

Determination of Intercultural Sensitivity and Empathic Tendency Levels of International Nursing Students

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to determine the intercultural sensitivity and empathic tendencies of international nursing students.

Method: This was a descriptive and cross-sectional study, and the sample consisted of 89 students from the nursing department of a university. The data collection tools used were the participants' personal information form, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale, and the Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale. Data were collected between November 25, 2023, and November 30, 2024.

Results: The study participants had a mean Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale score of 89.83 ± 12.39 and 110.70 ± 13.46 , respectively. There was a positive correlation between intercultural sensitivity and multidimensional emotional empathy scale scores ($p < .001$).

Conclusion: This study showed that empathy skills play an important role in intercultural interactions and support students in communicating effectively with different cultures. Therefore, it is important to develop programs that focus on empathy and cultural awareness in nursing education.

Keywords: International students, intercultural sensitivity, empathic tendency, nursing students.

Uluslararası Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Kültürlerarası Duyarlılık ve Empatik Eğilim Düzeylerinin Belirlenmesi

Öz

Amaç: Araştırmanın amacı, uluslararası hemşirelik öğrencilerinin kültürlerarası duyarlılık ve empatik eğilim düzeylerini belirlemektir.

Yöntem: Araştırma tanımlayıcı ve kesitsel bir çalışma olup, örneklemini bir üniversitenin hemşirelik bölümünde okuyan 89 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Veri toplama araçları olarak katılımcıların kişisel bilgi formu, Kültürlerarası Duyarlılık Ölçeği ve Çok Boyutlu Duygusal Empati Ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Veriler, 25 Kasım 2023 ile 30 Kasım 2024 tarihleri arasında toplanmıştır.

Bulgular: Çalışma katılımcılarının ortalama Kültürlerarası Duyarlılık Ölçeği ve Çok Boyutlu Duygusal Empati Ölçeği puanı sırasıyla $89,83 \pm 12,39$ ve $110,70 \pm 13,46$ 'ydı. Kültürlerarası Duyarlılık Ölçeği ve Çok Boyutlu Duygusal Empati Ölçeği puanları arasında pozitif bir korelasyon vardı ($p < 0,001$).

Sonuç: Bu çalışma, empati becerilerinin kültürlerarası etkileşimlerde önemli bir rol oynadığını ve öğrencilerin farklı kültürlerle etkili iletişim kurmasını desteklediğini göstermektedir. Hemşirelik eğitiminde, empati ve kültürel farkındalık odaklı programların geliştirilmesi önemlidir.

Özgün Araştırma Makalesi (Original Research Article)

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ETHICAL STATEMENT: This study was carried out with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Istanbul Gelisim University, dated 30/10/2024 and numbered 2024-15-70. A signed subject consent form in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki was obtained from each participant.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Uluslararası öğrenciler, kültürlerarası duyarlılık, empatik eğilim, hemşirelik öğrencileri.

Introduction

Individuals studying in different countries are defined as international students and their numbers are increasing¹. In recent years, the number of international students in the Turkish higher education system has significantly increased. While there were 16,656 international students in the 2000/01 academic year, this number exceeded 300,000 by 2022, demonstrating remarkable growth². These students, who are educated in different cultural environments, face sociological and psychological difficulties owing to cultural interactions. International students experience adaptation problems due to cultural differences in many areas such as language, clothing, nutrition, social activities, and interpersonal relationships. Cultural adaptation is directly related to the similarity of the environment students come from to their own culture; as similarity increases, adaptation problems decrease, and as differences increase, adaptation difficulties deepen^{3,4}. Cultural adaptation affects not only daily life but also individuals' health perceptions and behaviors. While culture shapes the values, beliefs, attitudes, and traditions of society, it also affects individuals' health and disease perceptions and treatment approaches⁵. In this context, health needs are shaped and changed by cultural structures at individual, family and community levels⁶. The impact of cultural differences is of great importance, particularly for health services. Nurses should show sensitivity to each individual, taking into account cultural differences and similarities, to improve the quality of care⁷. Intercultural sensitivity refers to the ability to accept individuals' cultural differences and similarities without judgment⁸. Nurses play an important role in providing care to individuals of different ethnic backgrounds in multicultural societies⁹. As future nurses, nursing students must provide effective health assessments and appropriate treatment to individuals from different cultures by embracing cultural sensitivity in their professional practice¹⁰. Cultural sensitivity is a fundamental competency that nursing graduates should possess in their professional practice¹¹, but studies have found that nursing students experience difficulties when providing care to individuals with different beliefs, communication styles and lifestyles^{12,13}. Therefore, empathy plays an important role in developing cultural sensitivity. Nurses should develop empathy to effectively communicate with individuals from different cultures¹⁴. Individuals with a high empathic tendency also have high levels of intercultural sensitivity¹⁵. A culturally competent empathic approach increases satisfaction by improving quality of care, improving health outcomes, and reducing stress and burnout¹⁶. Cultural sensitivity in healthcare is the foundation of effective and humane care¹⁷. Determining nursing students' levels of cultural sensitivity and empathy is crucial for improving care quality. Understanding cultural beliefs and adapting perspectives help prevent communication issues and treatment noncompliance. Intercultural sensitivity and empathy enable healthcare professionals to deliver more effective, individualized care. Research on these skills among international students offers valuable insights for enhancing global healthcare services. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the levels of intercultural sensitivity of international nursing students?

