

# Changes In Bullying Bystanders' Empathy Following Group Counseling Using Role-Playing Techniques: A Pre-Experimental Study Among High School Students

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                    | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <b>Article history:</b><br>Submitted: 30-07-2026<br>Accepted: 01-09-2026<br>Published: 04-09-2026                                               | <i>Bullying is a complex social phenomenon involving perpetrators, victims, and bystanders whose responses may influence bullying dynamics. This study aimed to examine changes in empathy among bullying bystanders following group counseling using role-playing techniques at SMA Negeri 17 Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. A quantitative pre-experimental approach with a one-group pretest-posttest design was employed. Six students with low to moderate empathy levels were selected through purposive sampling. The intervention consisted of five structured group counseling sessions incorporating psychoeducation, role-playing, group discussion, and reflection. Empathy was assessed using a researcher-developed scale based on Davis's multidimensional empathy framework. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The results revealed an increase in mean empathy scores from 62.83 to 80.50, representing a mean improvement of 17.67 points. The exact two-sided Wilcoxon test indicated a statistically significant difference (<math>p = .03125</math>). These findings suggest positive changes in self-reported empathy following the intervention. However, the small sample and absence of a control group limit causal interpretation. Further controlled studies are recommended to establish intervention effectiveness</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Keyword:</b><br>Bullying Bystanders;<br>Empathy; Group<br>Counseling; Role-Playing;<br>Pre-Experimental Study.                               | <b>ABSTRAK</b><br><i>Perundungan merupakan fenomena sosial kompleks yang melibatkan pelaku, korban, dan saksi (bystander) yang responsnya dapat memengaruhi dinamika perundungan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji perubahan empati siswa bystander setelah mengikuti layanan konseling kelompok dengan teknik role playing di SMA Negeri 17 Bandar Lampung. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan desain pra-eksperimental one-group pretest-posttest. Sebanyak enam siswa dengan tingkat empati rendah hingga sedang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Intervensi dilaksanakan melalui lima sesi konseling kelompok terstruktur yang mencakup psikoedukasi, bermain peran, diskusi kelompok, dan refleksi. Empati diukur menggunakan skala yang dikembangkan peneliti berdasarkan kerangka empati multidimensional Davis. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif dan uji Wilcoxon signed-rank. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan peningkatan rerata skor empati dari 62,83 menjadi 80,50, dengan kenaikan sebesar 17,67 poin. Pengujian Wilcoxon eksak dua sisi menunjukkan perbedaan yang signifikan secara statistik (<math>p = 0,03125</math>). Temuan ini mengindikasikan perubahan positif pada empati berdasarkan laporan diri setelah intervensi. Namun, ukuran sampel yang kecil dan tidak adanya kelompok kontrol membatasi penarikan kesimpulan kausal. Penelitian lanjutan dengan desain terkontrol diperlukan untuk menguji efektivitas intervensi secara lebih meyakinkan dan menilai perubahan perilaku nyata siswa ketika menyaksikan perundungan di sekolah.</i> |
| <b>Corresponding Author:</b><br>Author Name, Rara Okta Purnamadewi<br>Email: <a href="mailto:raraokta1510@gmail.com">raraokta1510@gmail.com</a> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

## Introduction

School bullying remains a persistent educational and psychosocial concern that affects students' emotional well-being, peer relationships, and sense of safety within the school environment. Beyond individual acts of aggression, bullying is characterized by repeated harmful behavior involving an actual or perceived imbalance of power between perpetrators and victims. Importantly, bullying does not occur exclusively within perpetrator–victim relationships but is embedded in broader peer-group dynamics in which students may directly or indirectly influence the continuation of aggressive behavior. Salmivalli et al. (1996) conceptualized bullying as a group process involving distinct participant roles, including perpetrators, assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and defenders. Within this framework, peer responses may reinforce aggressive behavior by providing social approval or, alternatively, contribute to victim protection through supportive intervention. Salmivalli (2014) further emphasized that the social rewards provided by peers can sustain bullying, highlighting the importance of addressing bystander behavior in school-based prevention efforts. Accordingly, effective bullying prevention should extend beyond changing perpetrators' behavior to strengthening the psychological capacities and constructive responses of students who witness bullying.

The significance of bystanders becomes particularly evident when bullying is examined through naturally occurring peer interactions. Hawkins et al. (2001), in their observational study of school playground interactions, found that peers were present during approximately 88% of bullying episodes, although intervention occurred in only 19% of the observed incidents. These findings suggest that the presence of witnesses does not necessarily translate into protective action. Moreover, bystander responses may take several forms, ranging from actively defending victims to remaining passive or reinforcing perpetrators through laughter, attention, or encouragement. Such variation demonstrates that students' involvement in bullying is shaped not merely by awareness of inappropriate behavior but also by their interpretations of social situations, emotional responses, perceived interpersonal risks, and confidence in their ability to intervene. Therefore, understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying bystander behavior is essential for developing interventions that encourage safer and more supportive peer responses (Hawkins et al., 2001; Salmivalli, 2014).

