



Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected the Compassion Competence of Midwifery Students?

COVID-19 Pandemisi Ebelik Öğrencilerinin Merhamet Yeterliliğini Etkiledi mi?

Safiye AĞAPINAR ŞAHİN¹, Sibel ÖZTÜRK²

ABSTRACT

Objective: This research aims to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the compassion competencies of midwifery students. **Materials and Method:** This study was conducted as a descriptive study. No sample selection was performed in the study. A total of 365 students have taken part in the study and represent 80% of the population. The student descriptive form and the Compassion Competence Scale were used in the study. The student descriptive form includes questions about students' grade, age, status of liking the profession, COVID-19, and contact with patients. **Results:** No statistical difference was identified between the Compassion Competence level according to the grades of midwifery students ($p>0.05$). The compassion mean score of students with COVID-19 was 3.97 ± 0.56 , and the compassion mean score of students without COVID-19 was 3.88 ± 0.71 . No significant difference was found between students with and without COVID-19 ($p>0.05$). It was revealed that 26.6% of the students did not want to participate in the treatment during the COVID-19 period. The students stated that the fear of being infected ranked first (46.8%) among the reasons for experiencing stress in clinical practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Conclusion:** The compassion levels of nursing students were found to be high. The COVID-19 period did not affect students' compassion competence adversely. **Keywords:** COVID-19, compassion, midwife, midwifery student, pandemic

ÖZET

Amaç: Bu çalışma COVID-19 pandemisinin ebelik öğrencilerinin merhamet yeterliliklerine etkisini belirlemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. **Gereç ve Yöntem:** Bu çalışma tanımlayıcı olarak yapılmıştır. Çalışmada örneklem seçimine gidilmemiştir. Çalışmaya toplam 365 öğrenci dahil olmuştur ve evrenin %80'ini temsil etmektedir. Çalışmada öğrenci tanıtım formu ve merhamet yeterliliği ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Öğrenci tanıtım formunda; öğrencilerin sınıf yaş, mesleği sevmeye, COVID-19 ve hasta temasına yönelik sorular yer almaktadır. **Bulgular:** Ebelik öğrencilerinin buldukları sınıflara göre merhamet yeterlilik düzeyleri arasında istatistiksel olarak farklılık belirlenmemiştir ($p>0.05$). COVID olan öğrencilerde merhamet puan ortalaması 3.97 ± 0.56 , COVID olmayan öğrencilerde ise merhamet puan ortalaması 3.88 ± 0.71 dir. COVID olan ve olmayan öğrenciler arasında anlamlı fark saptanmamıştır ($p>0.05$). COVID sürecinde öğrencilerin %26.6'sının tedaviye katılmak istemedikleri saptanmıştır. Öğrenciler COVID sürecinde klinik uygulamada yaşadıkları stres nedenleri arasında ilk sırada (%46.8) enfekte olma korkusu yaşadıklarını belirtmiştir. **Sonuç:** Ebelik öğrencilerinde merhamet yeterlilik düzeyi yüksek bulunmuştur. COVID-19 süreci öğrencilerinin merhamet yeterliliğini negatif yönde etkilememiştir. **Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ebe, ebelik öğrencisi, COVID-19, merhamet, pandemi

¹ Ass. Prof, Atatürk University Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Erzurum, Turkey. ORCID: 0000-0002-4688-5540

² Ass. Prof, Atatürk University Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Erzurum, Turkey. ORCID: 0000-0003-3236-1495

Corresponding Author: Safiye Ağapınar Şahin, Atatürk University Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Erzurum, Turkey. email: pinarsaf@gmail.com

Başlıklı çalışma 1. Ulusal 1. Uluslararası Sivas Ebelik Kongresinde sözlü bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.



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INTRODUCTION

Compassion is defined as understanding another person's suffering, helping that person find a solution to his/her suffering, and caring about the person's well-being. Compassion is a concept that involves somatic, sensory, cognitive, and bodily processes (Perez-Bret, Altisent & Rocafort, 2016). This concept is also included and widely used in healthcare services (Menage et al., 2017). The use of compassionate care in healthcare services is important for finding easy and cost-effective solutions to problems (Bivins, Tierney & Seers, 2017).

