

Autonomy Levels of Nursing Students*

Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Otonomi Düzeyleri*

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ABSTRACT

Autonomy is one of the vocational criteria of the nursing profession and is essential for safe and quality care. Nurses begin to learn the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values associated with their professional roles during their school years. Nursing students should primarily have a high level of autonomy to protect and improve individuals' health, and enhance their life quality in the future. This descriptive study was carried out with 285 nursing students to determine their autonomy levels. The study data were collected using a personal information form and the autonomy subscale (AS) of the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale. For the analysis of the data, numbers, percentages, mean and standard deviation values, Mann-Whitney U, and Kruskal Wallis tests were employed, and the significance level was accepted as $p < 0.05$. The mean total score of the students obtained from AS was 103.65 ± 18.34 . Their scores from the subscales of AS were 42.68 ± 8.16 for "personal achievement", 40.77 ± 7.70 for "freedom", and 20.20 ± 4.70 for "enjoying loneliness". The mean total score of the first-grade students was found to be higher than that of other grades, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The autonomy level of the students was found to be above the middle level, and the autonomy level of 1st-grade students was higher than that of the students in other grades.

Keywords: Autonomy, Autonomy levels, Nursing students, Nursing education

ÖZ

Otonomi, hemşirelik mesleğinin profesyonellik kriterlerinden biridir ve güvenli, kaliteli bakım için gereklidir. Hemşireler profesyonel rolleriyle ilişkili bilgi, beceri, tutum ve değerleri eğitimleri sırasında öğrenmeye başlarlar. Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin gelecekte bireylerin sağlığını korumak, geliştirmek ve yaşam kalitesini yükseltmek için öncelikle yüksek düzeyde otonomiye sahip olmaları gerekir. Tanımlayıcı

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olan bu araştırma hemşirelik öğrencilerinin otonomi düzeylerini belirlemek amacıyla, 285 hemşirelik öğrencisiyle yapılmıştır. Araştırmada veriler kişisel bilgi formu ve Sosyotropi-otonomi Ölçeği'nin otonomi alt boyutu (OÖ) ile toplanmıştır. Verilerin analizinde sayı, yüzde, ortalama, standart sapma, Mann Whitney U ve Kruskal Wallis kullanılmış, anlamlılık düzeyi $p < 0.05$ olarak kabul edilmiştir. Öğrencilerin OÖ toplam puan ortalamaları 103.65 ± 18.34 , OÖ'nin alt boyutlarının puan ortalamaları; "kişisel başarı" 42.68 ± 8.16 , "özgürlük" 40.77 ± 7.70 , "yalnızlıktan hoşlanma" 20.20 ± 4.70 olarak belirlenmiştir. 1. sınıf öğrencilerinin OÖ toplam puan ortalamalarının diğer sınıflara göre daha yüksek olduğu ancak farkın istatistiksel olarak anlamlı olmadığı saptanmıştır ($p > 0.05$). Öğrencilerin otonomi düzeyleri orta düzeyin üzerindedir ve 1. sınıf öğrencilerinin otonomi düzeyleri diğer sınıflardaki öğrencilere göre daha yüksektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Otonomi, Otonomi düzeyi, Hemşirelik öğrencisi, Hemşirelik eğitimi

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is the ability of individuals to protect and enhance their independence and personal rights and is defined as having the ability to think and make decisions independently and to act independently in putting their decisions into action (Didişen et al., 2015), requires the right to freedom of decision-making and acting with professional knowledge (Skar, 2010) and allows professionals to make their own decisions without the pressure of external resources (Paganini & Bousso, 2015).

Autonomy is an important element of the status of the nursing profession and it is necessary for safe and quality care (Sarkoohijabalbarezi et al., 2017; Varjus et al., 2011; Kramer & Schmalenberg, 2008). Independent decision making and problem-solving skills are professional behaviors, which are expected from nurses. It is emphasized that in the field of health care, there is a need for nurses who think critically, have developed problem-solving skills, use autonomy, and focus on care (Külekcı et al., 2015).