Among the psychological factors associated with bystander responses, empathy has received considerable theoretical and empirical attention. Empathy generally refers to the capacity to understand another person's emotional experience and respond with an appropriate degree of emotional sensitivity. Rather than treating empathy as a single psychological attribute, Davis (1983) proposed a multidimensional framework encompassing cognitive and affective components. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) identifies four dimensions: perspective taking, empathic concern, fantasy, and personal distress. Perspective taking reflects the tendency to adopt another person's psychological viewpoint, whereas empathic concern involves feelings of compassion and concern for individuals experiencing difficulties. Fantasy refers to the tendency to imaginatively identify with fictional characters or situations, while personal distress represents self-oriented emotional discomfort in response to others' suffering. These dimensions provide a conceptual foundation for understanding the complexity of empathic experiences and their potential associations with interpersonal behavior (Davis, 1983).

In bullying situations, the multidimensional nature of empathy is particularly relevant because witnessing aggression may elicit different cognitive and emotional reactions. Students who demonstrate stronger perspective-taking abilities may be better positioned to recognize the victim's experiences, whereas those exhibiting greater empathic concern may become more motivated to provide emotional support. However, empathic reactions do not necessarily lead to protective behavior. Personal distress, for example, reflects self-focused emotional discomfort that may interfere with constructive responding in demanding social situations. Consequently, increasing empathy should not be understood as automatically producing defending behavior. In their systematic review, van Noorden et al. (2015) demonstrated the importance of distinguishing cognitive and affective empathy when examining children's and adolescents' involvement in bullying. This distinction suggests that interventions should address not only students' understanding of victims' experiences but also their emotional responses and capacity to translate empathic awareness into appropriate social action.

Empirical evidence further supports the association between empathy and students' participation in bullying-related social roles. Nickerson et al. (2008) examined attachment and empathy as predictors of students' identification with defender and outsider roles in bullying interactions, demonstrating the relevance of interpersonal and emotional factors in understanding peer responses. Nevertheless, empathy alone provides an incomplete explanation of whether a student will intervene. Thornberg and Jungert (2013) investigated the relationships among basic moral sensitivity, moral disengagement, defender self-efficacy, and bystander behavior. Their findings indicated that moral disengagement was associated with greater pro-bullying tendencies, while defender self-efficacy helped distinguish students who defended victims from those who remained outsiders. These findings suggest that protective responses emerge through the interaction of emotional sensitivity, moral evaluation, and perceived behavioral capability. Consequently, educational interventions should provide opportunities for students to develop empathic understanding while also practicing feasible and socially responsible responses to bullying (Nickerson et al., 2008; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013).

From an intervention perspective, strengthening constructive bystander responses requires more than communicating the negative consequences of bullying. Students may recognize bullying as morally unacceptable yet remain reluctant to intervene because they fear retaliation, rejection by peers, or uncertainty about appropriate actions. This discrepancy between recognizing a harmful situation and engaging in protective behavior highlights the need for experiential approaches that allow students to examine interpersonal situations and rehearse alternative responses. Salmivalli (2014) emphasized that bystander-focused interventions should strengthen awareness of peer roles, empathy toward victims, and self-efficacy in defending vulnerable students. Furthermore, Polanin et al. (2012), through a meta-analysis of school-based bullying prevention programs, examined the effects of interventions on bystander intervention behavior, providing evidence that bystander responses constitute a meaningful target for school-based prevention initiatives. These findings provide a rationale for counseling interventions that integrate emotional understanding, interpersonal reflection, and behavioral rehearsal.

Group counseling incorporating role-playing techniques represents a potentially relevant approach to addressing these needs. Group counseling provides an interpersonal setting in which students can discuss experiences, consider alternative viewpoints, exchange feedback, and reflect on the consequences of social behavior. Role-playing adds an experiential

component by allowing participants to enact situations resembling real-life peer interactions. Within simulated bullying scenarios, students may assume the roles of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, enabling them to examine how different actions and responses affect individuals involved in the interaction. Through guided discussion and reflection, participants can explore victims' emotional experiences, identify inappropriate peer responses, and rehearse constructive alternatives. Such activities are theoretically consistent with a multidimensional understanding of empathy because they can create opportunities to practice perspective taking and express empathic concern. Nevertheless, whether these activities produce measurable changes in empathy must be established empirically rather than assumed (Davis, 1983; Salmivalli, 2014).

The potential relevance of role-playing can also be understood through the distinction between empathic awareness and behavioral competence. Students may experience concern for bullying victims but lack confidence in how to respond safely. In this context, role-playing may provide opportunities to practice supportive verbal responses, seek assistance from teachers, comfort victims, or disengage from behaviors that reinforce perpetrators. Group reflection allows participants to evaluate the consequences of different responses without exposing students to the immediate interpersonal risks associated with real bullying incidents. The importance of combining emotional sensitivity with perceived ability to act is consistent with the findings of Thornberg and Jungert (2013), while Salmivalli (2014) underscored the significance of enhancing students' readiness to defend vulnerable peers. Accordingly, role-playing within group counseling can be conceptualized as an experiential strategy intended to support empathic understanding and the rehearsal of constructive bystander responses, although the present study specifically measures changes in empathy rather than actual defending behavior.