Regarding the concept of compassion, numerous studies have been carried out in the healthcare field (Menage et al., 2017; Beaumont et al., 2016; Cavanagh et al., 2020; Ortega-Galan et al., 2021; Papadopoulos et al., 2020; Mannion, 2014). The common theme in the literature is the presence of healthcare professionals who provide compassionate care in healthcare delivery (Ali & Terry, 2017). Midwives are among these professionals. The concept of compassion in midwifery is also included in the definition of midwifery. In a definition, a midwife is stated as "a person who continuously provides knowledgeable, qualified, and compassionate care for the pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, birth, postpartum and newborn infant and his/her family" (The Lancet, 2014). On the other hand, the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) encourages midwives to provide compassionate and culturally safe care to the people they serve. Accordingly, in terms of quality midwifery care, it has been emphasized that the care provided by midwives should be compassionate, in addition to being qualified and knowledgeable (Beaumont et al., 2016; ICM, 2022). As is seen, the concept of compassion is also included in the international midwifery literature. Studies on midwives and midwifery students have also evaluated the concept of compassion. A study conducted with midwifery students examined students' level of compassion and found it to be high (Yüksekol et al., 2020). In another study on midwives working in the delivery room, it was stated that the midwives participating in the study defined compassion as empathy and felt compassion for pregnant women presenting with pain, and most of them experienced compassion fatigue (Sökmen and Taşpınar, 2021). Another study showed that midwifery students evaluated compassion as a feeling of pity, sadness, and goodwill (Özdemir & Karadavut, 2022). As is seen, studies have been conducted on the concept of compassion in midwifery in the national literature. As seen from the studies, compassion is a concept that should be assessed.

Numerous variables can impact the level of compassion. Studies on midwifery students have examined the effects of variables, such as class, marital status, having children, and place of residence, on compassion (Yüksekol et al., 2020; Demirel, Kaya & Doğaner, 2020). Compassion in midwives is impacted by variables such as, shift work, the number of traumatic births, the number of patients and job satisfaction (Ergin, Özcan & Aksoy, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic may also be one of the factors affecting compassion in midwives and midwifery students. It is important that healthcare professionals provide compassionate care, especially in global health crises such as COVID-19, to alleviate the suffering of individuals (Ghafourifard, 2021). One of the most significant contradictions in the pandemic is that healthcare professionals continue their care work under exposure to the viral load while the general population should stay at home and avoid social contact (The Lancet, 2019). This situation can impact the level of compassion. When the literature is reviewed, it is seen that there are studies on the relationship between COVID-19 and compassion (Wakam et al., 2020; Uslu &

Kendirkıran, 2022; Lluch et al., 2022; Labrague & Los Santos, 2021). Studies on midwives and midwifery students have also examined compassion fatigue (Li et al., 2023; Doğan, Hüseyinoğlu & Yazıcı, 2023). There are few studies that evaluate the compassion of midwifery students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering these results, carrying out the present study may be remarkable in terms of revealing whether compassion is affected by this process. This research aims to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the compassion competencies of midwifery students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design and Sample

The research was conducted with a descriptive. The data of this study were collected between April 2 and 25, 2022, and the study population consisted of midwifery students of a university located in the east of Turkey. The study sample comprised 365 students who agreed to participate in the study. In the study, 80% of the research population was reached.

Instruments

Student Introduction Form: This form, which was prepared by the researchers in line with the literature knowledge, consists of 9 questions (questions about; students' age, year level, profession, COVID-19 status, and contacting patients).

