



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor (RJIF):3.4
IJAR 2024; 10(1): 159-163
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 11-11-2023
Accepted: 13-12-2023

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A cross sectional study to assess self-reported empathy among nursing students studying in selected colleges of North India

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Abstract

Introduction: Empathy is the fundamental skill in therapeutic communication for holistic patient care. It is one of the basic qualities that a nurse must be empathetic in providing care to the patient. Empathy is a predominantly cognitive attribute that involves an understanding of experiences, concerns and perspectives of the patient with an intention to help

Aim: The aim of the study is to assess self-reported empathy among nursing students studying in selected Colleges of North India.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive online survey was carried out to assess self-reported empathy among 387 nursing students studying in selected colleges of North India. Original data were collected from undergraduate nursing students from first to fourth year using socio demographic tool and Standardized Jefferson Scale of Empathy.

Results: The study results revealed that most 189(50%) of participants were belong to age between 18-20 years. Majority 359(95%) of them were female. 100(26.6%) of them were from 4th year of Undergraduate course. Greater number 365(96.6%) of them has preferred nursing as profession followed by 13(3.4%) of them don't want to adopt nursing as profession. 272(72.22%) of them had intention to work as nurse after graduation followed by 90(23.80%) of them had replied that they do not have intention to work as nurse after graduation and 15(3.98%) of them don't want to work as nurse after graduation.

Conclusion: This study concluded that There was a significant association of level of empathy with year of study ($p < 0.011$) and intent to work ($p < 0.023$) as $p < 0.05$ level of significant.

Keywords: Jefferson scale of empathy, empathy, nursing students

Introduction

“You can only understand people if you feel them in yourself”

- John Steinbeck

Empathy is the fundamental skill in therapeutic communication for holistic patient care. It is one of the basic qualities that a nurse must be empathetic in providing care to the patient ^[1]. Empathy is a predominantly cognitive attribute that involves an understanding of experiences, concerns and perspectives of the patient with an intention to help ^[2, 3].

The Empathetic approach is the most frequently used concept in the Nursing Profession for developing a therapeutic relationship in order to increase patient well-being and satisfaction, decrease complications and treatment period ^[4]. However, due to lack of empathy, this may negatively interfere with care; diagnosis and treatment ^[5]. According to researchers, nursing students demonstrate low to moderate levels of empathy.

Many authors highlight that a scarcity of empathy in our healthcare systems is likely to have a detrimental effect on patient care ^[6]. Empathetic behavior of healthcare professionals has been linked to a variety of attributes, such as for quality of care, positive attitude towards elderly patients, more competent in history taking and performance of physical examination etc. ^[7]. The ability to empathize is often influenced by many factors, like gender, age, job training, and knowledge ^[8, 9]. Empathy continues to be integrated into nursing education; undergraduate nursing students are taught the basic communication skills and the importance of an empathic relationship with patients ^[10-13].

A systematic review revealed that patients experience lower levels of anxiety and distress when cared for by nurses who show empathy at the same time, the characteristic of empathy among nurses allows the perceived needs of patients to be understood [14].

An Italian longitudinal study, which assessed the efficacy of a specific training course for improving empathy skills in nursing students, highlighted that the training was more effective for the female students than for their male counterparts [15, 16].

The majority of studies that explored nursing students' empathy in different countries showed a good level of empathy, such as in studies conducted in Australia, USA, and United Kingdom. Other studies reported significant decreases in empathy scores from the beginning to the end of the curriculum [17, 18].

Despite the fact that studies have been undertaken to explore the concept of empathy among Nursing Students in a North States of India which has revealed that there may worldwide differences in terms of cultural values and beliefs as well as differences in nursing education systems. This indicates a need to examine empathy among nursing students in north India whose behaviors and beliefs may differ from those of nurses and nursing students in other countries where studies have been undertaken [19].

Researchers felt the need to conduct this study as empathy helps nurses build a trusting connection with those in their care by focusing on the patient's point of view. This strengthens communication because nursing students can gain an understanding of how patients are coping and what they are experiencing. Thus, empathy is essential to promoting a dialogue with patients about their discomfort, worries and preferences.

Statement of problem

A Cross sectional study to assess Self-reported Empathy among nursing students studying in selected Colleges of North India.

Objectives

1. To assess self-reported level of empathy among nursing students.
2. To find out the association of level of empathy among nursing students with their selected demographic variables.

Methodology

A quantitative research approach and Cross-sectional descriptive design was used for the study to assess self-reported empathy among nursing students studying in selected colleges of North India.

Original data were collected from undergraduate nursing students from first to fourth year using Standardized Jefferson Scale of Empathy, online Google form, during the month of June, 2021. We have included all the students who were willing to participate and understand English.

