

Evaluation of the empathic skills of nursing students with respect to the classes they are attending

Avaliação da habilidade de empatia dos estudantes em relação aos grupos por eles assistidos

Evaluación de la habilidad de empatía de los estudiantes en relación a los grupos por ellos assistidos

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out, as a descriptive and comparative one, with the aim of evaluating the empathic skills of the students of the Nursing Department of Sakarya University School of Health Sciences. The universe of the study comprised 139 students. The sampling comprised 104 students who had been able to take part in the study. As the means of data collecting, a 22-question survey form and the 'Empathic Skill Scale B-Form' which Dökmen (1988) had put into application by testing the validity and reliability for our country. In the evaluation, percentage, Students 't' Test, Mann-Whitney U Test were employed. The average of the empathic skill points of the students included in the study was found to be 139.45 ± 20.47 . According to the results of our study, scores of empathic skill of Grade I students are higher comparing to Grade II and III students. This case may depend on the fact that the communication lessons are more intensive in this grade. Again, increasing of empathic skill points in Grade IV made us think that the application opportunities of psychiatric nursing lessons taken in this grade had been effective on the development of empathic skills of students.

Key words: Empathy; Skill; Nursing students; Nursing education.

RESUMO

Estudo descritivo, comparativo desenvolvido com o objetivo de avaliar as habilidades de empatia dos estudantes do Departamento de Enfermagem da Escola de Ciências da Saúde da Universidade de Sakarya/Turquia. Trabalhou-se com amostra composta de 104 estudantes que fizeram parte do estudo, respondendo a formulário com 22 questões entre os anos de 2006/2007. No instrumento

de coleta de dados constava ainda o "Formulário B da Escala de Habilidade de Empatia" de Dökmen (1988) para testar a validade e confiabilidade do mesmo em nosso país. Na avaliação, percentual, teste 't' e teste "Mann Whitney U" foram empregados. A média dos pontos da habilidade de empatia dos estudantes incluídos no estudo encontrada foi de 139.45 ± 20.47 . De acordo com os resultados do estudo, os registros da habilidade de empatia dos estudantes do primeiro ano estão acima se comparados com as turmas do segundo e terceiro anos. Este caso pode depender do fato de que as aulas de comunicação são mais intensivas neste ano. Novamente, o aumento dos pontos da habilidade de empatia no quarto ano nos fez concluir que as oportunidades de aplicação nas aulas de Enfermagem Psiquiátrica, obtidas neste ano, tem sido eficazes no desenvolvimento da habilidade de empatia dos estudantes.

Palavras chave: Empatia; Habilidade; Estudantes de enfermagem; Educação em enfermagem

RESUMEN

Estudio descriptivo, comparativo desarrollado con el objetivo de evaluar las habilidades de

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empatía de los estudiantes del Departamento de Enfermería de la Escuela de Ciencias de la Salud de la Universidad de Sakarya/Turquía. Se trabajó con muestra compuesta de 104 estudiantes que hicieron parte del estudio, respondiendo a encuesta con 22 cuestiones entre los años 2006/2007. En el instrumento de recolección de datos constaba aún el "Encuesta B de la Escala de Habilidad de Empatía" de Dökmen (1988) para verificar la validez y confiabilidad del mismo en nuestro país. En la evaluación, porcentual, test 't' y test "Mann Whitney U" fueron empleados. El promedio de puntos de la habilidad de empatía de los estudiantes incluidos en el estudio encontrada fue de 139.45 ± 20.47 . De acuerdo con los resultados del estudio, los

registros de la habilidad de empatía de los estudiantes del primer año están superior si son comparados con los grupos del segundo y tercer años. Este caso puede depender del hecho de que las clases de comunicación son más intensivas en este año. Nuevamente, el aumento de los puntos de la habilidad de empatía en el cuarto año nos hizo concluir que las oportunidades de aplicación en las clases de Enfermería Psiquiátrica, obtenidas en este año, han sido eficaces en el desarrollo de la habilidad de empatía de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Empatía; Habilidad; Estudiantes de enfermagem; Educación en Enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is a concept deeply rooted in and central to professional nursing. Although few would argue the appropriateness of empathy to nursing, less consensus can be reached regarding the definition and application of the concept to practice^(1,2). Most research studies concerned with empathy have been undertaken in the USA and they rely heavily on the work of counselors and psychotherapists, and especially on the work of^(3,4).

Empathy is a commonly used but poorly understood concept. It is difficult to define or measure as it appears to be a multidimensional concept which has not been fully identified⁽⁵⁾.

