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**Abdulkerim Çeviker**   
Hitit University, Turkiye

**Çisem Ünlü**   
Hitit University, Turkiye

**Abdüsselam Turgut**   
Hitit University, Turkiye

**Ecem Türkmen**   
Gazi University, Turkiye

**Merve Karaman Çam**   
Gazi University, Turkiye

**Emre Kara**   
Hitit University, Turkiye

**Fatma Hafizoğlu**   
Hitit University, Turkiye

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## Determining the Empathy Level of Coaching Education Students in the Sports Environment

Abdulkerim Çeviker, Çisem Ünlü, Abdüsselam Turgut, Ecem Türkmen, Merve Karaman Çam, Emre Kara, Fatma Hafizoğlu

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### Abstract

The high level of empathy in the sports environment makes it clear that each individual in the sports factor displays a positive attitude in society and is positively influenced in terms of sporting success. This research was conducted to determine the level of empathic tendency of students in the Department of Coaching Education and to examine the effects of demographic differences on empathic tendency scores. The research group consisted of a total of 226 volunteers, 98 females and 128 males, studying in the Department of Coach Education, with a mean age of  $21.66 \pm 2.26$  years. The Empathy Scale in the Sports Environment was used in the study. Independent T-test, ANOVA and Pearson correlation test were used for the data collected in the study. According to the results of the study, there was a significant difference in the sub-dimension of emotional empathy in sports in relation to gender ( $p < 0.05$ ). The significant difference was in favor of men. Although there was a significant difference between the groups when the total score of the scale was compared in the students' grade levels, no significant difference was found in multiple comparisons. A positive and significant relationship was found between sports age and emotional empathy in sports. These values show that emotional empathy in sport tends to increase with increasing sporting age. The findings demonstrate that the empathic tendencies of people who participate in sports are at a similar level regardless of gender, age and class variables, but as sports experience increases, so does the emotional empathy level. Applied training programs should be developed to improve empathy skills in sport science faculty and studies should be conducted to strengthen students' emotional and social skills in the sport environment.

### Introduction

The term empathy originated more than 100 years ago as an adaptation of the German word "Einfühlung" (Cuff et al., 2014). It is often confused with related concepts such as sympathy, pity, identification and self-transference (Davis, 1990). However, empathy describes the naturally occurring subjective experience of similarity between the emotions expressed by ourselves and others and does not lose sight of whose emotions belong to whom (Decety & Jackson, 2004). In psychotherapy, which is defined as the systematic use of human relationships for

therapeutic purposes (Brent & Kolko, 1998), there is no single definition of empathy (Elliot et al., 2011). It can be seen that there are different definitions of this concept, which causes confusion in the literature. One of the most comprehensive definitions of empathy was formulated by the Stanford Philosophy Encyclopedia (2018) as follows: "The concept of empathy is used to refer to a broad range of psychological capacities that are thought to play a central role in the formation of humans as social beings, enabling us to know what other people are thinking and feeling, to interact with them emotionally, to share their thoughts and feelings, and to care about their well-being" (Stueber, 2018). When explaining empathy conceptually, one realizes that the word empathy is only defined as an individual concept, but empathy is a concept that also has collective and social aspects (Jami et al., 2024). In general, empathy means putting oneself in another's shoes and plays an important role in the educational process. Teachers are expected to be empathetic because it is crucial for them to understand the needs and feelings of their students to ensure their learning success and autonomy (Costastini, 2019).