Compassion Competence Scale: The scale, which was developed by Lee and Seomun in South Korea, is an assessment tool that can assess the compassion competence of nurses (Lee & Seomun, 2016). Çiftçi and Aras conducted the validity and reliability studies of the Turkish version of the scale (Çiftçi & Aras, 2022). The scale comprises 11 questions in total. The results of this five-point Likert scale are evaluated on the basis of item score averages. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 1, and the highest score is 5. The compassion competence levels of individuals increase with an increase in the score obtained from the scale. The Communication subdimension includes items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, the Sensitivity subdimension includes items 6, 7, and 8, the Insight subdimension includes items 9, 10, and 11, and there is no reverse item on the scale. Cronbach's alpha value for the overall scale is 0.79. In this study, the scale's Cronbach's alpha value was determined to be 0.92.

Application of the Data Collection Tools: Questionnaires were distributed to students at all year levels at an appropriate time. Students filled out the questionnaires themselves. It took approximately 10 minutes to fill out the questionnaires.

Statistical Analysis

SPSS 22.0 was used to analyze the data. Percentage, the independent samples t-test, ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis test were used in the statistical evaluation.

Ethical Considerations

For this study, approval from the Non-Interventional Ethics Committee of a university (B.30.2.ATA.0.01.00/276) and permission from the faculty (numbered E-30171381-000-2200113371) where the study was carried out were obtained. Concerning the Compassion Competence Scale employed in the study, permission to use the scale was obtained from the

relevant author. This study was carried out following the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

Of the students participating in the study, 23.8% were at the first year level, 23.0% were at the second year level, 28.5% were at the third year level, and 24.7% were at the fourth year level. No statistically significant difference was found between their year levels and the mean compassion competence scores ($p>0.05$). It was revealed that students' mean compassion competence scores were close to each other.

Table 1. Evaluation of the compassion competence of midwifery students according to their year level and love for the profession

		n	%	Compassion Competence	Test and p-value
				$\bar{X}\pm SD$	
Year level	1	87	23.8	3.86±0.67	F=0.865 p=0.459
	2	84	23.0	3.99±0.54	
	3	104	28.5	3.86±0.81	
	4	90	24.7	3.95±0.54	
Love for the profession	Yes	263	72.1	3.95±0.63	t=1.841 p=0.066
	No	102	27.9	3.81±0.72	

In Table 1, it was found that 72.1% of the students participating in the study loved their profession. No statistically significant difference was determined upon comparing students' love for the profession and their compassion competence levels ($p>0.05$).

Table 2. Evaluation of compassion competence levels according to the COVID-19 infection status of the student or his/her family

		n	%	Compassion Competence	Test and p-value
				$\bar{X}\pm SD$	
COVID-19 infection status	Yes	128	35.1	3.97±0.56	t=1.296 p=0.196
	No	237	64.9	3.88±0.71	
COVID-19 infection status in the family	Yes	225	61.6	3.95±0.60	t=1.558 P=0.193
	No	140	38.4	3.84±0.75	

In Table 2, It was determined that 35.1% of the students participating in the study had been infected with COVID-19, and families of 61.6% had been infected with COVID-19. No statistically significant difference was found between the COVID-19 infection status of students and the COVID-19 infection status in their families and their compassion competence ($p>0.05$, $p>0.05$).

Table 3. Evaluation of students' attitudes toward COVID-19 according to their compassion competence level

		n	%	Compassion Competence $\bar{X}\pm SD$	Test and p-value
Avoidance of approaching patients during the pandemic	Yes	207	56.7	3.90±0.64	t=0.241 p=0.809
	No	158	44.3	3.92±0.68	
Emotions experienced while contacting patients during the pandemic	Positive	35	9.6	3.98±0.98	KW=2.672 p=.0.263
	Negative	119	32.6	3.95±0.55	
	Hesitant	211	57.8	3.88±0.65	
Hesitation to participate in treatment	Yes	97	26.6	3.87±0.55	t=0.777 p=0.483
	No	268	73.4	3.93±0.69	
Reluctance to touch pregnant women/women	Yes	95	26.0	3.85±0.49	t=0.992 p=0.322
	No	270	74.0	3.93±0.71	

In Table 3, It was revealed that most students did not hesitate to participate in the treatment and were not reluctant to touch pregnant women/women. No significant difference was identified between students' reluctance to participate in the treatment and to touch pregnant women/women and their mean compassion competence scores ($p>0.05$, $p>0.05$).