We calculated the sample size by using formula $(Z_1 - a/2)^2 \frac{(p)(q)}{d^2}$ [20] where p was considered 50% with absolute error of 5%, confidence interval 95% also included 5% non-response rate. The estimated sample size was 387 participants. Data were collected through Google forms till calculated sample size met.

Ethical clearance from Institutional Review Board of Akal college of Nursing, Baru Sahib, Himachal Pradesh, India

was taken vide letter No. ACN/IRB/273-A/2021. Informed Electronic consent was taken from all the participants to participate in the study. Final tool included two sections i.e. Section A: Self-structured socio-demographic characteristics which comprised age, gender, year of study, preferred nursing as profession, and grade point average. Section-B: students were asked to complete the "Jefferson Scale of Empathy - Health Profession-Student version" (JSE-HP-S), which is a self-report measure of attitudes or feelings relating to empathy. This 20-item survey employs a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree) with 10 items scored in reverse. Results range from a minimum of 20 through to a maximum of 140. Higher scores reflect a higher participant level of empathy. The JSE-HP-S in English language has proven reliability and validity, with a coefficient of alpha reported as 0.80 [21]. Researchers obtained permission to use the JSE-HP-S from the original authors via email.

Received data were analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistics with Statistical product and service solutions (SPSS version 23) as per our study objective stated earlier. Statistical significance (p value) was set at 0.05 for the tests involved.

Results

Most 189(50%) of participants were belong to age between 18-20 years. Majority 359(95%) of them were female. 100(26.6%) of them were from 4th year of Undergraduate course. Greater number 365(96.6%) of them has preferred nursing as profession followed by 13(3.4%) of them don't want to adopt nursing as profession. 272(72.22%) of them had intention to work as nurse after graduation followed by 90(23.80%) of them had replied that they do not have intention to work as nurse after graduation and 15(3.98%) of them don't want to work as nurse after graduation.

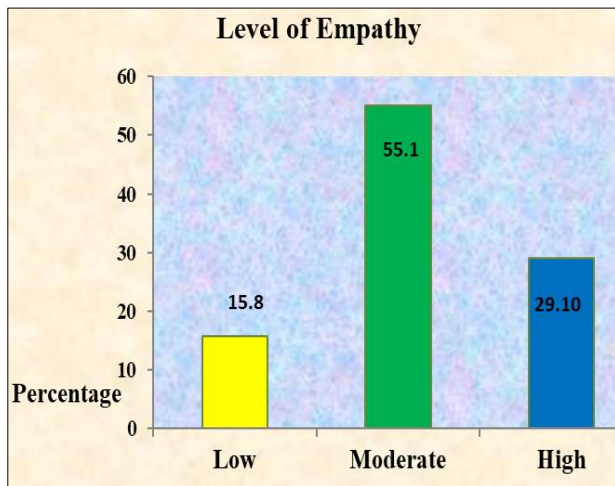
Table 1: Frequency & percentage of socio-demographic variables of participants, N=378

S. No.	Variables	Frequency (Percentage)
1.	Age (In Yrs.)	
	a) 18-20	189(50)
	b) 21-23	170(45)
	c) 24-26	15(4.0)
2.	Gender	
	a) Female	359(95.0)
	b) Male	19(5.0)
	Year of the study	
3.	a) 1 st year	90(23.8)
	b) 2 nd year	96(25.5)
	c) 3 rd year	91(24.1)
	d) 4 th year	100(26.6)
4.	Preferred Nursing as a Profession	
	a) Yes	365(96.6)
5.	b) No	13(3.4)
	Intent to work as nurse after graduation	
	a) Yes	273(72.22)
6.	b) No	15(3.98)
	c) May be	90(23.80)
6.	Grade Point	
	a) Average	64(17.05)
	b) Good	190(50.27)
	c) Very good	92(24.34)
	d) Excellent	31(8.34)

Table 2: Empathy level among nursing students

S. No.	Level of Empathy	Frequency (Percentage)
1.	Low (47-105)	60(15.8%)
2.	Moderate (106-120)	208(55.1%)
3.	High (121-140)	110(29.10%)

This table has revealed that 84.92 mean empathy level. Most (55%) of students has moderate empathy level, 29.10% students has high and 15.8% has low Empathy level.

**Fig 1:** Level of Empathy

There was a significant association of level of empathy with year of study ($p < 0.011$) and intent to work ($p < 0.023$) as $p < 0.05$ level of significant.

Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to the objectives, need for the study and related literature of the study.

The study results represents on table that empathy level among nursing students had shown most of nursing students 208(55.1%) has moderate level, 110(29.10%) had high and 60(15.8%) had low level.