Empathy plays an interpersonal and social role as an emotional bridge that enables the exchange of experiences, needs and desires between individuals and fosters social behavior (Riess, 2017). In this way, it can reduce the negative consequences of sport. In addition, athletes with empathy show harmonious behavior with their teammates (Güllü & Şahin, 2018). Athletes with high empathy can more easily understand the feelings of their teammates and help each other to increase their motivation. The concept of empathy plays a crucial role in the sporting environment, especially in team sports. The fact that athletes and coaches have empathic skills enables an increase in team cohesion and a strengthening of social relationships (Güllü & Şahin, 2018). In this context, coaches with a high level of empathy can build stronger relationships with their athletes and contribute positively to their performance. This is important to understand the emotional needs of athletes and motivate them (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Coaches are the most important people in the sporting environment, responsible for supporting the physical, mental and social development of athletes (Arslan et al., 2024; Atilgan & Tukul, 2022; Karagöz et al., 2022; Sahin, 2022; Tukul, 2020). Coaches are responsible for preparing their athletes not only in terms of technical skills but also emotionally and psychologically (Bloom, Stevens, & Wickwire, 2014; Küçük & Ceylan, 2022; Rockwell, 2024). It is widely discussed in modern sport science and psychology literature that coaches need to have empathy in order to build strong communication with athletes. Empathy can not only improve the coach-athlete relationship, but also enhance athlete motivation and performance (Hojat, DeSantis & Gonnella, 2017).

The sports science literature shows that empathic approaches by coaches have positive effects on athletes. Research shows that coaches with high empathy skills enhance their athletes' performance and support their emotional well-being (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003). In particular, studies conducted with young athletes have observed that empathic coaches increase athletes' self-confidence and social cohesion within the team (Çağlar et al., 2024; Gillham, Gillham & Hansen, 2015; Marwanto & Satriyono, 2021). This shows that coaches should not only have technical knowledge and skills, but also emotional intelligence and empathy.

Empathy can be seen not only as an individual ability, but also as a collective characteristic. Empathy plays an important role in team relationships and social interactions. Athletes with high levels of empathy can increase

team cohesion and motivation by understanding the emotional states of their teammates (Decety & Jackson, 2004). This situation emphasizes the importance of developing empathy skills not only for coaches but also for athletes. In team sports, empathic interactions can positively influence team performance and success (Bahadır & Adiloğulları, 2020).

Examining the effects of empathy on students pursuing coaching education in a sport setting will provide important contributions to both sport science literature and coaching education. In particular, the development of empathy skills in prospective coaches during their education process may enable them to build more effective relationships with athletes. There are a limited number of studies in the literature on this topic and it is important to examine how the empathic tendencies of prospective coaches differ depending on variables such as industry, age, gender and sport age. Investigating the impact of coach education students' empathy levels on their success in the sport environment will contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in the field of sport science (Jowett, 2007).

If one examines the relevant literature studies, one finds that with a high degree of empathy in the sporting environment, every individual in the sporting factor shows a positive attitude in society and has a positive effect on sporting success. From this point of view, it can be said that it will contribute to the literature if the effects of empathy level of students in the department of coach education, which can have the identity of both athletes and coaches, on success in the sports environment are studied. This study was conducted to determine the empathy level of coach education department students and to examine the effects of this level on variables such as class, industry, gender, age, and sports age. The results of the study will provide important evidence for the need to improve empathy skills in the sport environment.

## **Method**

### **Working Group**

The study population consisted of 454 students enrolled at Hitit University's Faculty of Sports Science, Department of Coach Education. Prior to the start of the study, approval was obtained from the Hitit University Ethics Committee for Non-Interventional Ethics with application number 2024/301. In determining the sample size, as a result of a simple random sampling calculation, the sample number was determined for a confidence level of 99% and a margin of error of 5, reaching at least 208 students and 226 volunteers. The mean age of participants was  $21.66 \pm 2.26$  years, while the mean age of participants was  $7.97 \pm 3.59$  years.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The study was conducted using a quantitative design and a questionnaire technique based on voluntary participation. In the first part of the questionnaire, which consists of two parts, questions were asked about the demographic characteristics of the participants such as gender, age, school level, type of sport and sporting age. In the second part of the questionnaire, the "Empathy Scale in the Sports Environment" developed by Erkuş and Yakupoğlu (2001) was used. The scale consists of 16 items collected under two sub-dimensions, namely

"Prediction in sport" and "Emotional empathy in sport". Of the 16 items, 5 items (1, 5, 7, 9 and 11) measure emotional empathy in sport, while the other items (2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16) measure prediction in sport. If the values are high, it is assumed that the person has a high level of empathy in the sport environment. The Cronbach's alpha value of the current study was determined to be 0.875.