By providing nurses with self-recognition, independence, and power-sharing, autonomy allows nurses the ability to define the nursing dimension in the care provided, to make informed decisions, to determine a care strategy, to sustain authority with responsibility, and to give purposive and controlled care that is not based on chance, but controls external forces (Kaya et al., 2006; Wynd, 2003; MacDonald, 2002; Adams & Miller, 2001;). Therefore, autonomy has a positive impact on nurses in terms of their proficiency to solve patients' problems, their professional skills, motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (Kaya et al., 2006). Also, nurses with high autonomy can see themselves competent in care by being aware of their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors and can use their autonomy by developing new attitudes for new situations (Kaya et al., 2006; Wynd, 2003; MacDonald, 2002; Adams & Miller, 2001). It is reported that nurses' ability to maintain their existence by raising their status depends on their use of professional autonomy (Salhani & Coulter, 2009). Nurses begin to learn the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values associated with their professional roles during their education (Wade, 1999). There is a strong relationship between nursing education and the acquisition of individual and occupational autonomy (Karagözoğlu et al., 2015). The higher the level of education and quality is, the higher the level of autonomy becomes. The autonomous decision-making process is based on knowledge. Knowledge is the basis of self-management. As

knowledge increases, the level of education and individuals' self-confidence increase as well, and critical thinking, problem-solving, and independent decision-making are supported. It is obvious that students with low levels of autonomy cannot exhibit effective professional attitudes and behaviors when executing their profession as a nurse after graduation. With this regard, nursing students should primarily have a high level of autonomy so that they can protect, improve, and enhance the life quality of individuals in the future (Karagözoğlu, 2009). Therefore, determining the autonomy level of nursing students will support autonomous behaviors in future nurses and will contribute to the reflection of this on quality nursing care by requiring a review of educational programs.

METHODS

Purpose

The study was carried out to determine the autonomy levels of nursing students.

Research questions

1. What are the autonomy levels of nursing students?
2. Does the level of grade affect nursing students' level of autonomy?

Setting and Sample

This descriptive study was carried out in the nursing department of a university in Turkey. There are a total of 4600 hours of courses and eight semesters in the nursing department where the research was conducted, and the education is given using a teacher-centered method with a classical teaching program. Courses are taught in theory-based classes with a large number of students. Nursing care skills are developed in laboratory studies and clinical practices. In eight-semester nursing education, students study basic medical sciences and theoretical and practical nursing courses. The nursing education in the school where the study was conducted is carried out by 9 faculty members and 7 research assistants in seven nursing departments such as principles of the nursing, internal medicine nursing, surgical diseases nursing, gynecological-obstetrics nursing, pediatric health and diseases nursing, mental health and diseases nursing, public health nursing, and management in nursing.

The study data was collected in May 2018 in the spring term of the 2017-2018 academic year. A total of 456 students were

enrolled in the nursing faculty of the university in the spring semester of the 2017-2018 academic year, including 101 first-grade, 96 second-grade, 121 third-grade, and 121 fourth-grade students. No sampling procedure was employed in the study; instead, 285 students who agreed to participate in the study were enrolled in the study.

Instruments

The study data were collected using a personal information form and the autonomy subscale of the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale.

The Personal Information Form: This form consisted of questions aiming to determine the age, gender, grade level of the nursing students, and the high school that they graduated from.

The Autonomy Subscale (AS) of the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale: AS is the subscale of the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale, which measures independent and autonomous personality traits. The scale was developed by Beck et al. The validity and reliability study of the Turkish form of the scale was carried out by Şahin et al. (1993). The scale consists of 30 items and 3 subscales, including 12 items for personal achievement, 12 items for freedom, and 6 items for enjoying loneliness. Each item is responded with one of the following five options: 0, not describing at all; 1, describing to some degree; 2, describing fairly; 3: describing well; and 4, describing very well. The lowest and the highest scores that can be obtained from AS are 0 and 120, respectively. The higher the score is, the higher the autonomy level is. Cronbach's alpha value of the scale is 0.81, and it was found to be 0.93 in this study.