Table 4. Evaluation of the factors causing students to experience stress

Factors that cause stress	n	%
Fear of infection	171	46.8
Mask	14	3.8
Fear of death	33	9.0
Working time intensity	18	4.9
No stress	31	8.5
Transmission to relatives	26	7.2
Contact with patients	38	10.4
Isolation	17	4.7
Non-compliance with the rules of wearing a mask and social distancing	17	4.7
Total	365	100.0

In Table 4, When the factors causing students to experience stress during the pandemic were examined, fear of infection was found in the first place with 46.8%, followed by contact with patients with 10.4% and fear of death with 9.0%.

DISCUSSION

The fact that students' mean compassion competence scores in the study were close to each other (Table 1) may have originated from the fact that the courses related to the midwifery profession were received starting from the first year level and the concept of compassion included in the definition of midwifery was stressed. Furthermore, since the majority of the students' families were infected with the disease in this process, the students may have shown more empathy, and therefore, their compassion competence level may not have been affected.

Most of the students who participated in this study love their profession. There was no difference between students' love for the profession and their compassion competence levels (Table 1), which can be explained by the emphasis laid by the International Nursing and Midwifery Council on the necessity of professional qualifications for students, such as being compassionate, reliable, and respectful of human rights before starting the profession (Bray et al., 2014). Based on this emphasis, it can be stated that the students participating in the study adopted this concept as a professional value. Unlike the present research, a study specified love for the profession as a variable affecting compassion (Kelly, Runge & Spencer, 2015). This difference may have originated from the sample group.

In this study, the compassion competence level was not impacted by the COVID-19 infection status of midwifery students and their families (Table 2). Likewise, the study conducted by Yüksekol et al. on 267 midwifery students found the participants' level of compassion to be high (Yüksekol et al., 2020). The high level of compassion in different studies on healthcare professionals and students (Arli & Bakan, 2018; Çingöl et al., 2018; Shih et al., 2017). supports the study's findings. At the same time, mean compassion competence scores were high in both groups (min: 1- max: 5), which suggests that midwifery students reflect a sense of compassion, one of the professional values, in clinical practice in line with the education they receive.

Most students did not hesitate to participate in the treatment and were not reluctant to touch pregnant women/women, and their compassion competence levels were not affected by these situations (Table 3). This result obtained from our study suggests that midwifery students adopt compassion as a professional value and it will not be impacted by any situation. Likewise, when the literature is reviewed, it is seen that compassion is at the basis of holistic care and at the focus of individualized care (Küçükkeleşçe et al., 2022; Çetin & Çevik, 2021). All these results confirm the findings of the present study.

Most students (46.8%) indicated the stress they experienced during the pandemic as the fear of infection (Table 4). In the literature, it is stated that situations such as pandemics that affect public health will create psychological effects on university students and these diseases will increase their anxiety (Thompson ve ark.,2017). Likewise, it was determined in a study carried out with midwifery students that, when students' fears of COVID-19 increased, their stress levels also increased (Bilgiç & Karaahmet, 2022). All these results support this study.

CONCLUSION

It was found that the majority of midwifery students did not hesitate to participate in the treatment during the pandemic and were not reluctant to contact pregnant women/women. In conclusion, it was determined that the pandemic period did not impact the compassion competence levels of midwifery students. In the education of midwifery students, emphasizing the concept of compassion, which is also included in the definition of midwifery, is extremely important to increase the quality of midwifery care.

Limitations of the Study

The result of the study can be generalized to the sample in which the study was carried out.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

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Conflict Interest

No conflict of interests.

Author Contributions

Research Idea/Concept: SAŞ

Research Design: SAŞ, SÖ

Supervision/Consultancy: SÖ

Data Collection and/or Processing: SAŞ

Analysis and/or Interpretation of Data: SÖ

Literature Review: SAŞ, SÖ

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Critical Review: SÖ

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