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Communication Skills and Empathy Levels: The Case of Health Department Students

İletişim Becerisi ve Empati Düzeyleri: Sağlık Bölümü Öğrencileri Örneği

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Abstract

Objectives: This study was carried out in cross-sectional and analytical type to evaluate empathic tendency and communication skills in nursing and midwifery students.

Material and Method: The sampling of the study consisted of 574 students. An information form, the Communication Skills Assessment Scale, and the Empathic Tendency Scale were used to collect the study data.

Results: The mean score for empathic tendency was found to be 70.0±8.7, while it was 102.7±9.9 for Communication Skills Assessment Scale. The relationship between the scores related to the two scales was determined to be positively significant ($p < 0.05$). The demographic variables (age, gender, marital status) were observed to have no effect on the mean scores for empathic tendency and Communication Skills Assessment Scale ($p > 0.05$). No significant difference was found between the scores obtained from the scales by the midwifery and nursing students ($p > 0.05$). There was no significant difference between the mean Empathic Tendency Scale scores and years of nursing students ($p > 0.05$). On the other hand, the difference between the scale scores in both scales for students who were satisfied, partly satisfied, and not satisfied with their profession was significant ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: In conclusion, the empathic tendency and communication skill scores of the students were found to be at a moderate level.

Keywords: Communication skills, empathy, empathic tendency, health school, midwifery, nursing

Öz

Amaç: Bu çalışma hemşirelik ve ebelik öğrencilerinde empatik eğilim ve iletişim becerilerini değerlendirmek için kesitsel tipte yapılmıştır.

Gereç ve Yöntem: Araştırmanın örneklemini 574 öğrenci oluşturmaktadır. Araştırma verilerinin toplanmasında bilgi formu, İletişim Becerileri Değerlendirme Ölçeği ve Empatik Eğilim Ölçeği kullanılmıştır.

Bulgular: Empatik eğilim puan ortalaması 70.0 ± 8.7 iken İletişim Becerileri Değerlendirme Ölçeği 102.7±9.9 olarak bulundu. İki ölçek arasındaki ilişki pozitif olarak anlamlıydı ($p < 0.05$). Demografik değişkenlerin (yaş, cinsiyet, medeni durum) Empatik Eğilim ve İletişim Becerileri Değerlendirme Ölçeği puan ortalamaları üzerinde hiçbir etkisinin olmadığı gözlendi ($p > 0.05$). Ebelik ve hemşirelik öğrencileri arasında anlamlı fark bulunmadı ($p > 0.05$). Ortalama Empatik eğilim puanları ile hemşirelik öğrencileri arasında anlamlı fark yoktu ($p > 0.05$). Diğer taraftan, memnun, kısmen memnun ve mesleklerinden memnun olmayan öğrenciler için ölçek puanları arasındaki fark anlamlı bulunmuştur ($p < 0.01$).

Sonuç: Sonuç olarak, öğrencilerin empatik eğilim ve iletişim becerileri puanları orta düzeyde bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim becerileri, empati, empatik eğilim, sağlık okulu, ebelik, hemşirelik

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INTRODUCTION

The nursing and midwifery professions, which are one of the health disciplines where person-to-person relations are experienced intensively, have been influenced by scientific knowledge and technological developments in recent years. However, the core of the profession entails establishing a helpful relationship with individuals who need care. For this reason, the ability to communicate and empathize in nursing and midwifery is of considerable importance.[1-3] Establishing effective interpersonal relationships, helping, and having counseling skills are characteristics that midwives and nurses must acquire for a healthy therapeutic relationship and they are prerequisites for quality midwifery care.[4] Caring, which is the first of these therapeutic skills, includes empathy, respect, sincerity, concreteness, and effective listening skills. Then comes the ability to react to emotion and meaning.[4]

Empathy is the ability of an individual 'to understand another person's feelings and thoughts in a natural way by putting himself/herself in the place of the person' and share another person's thoughts and feelings. Empathy represents the way we interact with others.[3,5] On the other hand, empathic skill is the ability of an individual to correctly understand other people's perceptions and attitudes and give feedback.[5]