Data Collection

The data were collected in the classroom environment. Before the data collection tools were given to the students, the purpose of the study was explained. The data collection forms were handed out to the students who accepted to participate in the study, and they were collected from the students after they were completed. The students did not write their names on the forms. It took about 10-15 minutes to complete the data forms.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software. For the analysis of the data, numbers, percentages, mean and standard deviation values and Variance Analysis (One-Way ANOVA) tests were used. The significance level was accepted as $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

At the outset, the ethical approval of the Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted (Decision no: 2018.05.45) and the permission of the school management where the study data were collected were obtained. The purpose and benefits of the study and their roles were explained to the students who made up the sample. The students were told not to write their names on the forms. Their consent was obtained by paying attention to the willingness to participate in the research and the principle of volunteering.

RESULTS

Table 1: The Demographic Characteristics of the Students (n=285)

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age (M±SD)	21±2.0	
Gender		
Female	218	76.5
Male	67	23.5
Grade		
1 st grade	48	16.8
2 nd grade	82	28.8
3 rd grade	64	22.5
4 th grade	91	31.9
High school education		
Health Vocational High School	44	15.4
High School	60	21.1
Anatolian High School	152	53.3
Science High School	4	1.4
Commercial High School	25	8.8

M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation.

Mean age of the students was 21.00 ± 2.00 , %76.5 were female, 28.8% were second-grade students, and 53.3% were Anatolian High School graduates (Table 1).

Table 2: Mean Total Scores of the Students from AS and Subscales (n=285)

Autonomy Scale	M±SD	Min. - Max. score range	Min.-Max.
Personal achievement	42.68±8.16	0-48	18-60
Freedom	40.77±7.70	0-48	17-60
Enjoying loneliness	20.20±4.70	0-24	9-30
Total (Autonomy)	103.65±18.34	0-120	44-150

M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; Min=Minimum; Max= Maximum

The mean total score of the students obtained from AS was 103.65 ± 18.34 . The mean scores for the subscales were 42.68 ± 8.16 for "personal achievement", 40.77 ± 7.70 for "freedom", and 20.20 ± 4.70 for enjoying loneliness (Table 2).

Table 3: Grade Level Classification of Students' Mean Total Scores Obtained from AS and the Subscales of AS (n=285)

Descriptive characteristics	Personal achievement	Freedom	Enjoying loneliness	Total Autonomy
Grade	M±SD	M±SD	M±SD	X±SD
First (n=48)	44.08±6.67	41.83±7.39	20.47±4.93	106.39±20.05
Second (n=82)	42.51±9.11	40.62±8.07	19.60±4.71	102.74±20.05
Third (n=64)	42.29±7.45	40.12±6.78	20.56±4.45	102.98±16.16
Fourth (n=91)	42.37±8.50	40.80±8.19	20.32±4.72	103.50±19.64
Variance Analysis	F=2.67 p=0.445	F=2.51 p=0.473	F=1.19 p=0.754	F=1.75 p=0.625

M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation; F: One-Way ANOVA test; p: p-value.

The mean total score of the first-grade students was found to be higher than that of other grades, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

In the process of professionalization, there is a need for a sophisticated education process where a high level of autonomy is achieved and which ensures professional status. Critical thinking and reasoning are very important in nursing education and one of the goals of nursing education is to improve the autonomy of students (Şenturan et al., 2016). The level of autonomy gained by the members of the profession is important in determining whether a profession provides professional status. Considering the problems experienced by nursing in becoming a profession, it is obvious that graduates with high autonomy are needed (Kaya et al., 2006).

