



Factors Influencing Peers' Attitudes towards Students with Special Needs in Indonesia : The Role of Moral Identity, Empathy, Age, and Gender

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the factors influencing peer attitudes towards students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), seen from the role of moral identity, empathy, age, and gender. This study uses a quantitative approach with a non-experimental method of cross-sectional design. The respondents were 288 Indonesian students aged 18-25 ($M = 19.67$ years, $SD = 1.23$), with 62.9% female and 37.1% male. The instrument used was a questionnaire distributed via social media, and the data was analyzed by correlation analysis, ANOVA, and SEM. The results showed that age did not correlate with attitudes towards college students with SEND. There is no difference between male and female students. Moral identity was negatively associated with negative attitudes towards college students with SEND, both in total, affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. The dimensions of fantasy, perspective-taking, and empathic concern can mediate the relationship between the two. The results of the study provide implications for increasing positive peer attitudes towards college students with SEND by encouraging the development of moral identity and empathy.

Article History

Received: 30-09-2023

Revised: 28-10-2023

Accepted: 15-11-2023

Published: 16-12-2023

Key Words:

Attitudes; Peers,
Students with
Disabilities; Moral
Identity; Empathy;
Age; Gender.

How to Cite: Levyadi, J., & Kurniawati, F. (2023). Factors Influencing Peers' Attitudes towards Students with Special Needs in Indonesia : The Role of Moral Identity, Empathy, Age, and Gender. *Jurnal Kependidikan: Jurnal Hasil Penelitian dan Kajian Kepustakaan di Bidang Pendidikan, Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran*, 9(4), 1104-1112. doi:<https://doi.org/10.33394/jk.v9i4.9191>



<https://doi.org/10.33394/jk.v9i4.9191>

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Introduction

"Leave No One Behind" is a slogan raised by the United Nations (UN) through the *Sustainable Development Goals* or SDGs (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2022). The UN (2015) suggests 17 objectives that are targeted by the SDGs, one of which is quality education, which is raised in the fourth point. All people, including people with disabilities, are targeted by this common goal. Indonesia, as a member of the UN, also supports the achievement of quality education for persons with disabilities. Polo et al. (2017) state that inclusive education has been widely recognized as the best way to provide maximum services for all persons with disabilities in terms of academics, social welfare, and economics. Inclusive education provides opportunities for people with disabilities to have access to equal education services (UNESCO, 1994). Not only that, if inclusive education is implemented well, people with disabilities can become part of the community and develop a sense of belongingness to better prepare them to live in society as children and adults.

College students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are persons with disabilities in higher education. Law of Republic Indonesia Number 8 Year 2016 Article 1 defines persons with disabilities as individuals with limitations in the physical, intellectual, mental, and/or sensory domains for a certain period of time so that they experience obstacles and/or difficulties when interacting with the environment. In inclusive education in higher education, college students with SEND will interact with their peers. This interaction behavior will be determined by the attitude of non-disabled students towards college students with SEND. Fishbein and Ajzen (2005) define attitude as a response of like or dislike to an



attitude object that can be an object, intuition, or event. Thus, attitudes have positive and negative degrees. Findler et al. (2007) emphasized the multidimensionality of attitudes towards people with disabilities, namely cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.

Carter et al. (2019) found that most students have high expectations for college students with SEND. This shows a positive attitude from peers in providing encouragement and support for college students with SEND. However, it is not uncommon to find that there are still many students who have a negative attitude towards them. For example, a study conducted by Nevill and White (2011) found that many students were afraid of college students with SEND and eventually withdrew from interactions with them. In Indonesia, a video of bullying against a college student with SEND went viral on social media. DetikNews (2017) reported that this case of bullying against the student occurred verbally and non-verbally. Although it has happened many times, this case only went viral because it was exposed in a video.

Negative attitudes towards college students with SEND are unfortunate, as positive peer attitudes are crucial for their self-development. With acceptance from their peers, college students with SEND can develop social skills, self-esteem, and academic achievement to succeed socially and academically at university (Nevill & White, 2011). A good relationship between college students with SEND and their peers will also positively impact the personal and work relationships of college students with SEND. This relationship will also improve their communication skills, social skills, and independence (Athamanah et al., 2020).

The importance of positive attitudes towards college students with SEND has prompted research into the factors contributing to forming positive attitudes. Researchers classify these factors into three categories: personal characteristics, knowledge of disability, and contextual factors (Bossaert et al., 2011; Vignes et al., 2009). Some of the most widely studied factors are the role of gender and age (de Boer et al., 2012). However, research results still contradict each other. Some studies found that the higher the age, the more positive the attitude towards college students with SEND (Nowicki, 2006; Vignes et al., 2009), while other studies found the opposite (Swaim & Morgan, 2001; Zheng et al., 2016). Likewise, with the gender factor, some studies found that women have a more positive attitude (Patka et al., 2013), while other studies found no relationship between gender and attitude (Vincent-Onabajo & Malgwi, 2015; Sharma et al., 2021).