## Method

The SPSS 24 program was used to analyze the data collected as part of the study. A descriptive analysis was used for the participants' demographic information and total scale scores, an independent T-test was used for the data that showed a normal distribution for the gender comparison (Table 1), an ANOVA was used for the comparison between classes, and the Games Howel test was used for multiple comparisons. The Pearson correlation test was used to examine the relationship between age and athletic age with the sub-dimensions of the scale and total score. For normally distributed data, +2 and -2 were considered (George & Mallery, 2010).

Table 1. Information on the Normal Distribution of the Data

		Statistic
Emotional Empathy in Sport	Mean	8.0885
	Skewness	2.103
	Kurtosis	1.662
Prediction in Sports	Mean	18.3673
	Skewness	1.290
	Kurtosis	1.699
Total Score	Mean	26.4558
	Skewness	1.677
	Kurtosis	1.113

## Findings

This part of the study discusses the results of the analyses to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants, their gender, team and individual sports, age and sporting age and grades.

Table 2. Findings of the Research Group According to Gender Variable

	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	S.S	t	p
Emotional Empathy in Sport	Female	98	7.61	2.85	-1.997	<b>0.047</b>
	Male	128	8.45	3.47		
Prediction in Sports	Female	98	18.03	5.07	-0.764	0.446
	Male	128	18.62	6.29		
Total Score	Female	98	25.64	6.56	-1.345	0.180
	Male	128	27.08	8.87		

The table shows that there is a significant difference in the sub-dimension of emotional empathy in sport ( $p < 0.05$ ). The significant difference is in favor of men. When estimation in sport and total score of the scale were compared according to gender, it was found that there was no significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 3. Findings of the Research Group According to the Variable of Sport Differences

		N	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	t	p
Emotional Empathy in Sport	Team Sport	123	8.13	3.07	0.227	0.820
	Individual Sports	102	8.03	3.45		
Prediction in Sports	Team Sport	123	18.31	5.55	-0.172	0.864
	Individual Sports	102	18.45	6.10		
Total Score	Team Sport	123	26.46	7.67	-0.033	0.974
	Individual Sports	102	26.49	8.38		

When comparing the sub-dimensions of the scale and the total score by team and individual sports, it was found that there was no significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 4. Findings Regarding Students' Class Levels

Sub Dimensions	Class Level	N	$\bar{X} \pm S.D.$	F	p
Emotional Empathy in Sport	1st grade	56	8.87±4.23	1.652	0.178
	2nd grade	34	7.47±3.10		
	3rd grade	55	7.89±3.19		
	4th grade	81	7.93±2.38		
	Total	226	8.08±3.24		
Prediction in Sports	1st grade	56	20.08±8.00	2.341	0.074
	2nd grade	34	17.41±4.84		
	3rd grade	55	18.10±5.11		
	4th grade	81	17.75±4.47		
	Total	226	18.36±5.79		
Total Score	1st grade	56	28.96±11.12	2.661	<b>0.049</b>
	2nd grade	34	24.88±6.06		
	3rd grade	55	26.00±7.08		
	4th grade	81	25.69±6.18		
	Total	226	26.46±7.96		

Although there was a significant difference between the groups when the total scale score was compared according to the students' grade levels ( $p < 0.05$ ), no significant difference was found in multiple comparisons ( $p > 0.05$ ). No significant difference was found in the sub-dimensions of the scale ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Accordingly, a positive and statistically significant correlation was found between sporting age and emotional

empathy in sport ( $r = 0.233$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $N = 226$ ). These values show that emotional empathy in sport tends to increase with increasing sporting age. This result is proof that the emotional empathy of people who participate in sports increases with increasing sport experience. When examining the correlation between the age of the students and the total score according to sports age and assessment in sports, no significant difference was found ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 4. Findings on Age and Sports Age of Students (n=226)