Evidence from broader school-based bullying prevention research also provides a basis for examining interventions targeting bystanders. Polanin et al. (2012) reviewed the effects of school-based programs on bystander intervention behavior and highlighted the potential for educational interventions to influence students' responses to bullying. Similarly, Gaffney et al. (2019), in an updated meta-analytical review, reported that school-based anti-bullying programs were associated with reductions in bullying perpetration and victimization. However, these findings concern interventions that vary considerably in their components, intensity, implementation, and target outcomes. They therefore cannot be interpreted as direct evidence of the effectiveness of group counseling using role-playing techniques in improving empathy among bullying bystanders. Rather, they reinforce the importance of conducting more focused studies that investigate specific intervention components and clearly defined psychological outcomes within particular educational contexts.

In the Indonesian educational context, understanding bystander responses is especially relevant to school counseling practice, where guidance and counseling services are expected to support students' social and emotional development. School-level interventions may benefit from addressing students who witness bullying but do not consistently demonstrate concern for victims or engage in supportive responses. Although international research has established relationships among empathy, moral sensitivity, and bystander behavior, these findings require careful contextual interpretation. Peer-group norms, interpersonal expectations, and the organization of counseling services may influence how interventions are experienced in particular schools. Therefore, context-specific empirical investigation is warranted to

understand whether structured group counseling activities are associated with measurable changes in students' empathy. The present study responds to this need by examining bullying bystanders in an Indonesian senior high school rather than assuming that outcomes reported in other educational settings necessarily apply to the local context.

Preliminary observations conducted at SMA Negeri 17 Bandar Lampung indicated that several students who witnessed bullying did not consistently demonstrate supportive or empathic responses toward victims. Some students reportedly remained silent, ignored incidents, or responded in ways that could reinforce perpetrators' behavior. During the initial identification process, 38 students were identified as potential bullying bystanders. The preliminary assessment reported percentage scores of 49.83% for perspective taking, 40.73% for empathic concern, 36.35% for fantasy, and 43.20% for personal distress. These percentages describe preliminary findings from the study setting and should not be interpreted as population-level prevalence estimates or definitive indicators of psychological impairment. Moreover, because the four dimensions of empathy represent conceptually distinct constructs, lower or higher scores should be interpreted according to their respective measurement properties rather than assuming that all dimensions represent equivalent levels of prosocial empathy. The preliminary findings nevertheless suggested a need for counseling activities that encourage students to examine victims' perspectives, reflect on emotional responses, and consider alternative ways of responding to bullying.

Following the initial identification process, 21 students were classified as having low to moderate empathy according to the study's screening criteria, and six students were purposively selected to participate in the intervention. The counseling program consisted of five group sessions that incorporated the development of group relationships, discussions of empathy and bullying-related roles, role-playing activities, reflection, feedback, and evaluation. The intervention was designed to encourage participants to understand different perspectives within bullying situations and strengthen their awareness of empathic responses. Because the program was implemented in a small group, participants had opportunities to observe and respond to simulated interpersonal experiences while receiving structured feedback from the counselor and fellow group members. These activities were intended to make the abstract concept of empathy more concrete and personally meaningful within the students' social environment.

Despite substantial literature on bullying as a group process and the psychological factors associated with defending behavior, a more specific empirical question remains regarding changes in multidimensional empathy following group counseling that incorporates role-playing among students identified as bullying bystanders. Previous studies have established the importance of participant roles (Salmivalli et al., 1996), empathy and interpersonal attachment (Nickerson et al., 2008), moral sensitivity and defender self-efficacy (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), and school-based bystander interventions (Polanin et al., 2012). However, these bodies of evidence do not directly establish the extent to which a brief, structured role-playing group counseling intervention is associated with changes in empathy scores among selected high school bystanders in the present Indonesian school context. The research gap addressed here is therefore primarily contextual and intervention-specific, rather than a claim that role-playing or empathy-based bullying prevention has not previously been investigated.

Accordingly, the present study aims to examine changes in bullying bystanders' empathy scores before and after participation in five sessions of group counseling incorporating role-playing techniques at SMA Negeri 17 Bandar Lampung. Using a quantitative pre-experimental

one-group pretest–posttest design, the study investigates whether statistically significant differences exist between participants' empathy scores before and after the intervention. It is hypothesized that participants will demonstrate higher empathy scores following the counseling sessions. The study contributes preliminary empirical evidence concerning the feasibility and potential relevance of role-playing group counseling for supporting bystanders' empathic development in an Indonesian high school setting. Nevertheless, given the absence of a control group and the small purposively selected sample, any observed changes must be interpreted as within-group differences rather than definitive evidence of a causal intervention effect.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative approach using a pre-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design to examine changes in empathy among bullying bystanders following participation in group counseling incorporating role-playing techniques. In this design, empathy was assessed before and after the intervention within the same group of participants, without random assignment or a comparison group. The design allowed the researchers to identify within-participant differences in empathy scores following the counseling program. However, because the study did not include a control group, the observed changes could not be attributed exclusively to the intervention. Other potential explanations, including testing effects, maturation, and external experiences, could not be ruled out.