Then, related to personal characteristics, Page and Islam (2015) found that there were only a few studies that looked at the role of these factors in shaping attitudes towards people with disabilities. Szumski et al. (2020) then conducted research to look at the role of moral identities and found that moral identity is negatively associated with negative attitudes towards people with disabilities. This means individuals with higher moral identity are less likely to have negative attitudes towards people with disabilities in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Black and Reynolds (2016) define moral identity as the extent to which individuals identify themselves with moral traits (moral self) and encourage themselves to perform prosocial behavior in various situations (moral integrity). Individuals develop moral identity when they see moral values, such as sympathy, justice, and kindness, as vital in understanding themselves.

Black and Reynolds (2016) found that the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards peers with special needs is not strong. There are two assumptions as to why this happened. First, the research participants were high school students who were in adolescence. Adolescence is a time when morality integration and new moral identities develop (Hardy et al., 2014). Hardy (2006) stated that the moral identity that begins to



develop in adolescence will continue to develop with age. Therefore, it is possible that the research participants do not yet have a fully developed moral identity. This study will focus on college students who have passed adolescence and are in young adulthood, so their moral identity is expected to be more developed than high school students.

Second, there is a variable that acts as a mediator between the two. This variable can then explain the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards people with disabilities, which is not strong. This mediator is expected to produce an indirect effect through mediation that is stronger than the direct effect of moral identity on attitudes towards people with disabilities. This study will look at the variable empathy as a mediator of the relationship between the two. Empathy can be defined as an effective response that comes from understanding or perceiving another person's emotional state or condition (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1999). Previous studies have identified two types of empathy: cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Clark et al., 2019; Powell & Roberts, 2017). The cognitive domain consists of the tendency of individuals to put themselves into situations using their imagination (fantasy) and the ability to adopt another person's point of view (perspective-taking). The affective domain concerns the tendency to worry about others (empathic concern) and feel uncomfortable if a friend experiences emotional distress (personal distress).

Previous research found that individuals with high moral identity will encourage individuals to have moral thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, including empathy (Morgan & Fowers, 2021). Other research also shows that moral identity allows individuals to process empathy emotionally and cognitively (Wang et al., 2023). Although it has not been studied in the context of inclusive education, in this study, it is assumed that individuals who have a moral identity will tend to have moral thoughts and feelings, including empathy for their peers with special needs. The existence of this empathy can then increase positive attitudes towards college students with SEND (Sharma et al., 2021).

Based on the above explanation, this study was conducted to analyze peer attitudes towards students with special needs, as well as the relationship between moral identity (moral self, moral integrity), empathy (fantasy, perspective-taking, empathic concern, personal distress), and attitudes (affective, cognitive, behavioral) towards peers with special needs in the student population. In addition, this study also analyzes the role of age and gender demographic factors on attitudes towards students with special needs (SEND) because previous research is still contradictory.

Research Method

This study used a quantitative approach with a non-experimental method of cross-sectional design. The respondents of this study were undergraduate students aged 18-25 years in Indonesia. The instruments used in this study were Moral Identity Questionnaire/MIQ (Black & Reynolds, 2016) to measure moral identity, Interpersonal Reactivity Index/IRI (Davis, 1980) to measure empathy, and Multidimensional Attitudes towards People with Disabilities/MAS (Findler et al., 2007) to measure attitudes towards college students with SEND. Note that the higher a participant's score on the MAS, the more negative the attitude towards college students with SEND is. Thus, the relationship will tend to be negative.

Data was collected using a convenience sampling technique, where researchers distributed questionnaires online using several social media platforms, such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Line, and X. The collected data was then analyzed using the R Studio Version 2023.06.2 Build 561 application. Descriptive analysis was conducted to see the demographic description of participants and attitudes towards college students with SEND, Pearson's correlation analysis to see the relationship between age and attitudes towards college students

with SEND, One Way ANOVA to see differences in attitudes of female and male students, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis to see the role of empathy as a mediator in the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards college students with SEND.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Overview of Participants

The respondents were 288 undergraduate students ($M=19.67$ years, $SD=1.23$) from Indonesia, 40.6% of whom lived in Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi (Jabodetabek), and the rest were spread across several regions, such as Medan, Bandung, Jogja, Semarang, and so on. 62.9% of the participants were female and 37.1% were male.