		Prediction in Sports	Prediction in Sports	Total Score
Age	r	0.067	-0.040	-0.002
	p	0.319	0.545	0.972
	N	226	226	226
Sport Experience (Year)	r	<b>0.233**</b>	-0.031	0.072
	p	0.001	0.642	0.281
	N	226	226	226

In relation to our research, it has been found in the examination of various studies that gender does not cause a significant difference in the total score of prediction and empathy in sports (Warner, 1984; Eisenberg & McWolly, 1993; Alver, 1998; Alisinanoğlu & Köksal, 2000; Akçakoyun, Çalışkan, & Karlı, 2010; Karabulut & Bahadır, 2013). The fact that there was no significant difference in empathy scores between male and female participants can be interpreted to mean that people who exercise show a positive development in their empathy scores by constantly being with people with different personalities.

In contrast to the results of this study, there are also studies that conclude that the empathic tendency is higher in female participants than in male participants (Özdiñç 2005, Erçoşkun, Dilekman and Şükrü 2006, Rehber and Atıcı 2009). It is assumed that women are naturally more emotional than men. The fact that women display optimistic behavior towards a situation in society compared to men can be interpreted as a higher empathic tendency.

## Discussion

The study examined the empathy level of coaching education students in the sports environment according to demographic characteristics such as gender, age, class, sport type and sport age. According to the results of the study, there was no significant difference between male and female participants. It can be said that sports has positive effects on personality development. The sports factor, which brings together many individuals with different character structures, can also play a role in socialization. The constant coexistence of people in a sporting environment has an effect on their empathic tendencies.

A significant difference was found in the sub-dimension Emotional empathy in sport by gender. The results show that men have a higher level of empathy in this sub-dimension (Table 2). Generally, it is assumed that the level of

empathy is higher in women; however, this result suggests that men may have a higher level of emotional empathy in sport. This could be due to socio-cultural factors, role in sports or the different ways in which men express empathy in the sporting environment. Nixdorf et al (2023) found in their study that male athletes showed higher levels of empathy than female athletes in relation to gender and sport environment. This was explained by male athletes' ability to use empathy as a more team-oriented and strategic tool. In another study examining gender differences in sport, male athletes were found to have higher empathic tendencies. This study suggests that men show more emotional support and understanding for each other, especially in team sports (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009). Similar findings to the current study can be found in the literature (Jowett & Lavalley, 2007; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009).

It was determined that there is no significant difference between participants in team and individual sports. It can be said that athletes who participate in team sports are always in the same environment. It is very important that athletes understand each other so that they can perform at their best as a team during competitions. Even if athletes who compete in individual sports do not perform as a team, they may show empathic tendencies because they are with different people in the sports environment during the preparation period.

Similarly, Özbalta (2018) found that there was no significant difference in the degree of empathic inclination between those who played individual or team sports. Karakaya (2002) also stated as a result of his research that there is no relationship between empathic tendency and the branch types of athletes. In this context, it can be said that the sporting environment has a significant influence on the empathic ability of the individual, regardless of team and individual sports.

When the empathic tendencies of the participants were examined according to the class variable in a multiple comparison, no significant difference was found. There are similar studies in the literature showing that there is no significant difference in the level of empathic tendency depending on the class variable (Atıcı & Rehber'in 2009; Durakoğlu & Gökçearslan 2010; Sayın, 2010). The fact that each of the participants has a sports major might enable them to have an empathic tendency. The fact that there was no difference in class levels can be interpreted to mean that the participants were socialized in a sports environment and showed a similar level of empathic tendency.