The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 17 Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, and focused on students identified as bullying bystanders with low to moderate levels of empathy. Given the exploratory nature of the intervention and the limited number of participants, the findings were interpreted as preliminary evidence of changes in empathy rather than definitive evidence of intervention effectiveness. As emphasized by Hertzog (2008), studies involving small samples require careful consideration of their objectives and limitations, particularly regarding statistical precision and generalizability.

### **Participants and Sampling Procedures**

Participants were selected through a multistage identification and screening process. Initial screening identified 38 students who were potentially involved as bystanders in bullying situations. Subsequent screening identified 21 students whose empathy scores fell within the low or moderate categories according to the classification criteria employed in the study. From this group, six students were purposively selected to participate in the counseling intervention. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) being identified as a student who had witnessed or was aware of bullying incidents without being the primary perpetrator or victim; (b) obtaining an empathy score within the low or moderate category; and (c) expressing willingness to participate in the group counseling sessions. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met the characteristics relevant to the research objectives.

The final intervention group consisted of six students ( $N = 6$ ), all of whom underwent pretest and posttest assessments. The small sample size and nonprobability sampling procedure limited the representativeness of the participants and the generalizability of the findings to other students or school settings. Accordingly, the study focused on evaluating within-group changes in the selected participants rather than estimating the intervention effect in the broader student population.

## **Research Instrument**

Empathy was measured using a researcher-developed self-report scale based on the multidimensional conceptualization of empathy proposed by Davis (1983). This framework distinguishes four related but conceptually different dimensions: perspective taking, empathic concern, fantasy, and personal distress. Perspective taking refers to the cognitive tendency to understand situations from another person's psychological viewpoint, while empathic concern reflects other-oriented feelings of compassion and concern. Fantasy describes the tendency to imaginatively identify with fictional characters or situations, whereas personal distress represents self-oriented emotional discomfort when observing others' suffering.

The scale was developed with reference to these four dimensions and adapted conceptually to the context of students witnessing bullying incidents. Therefore, the instrument was treated as a researcher-developed empathy measure informed by Davis's theoretical framework rather than an established or directly validated version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). This distinction is important because Davis (1983) conceptualized the four dimensions as related but distinguishable components rather than interchangeable indicators of a single empathic response.

The initial instrument consisted of 25 statements using a four-point Likert-type response format: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Item-level screening was conducted using Pearson product-moment correlations based on responses from 21 students. According to the original instrument analysis, 21 items met the adopted statistical criterion, whereas four items (P4, P7, P15, and P21) were excluded. The reported critical correlation coefficient was 0.433.

Following item screening, the retained 21-item instrument yielded a reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.920, indicating high internal consistency for the composite measure. Nevertheless, this reliability coefficient should not be interpreted as sufficient evidence of construct validity or the unidimensionality of the instrument. Furthermore, given the modest sample used for item screening, the psychometric findings should be regarded as preliminary.

Particular attention is required when interpreting the personal distress dimension because higher personal distress may reflect greater self-oriented emotional discomfort rather than more adaptive empathic functioning. Consequently, interpretation of the overall empathy score depends on the scoring direction and treatment of items representing different dimensions. The available study documentation does not provide sufficient information regarding the distribution of items across dimensions, reverse-coded items, corrected item-total correlations, or the scoring thresholds used for empathy classification. These measurement details require confirmation before the instrument can be fully evaluated for reproducibility and construct validity.

## **Group Counseling Intervention**

The intervention consisted of five structured group counseling sessions incorporating role-playing techniques. Each session lasted approximately 60–70 minutes and involved the six selected participants. The counseling activities were organized progressively, beginning with group establishment and conceptual understanding, followed by experiential role-playing exercises, reflection, feedback, and evaluation.

The intervention was designed to provide opportunities for students to understand different perspectives within bullying situations, recognize victims' emotional experiences, and explore supportive responses that bystanders might employ. Role-playing activities were incorporated as experiential learning opportunities through which participants could examine interpersonal interactions and reflect on the consequences of different behavioral responses.

The first session focused on establishing group relationships, developing trust, introducing the counseling objectives, and agreeing on basic group expectations. Participants were introduced to the concepts of empathy and bullying bystanders to establish a common understanding of the intervention focus. The second session emphasized psychoeducational discussion concerning bullying, its potential consequences for victims, the different roles assumed by bystanders, and the multidimensional nature of empathy. This session was intended to strengthen participants' understanding of how emotional awareness and perspective taking might influence interpersonal responses.

The third session introduced the first structured role-playing activity. Participants enacted simulated bullying situations and reflected on the perspectives and emotional experiences of individuals involved, particularly victims. Guided reflection was used to encourage participants to recognize how bullying might be experienced differently by victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. The fourth session involved a second role-playing activity focusing on empathic and assertive bystander responses. Participants explored alternative ways of responding to bullying, including communicating support to victims and considering constructive actions in potentially harmful peer interactions. The activity was followed by group discussion and feedback intended to reinforce awareness of more supportive interpersonal responses.

