish intervention effectiveness. Considering the relatively small experimental group, further inferential analysis and comparison with the control group are necessary to determine whether the observed changes can be attributed to the intervention. Accordingly, the subsequent analysis examines the statistical significance of pretest–posttest differences, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the Paired-Samples *t* Test on Students' Empathy

Intervensi	<i>t</i>	Sig. (<i>P-value</i>)
SFBGC	6.796	0.00

The paired-samples *t* test revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' empathy following the implementation of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC), $t(7) = 6.796, p < .001$. This finding indicates that students demonstrated higher empathy scores after participating in the intervention, suggesting that SFBGC may be a promising approach to fostering empathy development. The improvement may be attributed to the strengths-based and collaborative characteristics of solution-focused counseling, which encourage individuals to recognize their personal resources, identify constructive solutions, and develop goal-directed behaviors. Lombu et al. (2023) emphasized that solution-focused counseling views individuals as capable of overcoming difficulties by recognizing and utilizing their existing strengths. Similarly, Palmer (2016) highlighted the importance of personal resources and solution construction in facilitating positive behavioral change.

The implementation of SFBGC across four sessions provided opportunities for students to explore interpersonal challenges, identify previous experiences of empathic behavior, and formulate practical strategies for improving their interactions with others. Through collaborative discussions and solution-focused questioning, participants were encouraged to shift their attention from interpersonal difficulties toward achievable behavioral changes. By the end of the intervention, group members had developed individual action plans based on their strengths and available resources. These activities may have facilitated greater awareness of others' perspectives, emotional needs, and appropriate social responses. This interpretation is consistent with Latifah and Ariffudin (2022), who emphasized the potential contribution of solution-focused group counseling to students' personal and social development. Nevertheless, the specific psychological mechanisms underlying these improvements require further empirical investigation.

The findings highlight the potential of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC) for enhancing students' empathy and interpersonal competencies through goal-setting, exception-focused questioning, and strengths-based strategies. Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of solution-focused

interventions in promoting positive behavioral changes and addressing adolescents' school-related difficulties (Franklin et al., 2022; Karababa, 2024). These findings support the potential integration of SFBGC into school counseling programs. However, the small sample size and reliance on within-group comparisons limit causal conclusions. Future research should involve larger samples, follow-up assessments, and mixed-methods approaches to examine the long-term effectiveness of SFBGC in developing empathy.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling (SFBGC) shows promising effectiveness in enhancing students' empathy, as indicated by significant improvements in empathy scores following the intervention. These findings highlight the potential of strengths-based and solution-oriented counseling strategies to promote students' perspective-taking, emotional awareness, and interpersonal competencies. Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of solution-focused counseling in developing social-emotional competencies, while practically, it provides a foundation for integrating SFBGC into school guidance and counseling programs. However, the small sample size and limited comparative evidence warrant cautious interpretation. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, rigorous experimental designs, and follow-up assessments to examine the long-term effectiveness of SFBGC in fostering students' empathy.

Author Contributions Statement

Intan Laksmi Mayastuty: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **DYP Sugiharto:** Supervision, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Mulawarman:** Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to assist with language editing and improving the readability of the manuscript. The authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the published article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Alawiyah, S., Ghozali, S., & Suwarsito, S. (2019). Pengaruh lingkungan dan motivasi belajar terhadap prestasi belajar. *Jurnal Studi Guru dan Pembelajaran*, 2(2), 134–138. <https://doi.org/10.30605/jsgp.2.2.2019.1369>
- Ardhan, F., & Satriadi, S. (2022). Empati dan perilaku prososial pada siswa SMK. *Arjwa: Jurnal Psikologi*, 1(3), 139–148. <https://doi.org/10.35760/arjwa.2022.v1i3.7306>
- Asro, M., Sugiharto, D., & Awalya, A. (2021). Mengatasi perilaku bullying siswa melalui konseling kelompok teknik role playing. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Counseling*, 5(2), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.30653/001.202152.174>
- Cardona-Isaza, A. de J., González Barrón, R., & Montoya-Castilla, I. (2023). Empathy and prosocial behavior in adolescent offenders: The mediating role of rational decisions. *SAGE Open*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231202844>
- Corey, G. (2023). *Theory and practice of group counseling* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Corey, G., Muratori, M., Austin, J. T., II, & Austin, J. A. (2023). *Counselor self-care* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Franklin, C., Guz, S., Zhang, A., Kim, J., Zheng, H., Hai, A. H., Cho, Y. J., & Shen, L. (2022). Solution-focused brief therapy for students in schools: A comparative meta-analysis of the U.S. and Chinese literature. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 13(2), 381–407. <https://doi.org/10.1086/712169>