The positive and significant correlation between sporting age and emotional empathy in sport shows that the level of empathy increases with increasing duration of sporting activity ( $r = 0.233$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) (Table 4). This suggests that sport is not only a physical activity, but also a process that develops the emotional and social skills of the individual. The social dimensions of sport (teamwork, communication, solidarity) may help individuals to develop empathy skills. Athletes' experiences and the difficulties they face can improve their ability to empathize with other athletes. In their study, Gano-Overway et al. (2005) show that the empathy level of individuals who participate in sporting increases with age. It was observed that athletes who play sports for a long time develop more emotional understanding. In this study on coach-athlete relationships, it was found that athletes developed more empathic relationships with their coaches as they grew older in sports. Sports experience improved the quality of relationships by contributing to the development of empathy skills (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). The



result of the current study shows that people who participate in sports develop not only physically but also emotionally and their empathy level increases in direct proportion to their sports experience. It can therefore be said that prolonged sporting activity, particularly in team or individual sports, has the potential to improve empathy.

When we examined the relationship between the age of the participants and the overall score of the scale and the prediction sub-dimension in sport, it was concluded that there was no significant difference (see Table 4). Thus, it can be said that some personality traits were carried over because the sample group is of a certain age. Also, the fact that there is no significant difference between the age groups of the participants may affect the level of empathic orientation. When we examine the literature, Yaşar and Erol (2015), Kiraz (2011), Yılmaz and Akyel (2008) come to the conclusion similar to this study that the age factor has no effect on the level of empathic disposition.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated whether the empathic tendencies of athletic coaching education students differed significantly according to demographic variables such as gender, age, class, sport type, and sport age. The results indicated that the empathic tendencies of individuals who play sports were at a similar level regardless of gender, age, and class variables, but sport age has a positive and significant effect on empathy level. Men were found to have a higher level of empathy in the sub-dimension of emotional empathy in sports, which can be explained by socio-cultural factors. This study shows that sports not only contributes to the physical development of individuals, but also to the development of their emotional and social skills. In this context, it is concluded that sports should be considered as an element to improve empathy.

## **Recommendations**

This study was conducted to determine the level of empathic tendency of coaching education Department students and to examine the effects of class, industry, gender, age and sports age differences on empathic tendency scores. This research contributes to the literature with the research group used.

Future studies can be conducted at different departments of the Faculty of Sports Science. The empathy scores of students in different departments can be compared with the empathy scores of students in the Faculty of Sports Science. The empathy scores of students in the Department of Coach Education at different universities can be compared. This question can be investigated on groups who are pursuing postgraduate education in the field of coach education.

Applied training programs should be developed to develop empathy skills in coaches' training departments, and studies can be conducted to strengthen students' emotional and social skills in the athletic environment. The effects of team sports and individual sports on the development of empathy can be studied in more detail. These studies can be used to determine which sports are more conducive to the development of empathy. By examining the

effects of gender differences on empathy development in sports with larger sample groups and in different socio-cultural contexts, the reasons for the differences in empathy levels between male and female athletes can be investigated in depth.

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### Author Information

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#### Abdulkerim ÇEVİKER

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6566-1251>

Hitit University


Faculty of Sport Sciences

Recreation Department

Corum, Türkiye

Contact e-mail: [kerimceviker@gmail.com](mailto:kerimceviker@gmail.com)

#### Çisem ÜNLÜ

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0212-2872>


Hitit University

Faculty of Sport Sciences

Department of Sport Management

Corum, Türkiye

#### Abdüsselam TURGUT

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8472-9824>


Hitit University

Faculty of Sport Sciences

Coaching Education Department

Corum, Türkiye

#### Ecem TÜRKMEN

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0059-2037>


Gazi University

Faculty of Sport Sciences

Recreation Department

Ankara, Türkiye

#### Merve KARAMAN ÇAM

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4728-6160>


Gazi University

Faculty of Sport Sciences

Recreation Department

Ankara, Türkiye

#### Emre KARA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8146-1030>


Hitit University

Institute of Graduate Studies

Department of Physical Education and Sports

Corum, Türkiye

#### Fatma HAFIZOĞLU

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8304-9023>

Hitit University

Institute of Graduate Studies

Department of Physical Education and Sports

Corum, Türkiye