The fifth session consisted of an overall reflection on the counseling process, discussion of participants' learning experiences, evaluation of the intervention activities, administration of the posttest empathy scale, and termination of the counseling group. The organization and intended learning objectives of the five sessions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the Group Counseling Intervention Using Role-Playing Techniques

| Session | Duration                | Main activities                                                                                 | Intended learning objectives                                                            |
|---------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1       | Approximately 60 min    | Group formation, rapport building, group agreement, introduction to empathy and bystander roles | Establish psychological safety, trust, and initial understanding of bullying bystanders |
| 2       | Approximately 60 min    | Discussion of bullying, its consequences, empathy dimensions, and bystander responses           | Develop awareness of victims' experiences and possible bystander responses              |
| 3       | Approximately 60–70 min | Role-playing bullying scenarios followed by guided reflection                                   | Strengthen perspective taking and recognition of victims' emotional experiences         |
| 4       | Approximately 60–70 min | Role-playing empathic and assertive responses, group discussion, and feedback                   | Practice identifying supportive and constructive responses to bullying                  |
| 5       | Approximately 60 min    | Overall reflection, evaluation, posttest administration, and group termination                  | Consolidate learning experiences and assess changes in empathy scores                   |

Note. The intervention structure was reconstructed from the original study's documented counseling procedures (2026). The activities represent intended learning processes rather than independently verified behavioral outcomes.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected at two measurement points: before and after the counseling intervention. Prior to the first intervention session, participants completed the empathy scale to establish baseline scores. Following the completion of the five counseling sessions, the same instrument was administered as a posttest to assess changes in participants' self-reported empathy.

Each participant's pretest and posttest scores were paired for statistical analysis. The use of the same measurement instrument at both time points enabled direct comparison of scores within individuals. However, the repeated administration of a self-report instrument may introduce response-related influences, including familiarity with questionnaire items and socially desirable responding. These factors were considered when interpreting the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize individual pretest and posttest scores, including total scores, means, medians, and within-participant differences. The direction and magnitude of individual score changes were also examined to describe the pattern of responses following the intervention. Because the study involved six paired observations, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to examine differences between pretest and posttest empathy scores. The analysis considered the paired differences and their signed ranks, with statistical significance evaluated using a two-sided exact probability at an alpha level of 0.05.

All six participants demonstrated positive nonzero differences between posttest and pretest scores. For this observed configuration, the exact two-sided probability was calculated as:

$$p_{\text{exact}} = \frac{2}{2^6} = 0.03125$$

Thus, the exact two-sided probability was approximately 0.031. This value differs from the asymptotic significance value of 0.027 reported in the original analysis. Given the small number of paired observations, the exact probability was prioritized for statistical interpretation. In addition to statistical significance, the direction and consistency of score changes were considered when interpreting the findings. Nevertheless, statistical significance in a one-group pretest–posttest design does not establish a causal intervention effect. Furthermore, the limited sample size necessitates caution in interpreting the precision and broader applicability of the observed changes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study involved secondary school students and addressed potentially sensitive experiences related to bullying. Therefore, ethical considerations included voluntary participation, confidentiality, protection of participants' identities, and attention to possible emotional discomfort during simulated bullying activities. The original study documentation does not provide sufficient information to confirm the procedures used to obtain institutional

approval, parental or guardian permission where required, student assent, or formal ethical clearance. The implementation of these safeguards must therefore be verified by the researchers before publication. In particular, a complete ethical statement should clarify how participants' confidentiality was protected, whether participation could be discontinued without consequences, and how potentially distressing emotional responses during role-playing were managed.

## Results

### Changes in Empathy Scores Before and After the Intervention

The findings revealed an increase in self-reported empathy scores among all six students identified as bullying bystanders following their participation in five sessions of group counseling incorporating role-playing techniques. The pretest and posttest assessments were administered to the same participants to examine within-individual changes in empathy scores. Individual scores and the corresponding differences are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Empathy Scores

| Participant | Pretest | Posttest | Score difference |
|-------------|---------|----------|------------------|
| PD1         | 58      | 75       | 17               |
| PD2         | 60      | 78       | 18               |
| PD3         | 62      | 80       | 18               |
| PD4         | 66      | 83       | 17               |
| PD5         | 68      | 86       | 18               |
| PD6         | 63      | 81       | 18               |
| Total       | 377     | 483      | 106              |
| Mean        | 62.83   | 80.50    | +17.67           |

Note. Positive differences indicate higher posttest scores than pretest scores. Data were obtained from the study's original pretest and posttest records (2026).

As presented in Table 2, all participants obtained higher empathy scores following the intervention. The total empathy score increased from 377 at pretest to 483 at posttest, representing an overall increase of 106 points. The mean score increased from 62.83 (pretest) to 80.50 (posttest), corresponding to an average improvement of 17.67 points. Relative to the initial mean score, this increase represented approximately 28.12%. The median also increased from 62.50 to 80.50, indicating a positive shift in the central tendency of the observed scores.

At the individual level, the smallest increase was 17 points, observed for participants PD1 and PD4, whereas the remaining four participants demonstrated increases of 18 points. These results indicate a consistent pattern of positive score differences across the six students. No participant exhibited a decrease or an unchanged score between the two assessments.