- Hayati, S. A., & Aminah, A. (2020). Solution-focused brief group counseling (SFGC) untuk meningkatkan self-acceptance pada anak korban perceraian. *Ghaidan: Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Islam dan Kemasyarakatan*, 4(2), 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.19109/ghaidan.v4i2.6065>
- Hendriani, W., & Mulawarman, M. (2020). The alignment of solution-focused brief counseling in helping to achieve resilience. *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal*, 3(2), 100–107. <https://doi.org/10.25217/igcj.v3i2.860>
- Indriani, I., Wibowo, M. E., & Mulawarman, M. (2022). Effectiveness of solution-focused brief counseling and motivational interviewing in improving students' self-disclosure. *Jurnal Kajian Bimbingan dan Konseling*, 7(2), 81–88. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um001v7i22022p81-88>
- Karababa, A. (2024). A meta-analysis of solution-focused brief therapy for school-related problems in adolescents. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 34(2), 169–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315231170865>
- Krol, S. A., & Bartz, J. A. (2022). The self and empathy: Lacking a clear and stable sense of self undermines empathy and helping behavior. *Emotion*, 22(7), 1554–1571. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000943>
- Kurniawan, D. L., Asrowi, & Suryawati, C. T. (2024). Studi kepustakaan implementasi layanan konseling dalam mengurangi perilaku phubbing. *Jurnal Psikoedukasi dan Konseling*, 8(1), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.20961/jpk.v8i1.91449>
- Latifah, L., & Ariffudin, I. (2022). Efektivitas pendekatan solution focused brief counseling (SFBC) untuk meningkatkan empati mahasiswa. *Counsnesia Indonesian Journal of Guidance and Counseling*, 3(2), 54–62. <https://doi.org/10.36728/cijgc.v3i2.2203>
- Lestari, R., & Astuti, B. (2021). The effectiveness of solution-focused brief therapy to reduce Generation Z anxiety in the age of disruption. *Jurnal Kajian Bimbingan dan Konseling*, 6(3), 96–104. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um001v6i32021p096-104>
- Lombu, J., Nugroho, A. R., & Gunawan, R. (2023). Keefektifan konseling kelompok SFBC dalam meningkatkan resiliensi siswa. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Counseling*, 7(2), 322–331. <https://doi.org/10.30653/001.202372.300>
- Mubarokah, W. N., Fuadi, D., Widyasari, C., & Rahmawati, L. E. (2020). Manajemen alpha zones' games berbasis kecerdasan majemuk dalam membentuk empati siswa sekolah dasar. *Psikologika: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Penelitian Psikologi*, 25(2), 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.20885/psikologika.vol25.iss2.art1>
- Mulawarman. (2023). *SFBC (solution-focused brief counseling) konseling singkat berfokus solusi: Konsep, riset, dan prosedur* (2nd ed.). Kencana.
- Palmer, S. (Ed.). (2016). *Konseling dan psikoterapi* (H. H. Setiadjud, Trans.). Pustaka Pelajar.
- Sağar, M. E. (2021). Intervention for social anxiety among university students with a solution-focused group counseling program. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 17(3), 316–326. <https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2021.346.20>
- Siem, B. (2022). The relationship between empathic concern and perceived personal costs for helping and how it is affected by similarity perceptions. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 162(1), 178–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2021.1996321>
- Slote, M. A. (2021). Why we need empathy. *Australasian Philosophical Review*, 5(4), 366–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24740500.2021.2122123>
- Stevens, F., & Taber, K. (2021). The neuroscience of empathy and compassion in pro-social behavior. *Neuropsychologia*, 159, Article 107925. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2021.107925>
- Yin, Y., & Wang, Y. (2023). Is empathy associated with more prosocial behaviour? A meta-analysis. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 26(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12537>