Attitude Towards College Students with SEND

The results of the descriptive analysis to see the attitude variable show that students have a low negative attitude towards college students with SEND, or in other words, have an attitude that tends to be positive. Table 1 contains a description of peers' attitudes towards college students with SEND. This supports previous studies that found students tend to have a positive attitude towards their peers with SEND (Carter et al., 2019; Evanjeli, 2021).

Table 1. Overview of Peers' Attitudes towards College Students with SEND

Description	Mean	Mean/Item	SD
Total	86,04	2,53	16,13
Affective Dimension	39,82	2,48	9,45
Cognitive Dimension	26,31	2,63	7,48
Behavioral Dimensions	19,90	2,48	5,57

Factors Influencing Attitudes Towards College Students with SEND

Age

Pearson's correlation analysis showed that age did not correlate with attitude towards college students with SEND, $r(287)=-0.02$, $p=0.666$. Thus, the hypothesis that age influences attitudes towards college students with SEND was rejected. While other studies have found positive (Morin et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2016) and negative (de Laat et al., 2013; Patka et al., 2013) relationships between age and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, this study shows different results. Referring to the literature review conducted by Andreev et al. (2019), this may be due to age intersecting with other factors, such as education and number of contacts with people with disabilities.

Gender

The results of One Way ANOVA analysis showed that there was no difference in attitudes towards college students with SEND between female and male students, $F(286)=0.779$ $p=0.378$. Thus, the hypothesis that gender affects attitudes towards college students with SEND is rejected. The results of this study support previous research, which found no relationship between gender and attitudes towards college students with SEND (Vincent-Onabajo & Malgwi, 2015; Sharma et al., 2021).

Moral Identity

Pearson's correlation analysis results show that moral identity is negatively correlated with negative attitudes towards college students with SEND and all its components, namely cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Table 2 contains the results of the analysis regarding this relationship. Thus, the hypothesis that moral identity affects attitudes towards college

students with SEND is accepted. The results of this study support the research of Szumski et al. (2020), who found that individuals with high levels of moral identity tend to have lower negative attitudes towards college students with SEND, or in other words, have positive attitudes. Individuals with high moral identity tend to have easy access to moral scripts. Moral scripts contain behavioral schemas that are used in assessing social situations. These social situations have various contexts, including situations related to people with disabilities. This moral script is related to the cognitive component of attitudes, where there are thoughts about people with disabilities. Then, moral identity plays a role in generating guilt in individuals when committing immoral behavior (Stets & Carter, 2011). Thus, individuals with a more developed moral identity will feel guilty when engaging in immoral behavior, such as having negative attitudes towards people with disabilities. These feelings of guilt are related to the affective component of attitudes. Furthermore, this moral script and feelings of guilt will encourage individuals to display positive behavior towards people with disabilities.

Table 2. Relationship between Moral Identity and Peers' Attitude towards College Students with SEND

Moral identity	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> ²
Total	-0,41	0,000	0,16
Affective Dimension	-0,22	0,000	0,05
Cognitive Dimension	-0,35	0,000	0,12
Behavioral Dimensions	-0,32	0,000	0,10

Mediating Role of Empathy

The results of SEM analysis in Figure 1 show that the dimensions of empathy (fantasy, perspective-taking, empathic concern) can mediate the relationship between the dimensions of moral identity and attitudes towards college students with SEND. Individuals who identify themselves with moral traits (moral self) and perform prosocial behavior in various situations (moral integrity) will tend to be able to put themselves into a fantasy situation, adopt the point of view of college students with SEND (perspective-taking), and worry about college students with SEND (empathic concern). Then, the fantasy and perspective-taking dimensions as cognitive components of empathy will encourage individuals to have a positive attitude towards college students with SEND in the cognitive domain. In other words, the cognitive component of empathy will encourage individuals to have positive thoughts towards college students with SEND because they can put themselves as college students with SEND and see from the point of view of college students with SEND. Not only that, individuals who are able to adopt college students with SEND's point of view also tend to show positive behavior towards college students with SEND. Furthermore, individuals who are able to worry about college students with SEND (the empathic concern dimension of the affective component of empathy) will tend to have positive thoughts and show behavior towards college students with SEND.

Furthermore, the personal distress dimension cannot mediate the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards college students with SEND. The personal distress dimension as an affective component of empathy is not related to moral identity but to the behavioral dimension of attitude. Both are positively and significantly correlated, where individuals tend to feel uncomfortable when exposed to the special needs of college students with SEND. Personal distress was negatively associated with the other three dimensions of

empathy. This may be because individuals with high personal distress tend to shift their attention from understanding others' emotions to their own (Israelashvili et al., 2020). Thus, individuals tend to maintain a physical distance from the attitude object, in this case, college students with SEND, to avoid the uncomfortable feelings they experience.