Although the observed changes were uniform in direction, the magnitude of improvement should be interpreted within the measurement characteristics of the researcher-developed empathy scale. Specifically, the increase represents a change in participants' self-reported scores rather than direct evidence of changes in actual defending behavior. Furthermore, the narrow range of score differences warrants careful consideration of the instrument's scoring procedures and the possibility of response-related influences.

### Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results

To determine whether the observed pretest–posttest differences were statistically significant, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted. This nonparametric procedure was selected to evaluate paired observations from the same participants. Given the small sample size ( $N = 6$ ), an exact two-sided probability was used for statistical inference. The signed-rank analysis identified six positive ranks, no negative ranks, and no zero-difference ties. The sum of positive ranks was 21.00, while the sum of negative ranks was 0.00. These findings demonstrate that all six participants had higher posttest than pretest scores.

Table 3. Summary of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

| Statistical indicator           | Result |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| Number of paired observations   | 6      |
| Positive ranks                  | 6      |
| Negative ranks                  | 0      |
| Zero-difference ties            | 0      |
| Mean positive rank              | 3.50   |
| Sum of positive ranks ( $W^+$ ) | 21.00  |
| Sum of negative ranks ( $W^-$ ) | 0.00   |
| Exact two-sided $p$             | .03125 |
| Rank-biserial correlation       | 1.00   |
| Significance level ( $\alpha$ ) | .05    |

Note. The exact probability was obtained from the observed configuration of six positive, nonzero paired differences. The original manuscript reported an asymptotic two-sided significance value of .027. The exact result is presented here because of the very small sample size.

The exact two-sided significance value was  $p = .03125$ , which was below the predetermined significance threshold of  $\alpha = .05$ . This result indicates a statistically significant difference between participants' pretest and posttest empathy scores. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no systematic paired difference was rejected at the 5% significance level.

The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation was 1.00, reflecting the fact that all observed signed ranks were positive. However, this value should not be interpreted as demonstrating a perfect or universally reproducible intervention effect. In the present sample, it describes the complete consistency in the direction of the six observed score differences.

Overall, the statistical findings indicate that the selected students reported higher empathy scores after completing the group counseling program. Nevertheless, the one-group pretest–posttest design does not permit the observed differences to be attributed solely to the intervention. Potential influences such as repeated testing, maturation, social desirability, and experiences outside the counseling sessions remain plausible alternative explanations.

### Discussion

#### Changes in Empathy Following Role-Playing Group Counseling

The present study examined changes in empathy among bullying bystanders following participation in a five-session group counseling intervention incorporating role-playing techniques. The findings indicated that all six participants demonstrated increased self-reported empathy scores, with the mean rising from 62.83 to 80.50 and an exact Wilcoxon signed-rank

test yielding a statistically significant difference ( $p = .03125$ ). Although the findings suggest a positive within-group change, they should be interpreted cautiously because the research design did not include a control group.

One possible interpretation of these findings concerns the experiential characteristics of the counseling activities. Through role-playing, participants were provided with opportunities to examine bullying situations from different social positions, including those of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. These activities were accompanied by discussion and reflection, which may have encouraged participants to recognize the emotional consequences of bullying and consider the perspectives of individuals affected by aggressive peer interactions.

This interpretation is theoretically consistent with the multidimensional conceptualization of empathy proposed by Davis (1983), particularly the components of perspective taking and empathic concern. Perspective taking enables individuals to consider how others interpret and experience interpersonal situations, whereas empathic concern involves other-oriented emotional sensitivity toward individuals experiencing difficulties. The combination of simulated interpersonal experiences and guided reflection may therefore represent a relevant pathway through which role-playing activities support the development of empathic awareness.

Nevertheless, the present study did not separately assess changes across the four empathy dimensions or examine the psychological processes responsible for the observed score differences. Accordingly, the proposed role of perspective taking and empathic concern remains a theoretically informed explanation rather than an empirically demonstrated mediation mechanism.

### **Empathy and the Psychological Dynamics of Bullying Bystanders**

The findings should also be considered in relation to the psychological characteristics of bullying bystanders. The decision to assist victims is influenced by multiple factors, including emotional responsiveness, moral evaluation, perceived social expectations, and confidence in one's ability to intervene.

Nickerson et al. (2008) examined attachment and empathy as predictors of defender and outsider roles in bullying interactions. Their research provides support for the relevance of interpersonal characteristics and empathic capacities in understanding why students respond differently to bullying. Similarly, Thornberg and Jungert (2013) found that moral sensitivity, moral disengagement, and defender self-efficacy were important variables associated with bystander behavior. These findings suggest that understanding victims' experiences is relevant to supportive responses but does not independently guarantee that students will intervene.

The distinction between empathic awareness and actual defending behavior is especially important for interpreting the present findings. Although participants demonstrated higher scores on the empathy measure, the study did not directly assess whether they became more likely to protect victims, report bullying incidents, or discourage perpetrators during actual school interactions. Therefore, the observed changes should not be interpreted as evidence that participants transitioned from passive bystanders to active defenders.

In this regard, future interventions could incorporate behavioral indicators alongside empathy measures, including the frequency of supportive peer responses, willingness to seek assistance from school personnel, and observed efforts to avoid reinforcing bullying. Such

measures would help establish whether changes in empathic understanding are accompanied by meaningful behavioral responses.