To assess self-reported level of empathy among nursing students

The majority of studies that explored nursing students' empathy in different countries showed a good level of empathy, such as in studies conducted in Australia [22-25], USA [26, 27], and United Kingdom [28]. Moderate levels of empathy were reported in the Ouzouni & Nakakis study in Greece [29].

The above objective and findings are supported by study of Ouzouni C, Nakakis K. (2012) [29].

Major findings of the study revealed that overall nursing students displayed a moderate level of empathy ($M=88.63$; $SD=8.93$). Females were found to be significantly more empathetic than males ($p < 0.001$). The 6th semester students displaying more empathetic ability and the 1st semester students the least.

Students who had made their own choice to study nursing and those who expressed a willingness to work as nurses after their graduation recorded higher levels of empathy as did those who acknowledged they had received emotional care from their families. Students who reported the ability to sense how another person is feeling in a given situation or had received training to sense another person's feelings or worked with clinical instructors who presented emotional

understanding in their approach to patients, demonstrated higher levels of empathy.

Based upon the criteria it was interpreted that most of nursing students had moderate to high level of empathy.

To find out the association of level of empathy among nursing students with their selected demographic variables

The study findings shows that between There was a significant association of level of empathy with year of study ($p < 0.011$) and intent to work ($p < 0.023$) as $p < 0.05$ level of significance.

Altwalbeh D *et al.* (2018) [30] conducted a cross-sectional study to assess the level of self-reported empathy in undergraduate nursing students at Mutah University by using a paper-based version of the Jefferson Scale of Empathy. A convenience sample of 202 students was recruited from first, second, third and fourth year. The mean score was 92.9, lower than scores reported in other studies. Results showed that female students' empathy scores were significantly higher than male students, and there was a significant increase in empathy scores by study year.

K Sukhpal *et al.* (2018) [18] conduct a similar study to assess the level of empathy among nursing students during internship in college of a North Indian city. Forty-six nursing interns participated in the study. Jefferson Scale of Empathy was administered three times to the students during the internship, i.e., at the beginning, at 6 months, and at the completion of internship. Results showed there was an increase in the number of participants with high level of empathy from the 23.9% at the beginning to 29.6% at the midway and 28.3% at the end of internship, but the increase was not statistically significant ($p > 0.01$). There was no significant change in the empathy score throughout the internship ($F = 1.816$, $P = 0.167$). It may be because of the saturation level of empathy among the students of senior most class. Hence, future research may study empathy level among all the 4 years of training separately rather than only interns.

Sedaghati Kesbakhi MS, Rohani C (2020) [31] conducted a study to investigate the level of nursing students' empathy during different years of education. The findings on changes in the level of nursing students' empathy during the university education are contradictory, and it's not clear whether it decreases/increases after four years of education. In this descriptive study, 122 undergraduate nursing students from the first to the fourth year of the program are included. Data were collected using the Jefferson Scale of Empathy Nursing Student Version-R and analyzed by the descriptive and analytical tests in SPSS version 21.

Results

The mean score of empathy was 91.8 ± 28.7 . The level of empathy significantly declines in the fourth year of education, compared to the first year ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

The above study was conducted on 378 nursing students with the view to assess self-reported empathy among nursing students studying in selected colleges of North India. Standardized Jefferson Scale was used to assess the level of empathy among nursing students and data was analyzed based upon objectives. The findings of the study revealed out of the 378 nursing students most 208(55.1%) of

has moderate level, 110(29.10%) had high and 60(15.8%) had low level.

Most 189(50%) of participants were belong to age between 18-20 years. Majority 359(95%) of them were female. 100(26.6%) of them were from 4th year of Undergraduate course. Greater number 365(96.6%) of them has preferred nursing as profession followed by 13(3.4%) of them don't want to adopt nursing as profession. 272(72.22%) of them had intention to work as nurse after graduation followed by 90(23.80%) of them had replied that they do not have intention to work as nurse after graduation and 15(3.98%) of them don't want to work as nurse after graduation.

So it can be concluded that most of nursing students has moderate level of empathy which can be alter according to their class year from first year to fourth year of their undergraduate course. The findings of the study revealed that there was a significant association of level of empathy with year of study ($p < 0.011$) and intent to work ($p < 0.023$) as $p < 0.05$ level of significant.

Limitations of the study

The use of a cross-sectional design is not ideal for this type of study. More valuable information would be gained from the use of a longitudinal study design, targeting nursing students from the first semester with follow-up in the final year of study.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the study following recommendations have been made

- A similar study can be replicated on large sample to generalize the findings.
- An experimental study can be conducted with control group in order to see the effectiveness of structure teaching programme regarding development of empathy among nursing students.
- Comparative study can be conducted to compare the level of empathy among male and female students.
- The research can be conducted to compare the level of empathy among students of different fields of health care studies according to their different demographic variables for example year of the study, type of college or universities etc.

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