In the study, the mean total score of the nursing students obtained from AS was 103.65 ± 18.34 . The mean scores from the subscales were 42.68 ± 8.16 for "personal achievement", 40.77 ± 7.70 for "freedom", and 20.20 ± 4.70 for enjoying loneliness" (Table 2). This result of the study showed that the nursing students had autonomy above middle level. Yılmaz et al. (2017) found the mean total score of nursing students for Autonomy Scale as 79.41 ± 14.26 , and the mean scores of the subscales as 33.84 ± 6.75 for "personal achievement", 34.31 ± 6.11 for "freedom", and 13.17 ± 4.05 for "loneliness". Karagözoğlu (2009) reported that the total mean score of nursing students for AS was 83.03 ± 14.51 , and the mean scores from the subscales were 34.78 ± 6.46 for "personal achievement", 33.18 ± 6.28 for "freedom", and 15.06 ± 4.10 for "loneliness". According to the results of Kaya et al. (2006), the mean total score of the nursing students for AS was 77.25 ± 14.45 , and the mean scores for the subscales were 32.84 ± 6.75 for "personal achievement", 30.31 ± 6.11 for freedom, and 14.09 ± 4.75 for "enjoying loneliness". Atalay et al. (2005) found that the mean total score of the nursing students for AS was 78.4 ± 14.4 , and the mean scores for the subscales were 33.4 ± 6.8 for "personal achievement", 31.0 ± 6.3 for "freedom", and 13.7 ± 4.4 for "enjoying loneliness". Furthermore, Tarhan and Doğan (2018) found mean total score of nursing students from the Autonomy Scale as 81.23 ± 18.18 , Arabacı et al. (2017) as 68.14 ± 13.32 , Büyükbayram et al. (2016) as 68 ± 18.39 , Yıldırak and Bulut (2003) as 82.9 ± 11.4 , and Karagözoğlu et al. (2015) as 78.74 ± 16.96 . The results of this study and the studies

mentioned above showed that nursing students had autonomy at a middle level or slightly above the middle level.

In the study, first-grade nursing students were found to have the highest autonomy (Table 3). Şenturan et al. (2016) found the mean total score of nursing students from the Autonomy Scale as 71.58 ± 15.42 in the first grade, 73.50 ± 16.70 in the second grade, 67.18 ± 18.72 in the third grade, and 74.86 ± 17.47 in the fourth grade. Karagözoğlu (2009) determined the mean total score of nursing students from the Autonomy Scale as 84.87 ± 14.44 in the first grade, 83.18 ± 15.09 in the second grade, 82.72 ± 15.80 in the third grade, and 81.47 ± 12.81 in the fourth grade. As a result of the study conducted by Tarhan and Doğan (2018), the autonomy levels of nursing students in the first grade were found to be higher than those of the fourth grade. When the autonomy levels of nursing students in the study were evaluated according to their grade levels, the fact that there was no significant increase in the autonomy levels of nursing students over the years and that there were even decreases suggests that there are deficiencies or inadequacies in the nursing curriculum and teaching methods in developing students' autonomy. Starting from the first year of the nursing undergraduate program, it is considered that there is a need for the development of educational programs and implementation of teaching methods that will increase the autonomy levels of nursing profession candidates.

Study Limitations

This study had some limitations. The first one was that since this was a cross-sectional study, it evaluated the participants' autonomy at a single time. Participants' responses may vary depending on their characteristics status. Second, this study focused on in the nursing department of a university in Turkey. Therefore, the results of the study may not apply to nursing students in other parts of Turkey, and other countries. Finally, the participants completed the data collection forms in the classroom environment. This may have caused the participants to give unnatural answers.

CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the results of the study, the autonomy levels of the students were above the middle level, and the autonomy levels of the 1st-grade students were higher than those of the students in the other classes.

According to the results of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- (1) Review of nursing education programs and teaching methods to develop behaviors that will increase the student autonomy above the middle level, and
- (2) Organizing private studies with student groups that have low-level of autonomy by evaluating the autonomy levels of nursing students at regular intervals.

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