### **The Role of Perspective Taking and Experiential Learning**

Role-playing may offer a distinctive learning opportunity because it allows participants to engage with social situations through active enactment rather than discussion alone. Within the intervention, students were encouraged to portray different roles in simulated bullying incidents, reflect on the emotional experiences associated with these roles, and identify more supportive alternatives.

This sequence of enactment and reflection is relevant to the development of perspective-taking skills. When students assume the role of a victim, for example, they may become more attentive to the humiliation, exclusion, or emotional discomfort associated with bullying. Conversely, portraying a bystander may help students examine why witnesses remain silent, reinforce perpetrators, or attempt to support victims.

Davis (1983) emphasized the importance of differentiating cognitive and affective components of empathy. The role-playing activities employed in the present study were conceptually intended to engage both components by encouraging students to understand others' psychological viewpoints and reflect on the emotional consequences of their actions.

Further support for distinguishing different empathic responses comes from Pozzoli et al. (2017), who examined the importance of anger alongside perspective taking and empathic concern in understanding bystander behavior. Their findings suggest that explanations of protective bystander responses should extend beyond general empathy to consider specific emotional processes that may motivate action. Thus, the value of role-playing may lie not only in fostering awareness of victims' experiences but also in providing opportunities to discuss how emotional understanding can be translated into constructive interpersonal choices. However, the present study provides no direct evidence regarding which component of role-playing produced the observed changes.

### **Emotional Responses and the Complexity of Empathic Behavior**

An important consideration in interpreting the findings is that empathy is not a uniformly prosocial psychological construct. Davis (1983) distinguished between empathic concern, which is primarily directed toward others, and personal distress, which involves self-oriented discomfort when witnessing another person's suffering. This distinction has implications for the interpretation of empathy scores among bullying bystanders. A student who experiences intense emotional discomfort when witnessing bullying may not necessarily engage in protective behavior. Instead, excessive personal distress may contribute to avoidance, withdrawal, or passive observation, particularly when the student perceives intervention as socially risky. Steinvik et al. (2024) provided empirical evidence that different empathic and compassionate responses were associated with distinct bystander intentions in cyberbullying situations. Their study found that empathic distress, empathic anger, and compassion demonstrated different associations with passive bystanding, aggressive defending, and prosocial defending. In particular, compassion was associated with greater prosocial defending intentions and lower aggressive defending intentions, whereas empathic distress was associated with more passive bystanding intentions. However, these findings were based on university

students responding to cyberbullying scenarios and should not be directly generalized to secondary school students experiencing face-to-face bullying.

These findings reinforce the need to distinguish between increased emotional reactivity and improved adaptive empathy. Within the present study, the empathy instrument was developed with reference to four dimensions of Davis's framework, but the available data were limited to composite scores. Without additional evidence regarding the scoring direction, dimensional structure, and treatment of personal distress items, it is not possible to determine whether improvements occurred uniformly across the dimensions. Accordingly, the most defensible interpretation is that participants' overall scores on the researcher-developed empathy scale increased following the intervention. Future studies should examine dimension-specific changes to clarify whether role-playing primarily influences perspective taking, empathic concern, emotional identification, or the regulation of self-oriented distress.

### **Relationship Between the Findings and Previous Bullying Prevention Research**

The present findings can be interpreted alongside broader research on school-based bullying prevention and bystander intervention. Polanin et al. (2012), in a meta-analysis of 12 school-based intervention programs involving 12,874 students, reported a statistically significant overall effect on bystander intervention behavior (Hedges'  $g = 0.20$ ). This finding suggests that structured educational interventions can contribute to changes in how students respond when witnessing bullying. However, the outcome assessed in their meta-analysis differs from the self-reported empathy scores examined in the present study. Therefore, the findings should be regarded as conceptually related rather than directly comparable.

Similarly, Salmivalli (2014) emphasized the importance of changing peer-group dynamics by increasing students' awareness of their roles in bullying and encouraging constructive responses toward victims. This perspective provides a broader theoretical rationale for incorporating role-playing into group counseling. By allowing students to rehearse alternative responses, the intervention may offer opportunities to explore interpersonal responsibilities within bullying situations.

The present findings are also consistent with the systematic review conducted by van Noorden et al. (2015), which synthesized 40 studies examining relationships between empathy and involvement in bullying. The review reported that defending behavior was consistently positively associated with cognitive and affective empathy, whereas findings concerning passive bystander behavior were less consistent. These results underscore the importance of treating empathy as a multidimensional construct and avoiding assumptions that all empathic responses have identical behavioral implications. Taken together, previous research provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for incorporating empathy-related activities into bullying prevention programs. Nevertheless, the present study contributes a more limited form of evidence: preliminary within-group differences in empathy scores among six selected Indonesian high school students. Its contribution lies primarily in examining the application of a brief role-playing group counseling program within a specific school context.