Midwives and nurses can offer better quality patient care when they have good communication skills and empathic attitudes.[6] There's an adequate number of research related to this topic conducted on nursing students, but the number of studies on midwifery students is limited.[1-3,7,10] Research has shown that little progress has been achieved in the communication skills of nurses and midwives, and that more studies are needed to develop this field. For this reason, it is important to determine empathic tendency and communication skills of midwifery-nursing students, and the factors affecting midwifery-nursing students, teach empathic approach and professional values through good communication, and establish suitable communication with students in nursing/midwifery education. This research was carried out in relation to the current needs to determine the communication skills and empathic tendencies of midwifery and nursing students and analyze the relation between them.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Design and Participants

This cross-sectional and analytical type study was carried out (01-30 November 2014) at Gaziosmanpaşa University, Health College (N=619) and included a total of 574 nursing and midwifery students. "An information form", "The Communication Skills Assessment Scale", and "The Empathic Tendency Scale" were used as the measurement tools.

The Information Form

The form consisted of 12 questions intended to determine socio-demographic data, information about the school year, previous school, job satisfaction, training, and training need on empathy and communication.

The Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS)

The scale was developed by Korkut [11] in order to determine the communication skills of individuals. It is a Likert-type scale containing 25 questions. Each question is scored between 1 and 5. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale is .76. This value was determined to be .87 in this study. The minimum and maximum scores that can be obtained from the scale range from 25 to 125. High scores from the scale mean high communication skills, whereas low scores indicate poor communication skills.

The Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS)

ETS was developed by Dökmen [12] to measure the empathy potential of individuals in daily life. It is a Likert-type scale consisting of 20 questions, each of which is scored from 1 to 5 (minimum score:20; maximum score:100). The total score expresses the empathic tendency scores of the individuals. The higher the score is, the higher the empathic tendency will be. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale is .86. This coefficient was found to be .72 in this study.

Statistical Analysis

The data were evaluated on the computer (SPSS version 20.0) using Kolmogorov-Smirnov, ANOVA, Fisher test, Tukey, and Mann-Whitney U test. The confidence interval was taken as 95 %, and the significance level was considered $p<0.05$.

The Ethical and Legal Issues

The written permission of the related institution was obtained. The study was conducted according to the Helsinki Declaration. The students were informed that their data would be kept confidential and they would not be harmed. The consent of the students was taken on a voluntary basis.

RESULTS

The mean age of the students was 20.48±1.95 [19 and younger, n=192, % 33,4; 20 and over n=382, % 66,6)]. Of the 574 individuals, 17 % were males (n=100) and 83 % were females (n=474). No significant difference was found when the gender factor was compared in terms of communication skills scores (Males $\bar{X}$=102.26 ±10.1; Females $\bar{X}$=102.8±9.9), (Z= -.569; p=.569) ($p>0.05$).

The majority of the students was high school graduates (%61.5,n=353), 34.8 % was graduates of other high schools, and only 3.7 % was health high school graduates (**Table 1**).

No difference existed between empathy scores of the students in terms of the school which they graduated from ($p>0.05$).

The mean ETS score of the nursing students (n=342) was found to be 69.57±8.5. Also, the 3rd year students got the highest scores ($\bar{X}$=70.52 ± 8.3). On the other hand, the mean ETS score of the midwifery students (n=232) was 70.65±9.04 and the highest mean score for the scale was obtained by 3rd-year students ($\bar{X}$=71.51 ± 7.8) (**Table 1**).

There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups according to the results of the one-way analysis of variance test (Nursing: F=0.883, p=0.450, Midwifery: F=0.606, p=0.611) (p> 0.05). It was determined that there was no difference between the ETS scores of the two departments (F=2.166, p=0.14) (p> 0.05) (**Table 1**).

Table 1. The mean scores of nursing and midwifery students for ETS

The empathic tendency scale	Nursing (n)	Mean* $\bar{X}$±Sd	Midwifery (n)	Mean** $\bar{X}$±Sd
1st year ETS	89	68.752±8.44	65	71.015±9.41
2nd year ETS	88	69.534±8.97	51	71.137±8.56
3rd year ETS	79	70.519±8.30	57	71.508±7.83
4th year ETS	86	69.581±8.13	59	69.033±10.07

*F=0.883, p=0.450;** F=0.606, p= 0.611

The CSAS score of the students was 102.70±9.95, which indicated that the communication skills of the students were well above the average.