Rogers⁽⁶⁾ defined empathy as the ability: "to sense the client's private world as if it were your own without ever losing the 'as if' quality". The 'as if' you were in the other person's shoes, became 'being in' the other person's shoes, with his revised definition of empathy⁽⁶⁾. Nurses in the USA interested in these concepts operated from the premise that all nurses, by choosing to enter the profession

and to remain in practice, care about their patients and hope to understand them⁽⁷⁾. Not surprisingly, their definitions of empathy rely heavily upon Rogerian theory, as this literature was most readily available. Thus Gagan⁽⁸⁾ asserts that the most commonly used definition of empathy in the nursing literature is: "The ability to perceive the meaning and feelings of another person and to communicate that feeling to the other"⁽⁸⁾. Many contemporary nurse researchers would subscribe to these views⁽⁹⁻¹¹⁾.

A review of the literature does support the position that empathy is viewed as a crucial component of helping relationships, and is a critical concept to nursing⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾. While empathy is identified as critical, the way in which it matters and the ways in which it is expressed remain less clear⁽¹⁵⁾. Confusion exists as to the nature of empathy and whether it is innate or learned, a personality dimension, amenable to change through experience, or an observable skill⁽¹⁵⁾.

Empathy has an axiomatic, pivotal role in the helping relationship, and has been

assumed to have essential applications in nursing as an essential component of the nurse-patient relationship. Empathy intuitively would seem to increase the power and efficacy of the nurse-patient relationship, and can function as the cornerstone of the relationship.

This research was carried out, as a descriptive and comparative one, with the purpose of investigating the correlation between the empathic skills of the students in the Nursing Department of Sakarya University Health College and the process of nursing education.

INSTRUMENTS-METHOD

The research was carried out in the Nursing Department of the Sakarya University Health College. The extent of the education

given in this department is 4 years, 8 semesters, including the theoretical and practical education. The universe of the research comprised all the students given education during the 2006-2007 educational year.

The number of the students attending to the Nursing Department of the Sakarya University Health College in 2006-2007 educational year is 139. The students who had filled the forms erroneously, who weren't at the school on the day the data were collected, or who didn't want to participate in the study were excluded from the sampling; thus the number of the students comprising the sampling was 104. The descriptive characteristics of the students included in the sampling are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of the Students. Sarakaya, 2007.

Age	n	%
18–20	52	50.0
21–23	46	44.2
24–26	5	4.8
27–29	1	1.0
Grade	n	%
I st Grade	32	30.8
II nd Grade	26	25.0
III rd Grade	29	27.9
IV th Grade	17	16.3
The High School Graduated From	n	%
Ordinary High School	54	51.9
Health Vocational High School	4	3.9
Anatolian High School	10	9.6
Others	36	34.6
The Place of Birth	n	%
Village	12	11.5
Small Town	27	26.0
City	35	33.7
Metropolis	30	28.8
Marital Status	n	%
Married	1	1.0
Single	103	99.0
Accommodation	n	%
With Family	25	24.0
Dormitory	62	59.7
With Relatives	2	1.9
In a House With Friends	15	14.4
TOTAL	104	100.0

Prior to the collection of the data pertaining the research, due permissions were taken from the Sakarya University Health College Directorship and from the students as well. The data were collected just before the final exams of the spring semester of the

2006-2007 educational year, under the supervision of the researchers.

In collecting the research data, a 22-question questionnaire form including the socio-demographical characteristics of the students were used. In the questionnaire, there were questions regarding the students'

grades, their ages, the number of their siblings, the educational status of their parents, the high school they had graduated from, the place they were raised and empathy.

The Empathic Skill Scale (ESS) was developed by Dökmen⁽¹⁶⁾ with the purpose of measuring the skill for empathy building. In the scale, six problems are presented and 12 response-sentences which can be said to a person expressing such a problem were listed under each problem. The participants were asked to choose four responses which they liked best (one of the twelve responses was an irrelevant response included in order to determine the random replies). The students chose totally 24 empathic responses, four for each of the six problems; and the point for each response they chose was given according to the evaluation section of the scale. The maximum point collected through ESS was found to be 219, while the minimum was 62. The validity and reliability studies for ESS were carried out by Dökmen⁽¹⁵⁾. The scale was applied to a group of 80 twice with a three-week interval, and the repetition reliability which was carried out on 64 subjects was

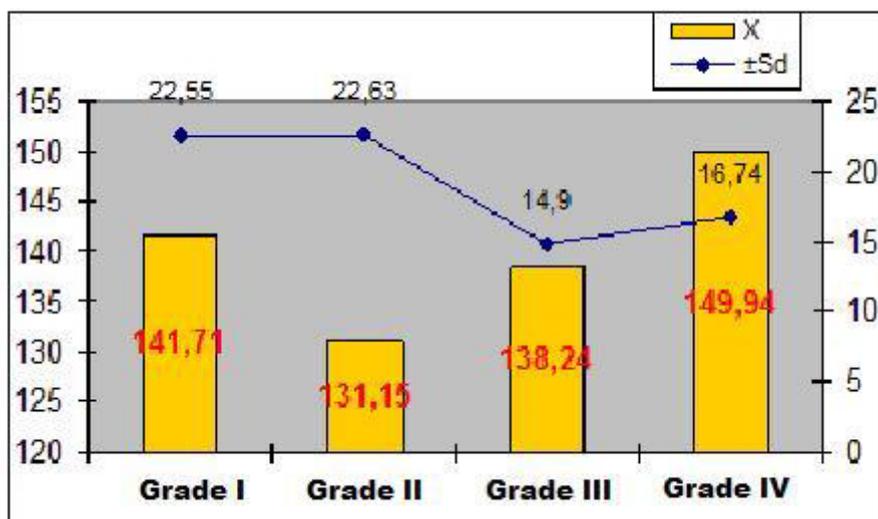
found to be 91. The due permission was obtained from Dökmen⁽¹⁵⁾, for using the Empathic Skill Scale B-Form in our study.