### **Methodological Considerations and Limitations**

Several methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only six participants selected through purposive sampling. Although all participants demonstrated positive score differences, the small sample size substantially

limits statistical precision and external validity. The findings cannot be generalized confidently to other bullying bystanders, schools, or student populations. Second, the study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design without random assignment or a comparison group. Consequently, the observed improvements may reflect factors other than the counseling intervention, including maturation, repeated exposure to the empathy questionnaire, external learning experiences, or participants' expectations regarding the desired outcomes. The statistically significant paired difference does not eliminate these alternative explanations.

Third, the study relied exclusively on self-reported empathy scores. Participants may have responded in ways that reflected their understanding of socially desirable behavior following the counseling sessions. Such responses may be particularly relevant when the intervention explicitly discusses empathy, victim support, and appropriate responses to bullying. The findings therefore indicate changes in reported empathy rather than independently observed improvements in empathic or defending behavior.

Fourth, the study employed a researcher-developed empathy scale based on Davis's multidimensional framework. Although the instrument demonstrated a reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.920, further psychometric evidence is needed to establish its dimensional structure, scoring validity, and sensitivity to change. The lack of separate scores for perspective taking, empathic concern, fantasy, and personal distress also limits understanding of which psychological dimensions may have changed.

Fifth, the posttest was administered immediately after the final counseling session. As a result, the study could not establish whether the observed differences persisted over time. Future research should incorporate follow-up assessments to determine the stability of empathy scores and whether any changes are associated with subsequent bystander behavior in actual school situations.

Finally, the differences between individual pretest and posttest scores were unusually similar, ranging from 17 to 18 points. Although this pattern does not necessarily indicate an error, it highlights the importance of verifying the original response sheets, scoring procedures, and data-entry records before publication. Such verification would strengthen the transparency and reproducibility of the statistical findings.

### **Implications for School Guidance and Counseling Practice**

Despite these limitations, the findings have preliminary implications for the development of school guidance and counseling services. Group counseling incorporating role-playing may be considered a potentially useful activity for facilitating discussion, perspective taking, emotional reflection, and awareness of supportive bystander responses. Rather than focusing exclusively on identifying bullying perpetrators and victims, school counselors may also address students who witness bullying but remain passive or uncertain about appropriate actions. Structured role-playing scenarios can provide opportunities for these students to examine the emotional consequences of bullying, discuss interpersonal responsibilities, and consider safer responses. Importantly, counseling activities should emphasize psychological safety and avoid exposing participants to unnecessary emotional distress. Simulated scenarios should not require students to disclose identifiable bullying incidents, reenact personal victimization experiences, or confront peers who may have been involved in actual bullying. Counselors should also provide clear procedures for seeking adult assistance when direct intervention may place students at risk. Future counseling programs may benefit from

integrating empathy development with explicit behavioral rehearsal, defender self-efficacy, and practical reporting procedures. However, these recommendations represent implications for intervention development rather than evidence that the present program produced causal improvements in students' real-world defending behavior.

### **Overall Interpretation of the Findings**

Overall, the study identified statistically significant increases in self-reported empathy scores among six bullying bystanders following participation in group counseling incorporating role-playing techniques. The consistent direction of score changes suggests that the intervention period was associated with higher reported empathy among the participating students. The findings are theoretically compatible with research emphasizing perspective taking, empathic concern, and the importance of constructive peer responses in bullying situations. However, the absence of a control group, limited sample size, reliance on a researcher-developed self-report instrument, and lack of behavioral follow-up prevent stronger conclusions regarding causal effectiveness. Accordingly, the present findings should be regarded as preliminary evidence that supports further investigation of role-playing group counseling as an approach to fostering empathic awareness among bullying bystanders. More rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental studies are needed to determine whether such interventions produce reliable and sustained improvements in both empathy and actual defending behavior.

### **Conclusion**

This study revealed a statistically significant increase in self-reported empathy scores among six bullying bystanders at SMA Negeri 17 Bandar Lampung following five sessions of group counseling incorporating role-playing techniques. The mean empathy score increased from 62.83 at pretest to 80.50 at posttest, with an exact two-sided Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicating a statistically significant difference ( $p = .03125$ ). These findings provide preliminary evidence of positive changes in students' reported empathy following the intervention. However, the results should be interpreted cautiously because the study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design without a control group, involved a small purposively selected sample, and relied exclusively on self-report measurements. Consequently, the observed improvements cannot be attributed conclusively to the counseling intervention, nor can they be interpreted as evidence of changes in actual defending behavior. Future research should employ more rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs with larger samples and comparison groups, use empathy instruments with stronger evidence of dimensional validity, incorporate direct assessments of bystander behavior, and conduct follow-up measurements to examine the sustainability of observed changes. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that role-playing group counseling warrants further investigation as a potential approach to supporting empathic development among bullying bystanders in secondary school settings.

### **CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement**

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, methodology, data collection, data analysis, manuscript preparation, critical revision, and approval of the final manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Public access to the data is restricted due to ethical considerations and the need to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

### **Declaration of AI-Assisted Writing**

The authors declare that AI-assisted writing tools were used only to improve language, grammar, and readability. All scientific content, analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and academic responsibility remain entirely with the authors.

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The authors declare no financial or non-financial competing interests that could influence the research process, manuscript writing, data interpretation, or publication of this article.

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