When CSAS scores for different classes were compared, the mean values were found to be different for the midwifery department (F=3.99, p=0.008, p<0.005), but similar for the nursing department (F=1.217, p=0.303, p>0.005). However, CSAS scores of the two departments did not show a difference (F=1.37,p=1.24 (p> 0.05) (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Mean scores of nursing and midwifery students for CSAS

CSAS	Nursing (n)	Mean* $\bar{X}$ ±Sd	Midwifery (n)	Mean** $\bar{X}$ ±Sd
1st Year CSAS	89	103.96±8.68	65	103.29±9.76
2nd Year CSAS	88	102.23±9.73	51	103.49±9.13
3rd Year CSAS	79	104.32±11.14	57	103.54±8.65
4th Year CSAS	86	102.01±9.65	59	98.23±11.87

*F=1.217, p=0.303;** F=3.99, p= 0.008

The mean score for Empathic Tendency Scale was 70.01 8.71, indicating that the empathic tendencies of the students were slightly above the average; however, empathic tendency did not increase as expected as the year increased (p>0.05) (**Table 3**).

Table 3. The distribution of total mean scores of all students for communication skills and empathy tendency scale (n = 574)

Total score	Minimum	Maximum	Mean ± Sd
CSAS†	65.00	125.00	102.70±9.95
ETS‡	41.00	98.00	70.01± 8.71

† CSAS (Communication Skills Assessment Scale), ‡ETS (Empathic Tendency Scale)

It was determined that there was no difference between the mean scores for perceived communication skills and empathic tendency in terms of age, marital status, the high school graduated, and active participation in social activities (p>0.05), while there was a difference between ETS scores and gender ($\bar{X}$=67.32±7.5 in males; $\bar{X}$=70.57±8.9 in females) (Z=-3.312; p=.001) (p>0.05). In addition, the communication skills and empathy level scores of the students who reported having difficulties in their daily relationships were found to be low.

When the mean scores for communication skills and empathic tendency were compared in terms of job satisfaction, those who stated they were satisfied with their job were found to have better skills than those who stated they were not satisfied with their job, and the difference between the two groups was significant (CSAS, Z=-3.77, p=.000; ETS, Z= 3.07, p=.002) (p<0.05).

When the relationship between the scores of the midwifery and nursing students obtained from both scales was evaluated, it was found that the power of the relationship was moderate, and that empathic tendency increased as communication skills increased (r=0.499).

DISCUSSIONS

Midwifery and nursing are professions based on human relationships. The effectiveness of care depends on the ability of the midwives and nurses to communicate effectively with the individual, understand the verbal and non-verbal clues and individuals' experiences, and be empathic. The most basic component of a helpful relationship that is expected to be established professionally is empathy. Empathy helps to understand and assist the problems of people.[10,13]

Empathy and good communication skills can be gained primarily during school. When a healthcare worker establishes communication with individuals who receive care, they feel comfortable, good and satisfied because they think they are understood.[5,7,13-15] In this study, the CSAS score of the students was found to be above the average (102.70±9.95) and higher than that of the other studies on nursing students. ($\bar{X}$= 73.75, $\bar{X}$=79.83, $\bar{X}$=81.10).[10,16,17]

Our results were satisfactory in terms of showing that communication skills of the students were more advanced and this suggested that these students had partly developed communication skills at the beginning of their vocational education. Bingöl et al.[18] also found that the communication skills of health school students were quite good and developed ($\bar{X}$=102.69). Facilitating the communication and understanding the individual in giving holistic care can help to use and develop helping skills better.

The CSAS scores of the nursing and midwifery students were similar (p>0.05). The scores decreased significantly in the 4th year in midwifery department; however, there was no significant difference between the classes in nursing department. While our results concerning midwifery students were similar to those of the study conducted by Pazar et al.[9] the results of the nursing department were not similar. This indicated that the level of communication skills could not

be increased by means of the curriculum; on the contrary, it exhibited a declining tendency in the fourth grade in the midwifery department.

The reasons for this decline need to be investigated. Tutuk et al.[10] indicated that communication skills of nursing students improved as the school years increased. Bingöl et al.[18] reported similar results showing that school year did not affect the communication skills. It was expected that communication skills would develop in favor of the fourth classes, which was not observed to happen. This might be due to failing to use the active methods owing to the inadequate physical environment and a high number of students. This suggested that the curriculum and teaching techniques in the related school should be reevaluated.