Data input and analysis were performed by the researchers by using SPSS packet program. In the evaluation, percentage, students' 't' Test and Mann-Whitney U Test were employed. The dependent variable of the study was the average empathic skill points, and the independent variable was the classes the students were attending.

THE FINDINGS

The averages of the empathic skill points of the students in relation to the classes are given in Graphic 1. The average of the empathic skill points was found to be $X=139.45\pm 20.47$ for the Grade I students, $X=131.15\pm 22.63$ for the Grade II students, $X=138.24\pm 14.90$ for the Grade III students, and $X=149.94\pm 16.74$ for the Grade IV students. Statistically meaningful differences were found between the average empathic skill points of the 2nd Grade and 4th Grade ($Z=2.609$, $p=0.009$), and between the 3rd Grade and 4th Grade ($Z=2.130$, $p=0.033$).

Graphic 1: The Averages of the Empathy Points in relation to the Educational Levels. Sakaraya, 2007.



DISCUSSION

Nursing is a profession based on human relations and the effectiveness of the nursing caring period depends on the skill of the nurse in building effective communication with other individuals. The nurse, while attempting to understand what the individual is experiencing through verbal and non-verbal communication, she/he also must be able to express herself/himself correctly and, as a caregiver, should be able to build and effective communication with the individual getting the care ⁽¹⁷⁾.

The most essential component of the helping relationship is empathy. Understanding the individual and his or her problems is only possible through empathy ⁽¹⁷⁾. Empathy is proposed to influence the conceptualization of the role of the nurse and empathy can organize the input of information received by the nurse which allows him/her to form a deeper, more meaningful knowledge of the patient's experience. Nursing empathy is an extension of

a basic human developmental phenomenon and more than a technical skill.

Developmental empathy has been a part of the person's life since conception and can be logically and intentionally directed through the process of nursing education and practice. Not only has empathy had an impact on the individual's past, but it influences the nurse's ability to become a more sensitive human being. Such an approach to empathy provides an understanding of empathy displayed by nurses and potentially yields new insights into methods of teaching nursing ^(6,17).

In our study, there found to be a statistically meaningful relationship in regarding the average empathic skill points between the 2nd Grade and 4th Grade ($Z=2.609$, $p=0.009$) and between the 3rd Grade and the 4th Grade ($Z=2.130$, $p=0.033$). A statistically meaningful difference was also found in the study carried out by Mete et al ⁽⁷⁾. ($p<0.005$). It is seen that many studies using the same scale have been carried out in order to determine whether the empathic skills of the

nursing students can be improved by means of education. Some of these studies have shown that education is effective in empathic skill development⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁹⁾.

It can be said that in course of education both the communication lessons and the other lessons and practices make a positive contribution to the development of the empathic skills of the students⁽¹⁷⁾. In our study, while the average of the empathic skill points for Grade I was 141.71 ± 22.55 , it was found to be 149.94 ± 16.74 for Grade IV, showing a positive correlation with increasing Grades. In Sakarya University Health College, the subjects connected with communication are emphasized in the general and vocational courses included in the 1st Grade and 2nd Grade curriculums. Based on the findings obtained, it can be said that education makes a positive contribution in developing the communication skills of the students.

In the relationship in which she/he helps, empathy is among the most essential qualities a nurse needs to develop, in order to be able to know the individual and the problem^(17,18). In our study, that the average of the empathic skill points of the Grade IV students has been found to be meaningfully higher can be linked to the fact that they have taken all the theoretical and practical psychiatric nursing courses, to the factor of age, and to the length of their education. In a study carried out by Pektekin et al⁽²⁰⁾, it was determined that, after the practice of psychological nursing, the students had improved their skills in building communication with both healthy individuals and patients and also had come to a position in which they can solve their own psychological problems⁽²⁰⁾.

CONCLUSION

According to the results of our study, it can be inferred that the empathic skills of the nursing students increase with their nursing education. Thus, it can be suggested that the levels of the empathic inclinations and skills of the students should be determined in the first year the students starts their education in this profession, this matter should be given due importance in curriculum, and programs should be employed for developing the empathic skills. Regarding the concept of empathy, more work needs to be done within nursing. Improved understanding of empathy as a concept uniquely used within the nursing profession is essential to facilitate, promote, and improve the health of patients.

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