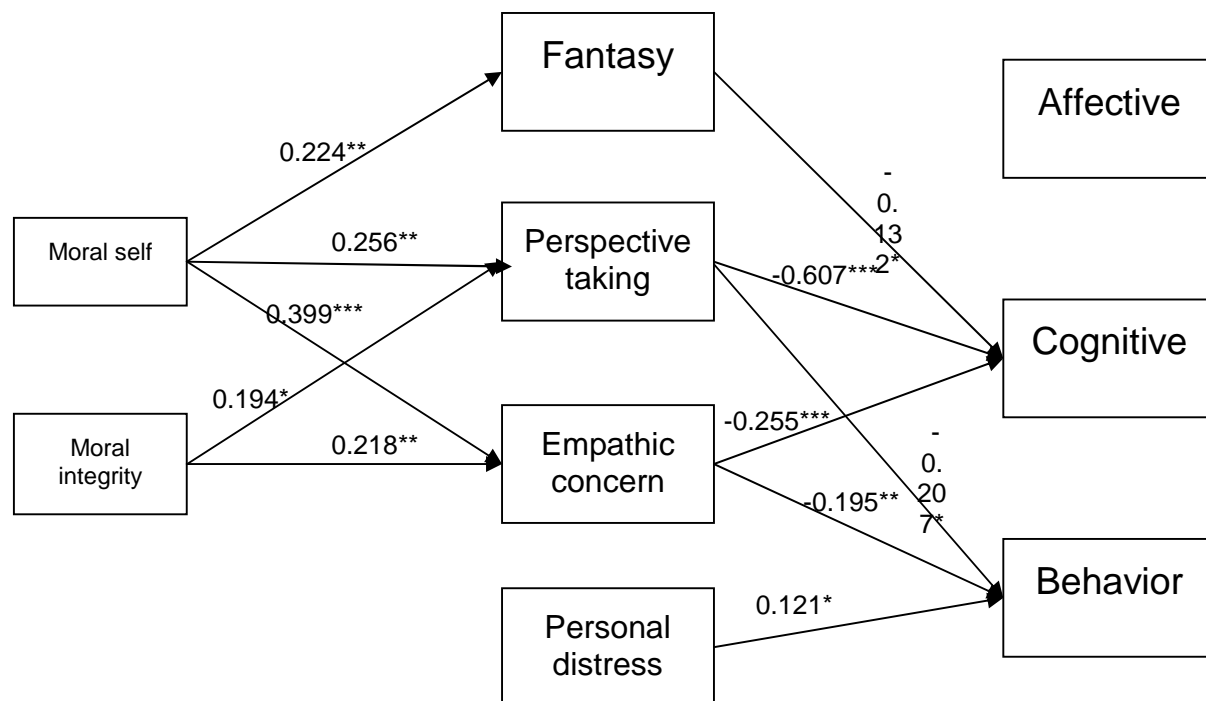


Figure 1: The Role of Empathy in Mediating the Relationship between Moral Identity and Attitudes towards college students with SEND. Notes: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

This study provides a theoretical contribution regarding the factors that influence peer attitudes towards students with special needs, namely moral identity and empathy. Individuals who have high moral identity will tend to empathize with peers with special needs and thus have lower negative attitudes towards them. Thus, this study provides practical implications for improving students' moral identity and empathy to support the development of positive attitudes towards their peers with special needs.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this study are as follows: (1) Indonesian students' attitudes tend to be positive towards college students with SEND, (2) correlation analysis shows that age is not significantly related to attitudes towards college students with SEND, (3) the One Way ANOVA results show no difference in attitudes towards college students with SEND between female and male students, (4) the results of correlation analysis show that moral identity is negatively related to negative attitudes towards college students with SEND, (5) the results of SEM analysis show that the fantasy, perspective-taking, and empathic concern dimensions of empathy can mediate the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards college students with SEND. SEM analysis also shows that the personal distress dimension of empathy cannot mediate the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards college students with SEND.



Recommendation

Based on the results of this study, there are several practical recommendations that can be made. Students need to improve moral identity with character education and build values that uphold positive attitudes towards people with disabilities so that individual moral identity can develop by internalizing these positive values. The role of empathy in mediating the relationship between moral identity and attitudes towards college students with SEND also provides implications for developing the ability of Indonesian students to empathize with others so that they can show a positive attitude towards college students with SEND. Students can be given the opportunity to meet directly (direct contact) with college students with SEND so that positive attitudes and empathy can be built.

Then, the researcher provides several methodological recommendations for future research: (1) future research can modify the measuring instrument so that it does not only include people with physical disabilities but also people with other disorders, (2) observation or interviews can be conducted as an additional method to overcome the limitations of the self-report method, and (3) future research can explore other factors of individual characteristics that can influence attitudes towards college students with SEND because not many studies have explored this.

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