The mean ETS total score (70.01±8.71) of the students was slightly above the mean score in the scale; however, the emphatic tendency did not increase as the class level increased ($p>0.05$). In contrast to our study, Williams et al.[19] found that the efficacy of education increased as the year increased and the emphatic tendency was higher in midwifery students in comparison to that of nursing students. The studies reviewed suggested that students might lose their humanistic and empathic point of view on patient-provider relationships due to focusing on evidence-based practice, scientific, technological, diagnostic, and therapeutic approaches to healthcare.[3,20]

Gender is also considered an important variable in communication. The CSAS scores did not differ in both departments according to gender ($p>0.05$). Contrary to our results, communication skills in female students were found to be higher than those of males in some studies.[11,16-20] This difference might have originated from the low number of male students, cultural structure, and the lack of a tangible effect brought from students' previous school. There was no significant difference between the CSAS scores in terms of the schools that the students graduated from ($p>0.05$). Similar results were reported in other studie.[10,18]

Similar to the results of the study by Kanbay et al.[21] we determined that such variables as age, marital status, the high school graduated, and active participation in social activities did not affect communication skills and emphatic tendency. However, Ister et al.[8] found that emphatic tendencies of the students were found to be affected by age, gender, the place of residence, the number of close friends, and the reasons for choosing this profession.

Communication style varies by culture and gender[17] The ETS scores differed in terms of gender in both departments ($p<0.05$). It was reported by a series of studies that the communication skills of men and women were different, and that women had better communication skills.[3,17,19,21] In a university in the United Kingdom, female medical students were found to be more empathetic than male students and had higher scores ($\bar{X}=5.55\pm 0.46$). In another study conducted by Kanbay et al.[21] there was no difference between genders in contrast to this study, while there was a difference in terms of gender in other studies in which female students were found to be more successful.[3,8] It was also determined that students who were satisfied with their profession could communicate more successfully and exhibited more empathic tendency than those who were not.

Communication skills and empathy level scores of students who reported having difficulty in daily interactions in our study were found to be as low as the findings of those in other studies. Although some people think that communication skills seem intuitive and innate, many studies show that communication can be taught and developed.

The related literature indicates that empathic tendency increases as communication skills increase.[16,22] When the relationship between the CSAS and ETS scores of the midwifery and nursing students were evaluated, it was found similar to the findings of the other studies that empathic tendency increased as the communication skill increased and that the relationship power between them was moderate ($r=0.499$). Similar to the findings of our study, Arifoğlu and Razı (16) found a positive and significant relationship between the communication skills and empathic tendencies of the students ($r=.59$, $p=.000$). This means that the higher the empathic tendency of an individual is, the higher the communication skills are. It is accepted that empathic tendency is important in helping nurses and midwives perceive the emotions experienced by the people they serve, and it facilitates communication.[5,16,17]

CONCLUSION

While all these findings indicate that the empathy levels of the students increase along with education, the same increase has not been observed in communication skills. Although communication skills are quite high in students, the moderate level of emphatic tendency indicates that it can be increased by implementing more specific methods and techniques.

In the light of these findings, it can be recommended that the importance of education should be taken into consideration for the development of communication and empathy levels of students, course contents and teaching methods should be developed more, the communication patterns of students should be observed using the monitoring activities showing the direct effects of the educational process, and that observation-based studies that investigate the causes of decline in skills in the 4th grade should be carried out.

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethics Committee Approval: In this research, the data before 2020 was used and the research was concluded before 2020. According to the Regulation on Clinical Researches published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey with the number 28617 dated 3 November 2015, the ethics committee approval was not obtained in accordance with the article "This Regulation includes bioavailability and bioequivalence

studies, medicines, medicinal and biological products to be made on humans, even if licensed or permitted. (article 2- (1))". So clinical survey studies are outside the scope of the regulation. This study was prepared in accordance with the Law on Protection of Personal Data, and in accordance with the 2013 Brazil revision of the Helsinki Declaration and guidelines for Good Clinical Practice.

Informed Consent: All patients signed the free and informed consent form.

Referee Evaluation Process: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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