2. What are the levels of empathic tendencies of international nursing students?
3. Is there a relationship between levels of intercultural sensitivity and empathic tendency among international nursing students?

Material and Methods

Study Design

The research is a descriptive and cross-sectional study.

Sample of the Research

A total of in universe of the study consisted of 127 international nursing students studying in the nursing department of a university. No sample selection was made, and the aim was to reach the entire study population between November 25, 2023, and November 30, 2024. 89 students who volunteered to participate in the study constituted the sample of the study. 70.07% of the universe was reached.

Data Collection Method

Face-to-face surveys were administered in classrooms between November 25, 2023, and November 30, 2024, with participation based on voluntariness.

Data Collection Instruments

The Personal Information Form

The personal information form consisted of descriptive items^{9,18} (age, gender, grade level, family type, place of birth, choosing nursing department willingly, taking lessons from below).

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

The 24-question scale was developed by Chen ve Starosta in 2000¹⁹ and its Turkish validity and reliability were assessed by Bulduk et al.²⁰. The scale has 5 sub-dimensions. The dimension of responsibility in communication consists of items 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23 and 24; the dimension of respect for cultural differences consists of items 2, 7, 8, 16, 18 and 20; the dimension of self-confidence in communication consists of items 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10; the dimension of liking communication consists of items 9, 12 and 15; and the dimension of being careful in communication consists of items 14, 17 and 19. Items 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20 and 22 are coded as reverse. The scale uses a 5-point Likert-type rating scale. A high score indicates that the individual has high intercultural sensitivity, while a low score indicates that the individual has low intercultural sensitivity. The Cronbach's alpha for this study was 0.855.

Multi-Dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale

The scale was developed by Caruso and Mayer in 1998²¹, and its Turkish validity and reliability were assessed by Turan et al²². The scale consists of 30 questions. The scale is designed on a 5-point Likert scale with a minimum score of 30 and a maximum score of 150. The scale consists of six sub-dimensions: suffering, positive sharing, responsive crying, emotional attention, feeling toward others, and emotional contagion. The Cronbach's alpha for this study was 0.806.

Study Variables

Mean scores on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and the Multi-Dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale served as the study's dependent variables. The independent variable in the study was personal characteristics of the participants (age, gender, grade year, family type, place of birth, choosing nursing department willingly, and taking lessons from below).

Data Analysis

The data obtained in the study were analyzed using SPSS for Windows v.25.0 at a significance level of $p < .05$. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used for normality testing. Percentages and frequencies were used as nominal variables. Arithmetic means, standard deviations and min-max were used as ordinal variables. The correlation between variables was assessed using Pearson correlation analyses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics committee approval was obtained from the XX University Ethics Committee Presidency with the decision dated 30.10.2024 and numbered 2024-15-70 to conduct the research. The participants to be included in the study were informed before the survey and a consent form was signed.

Results

The mean age of the international nursing students was 25.56 ± 2.73 , 75.3% were male ($n=67$), 45% were in the fourth grade ($n=40$), 60.7% lived in a nuclear family ($n=54$), 85.4% were born in the city ($n=76$), 95.5% did not choose the nursing department willingly ($n=85$), and 64% did not take lessons from below ($n=57$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Personal characteristics of international nursing students ($n=89$)

		Mean±SD	
Age		(25.56±2.73) (min:18-max:33)	
		n	%
Gender	Female	22	24.7
	Male	67	75.3
Grade level	2nd grade	19	21.3
	3rd grade	30	33.7
	4th grade	40	45.0
Family type	Nuclear family	54	60.7
	Extended family	34	38.2
	Broken family	1	1.1
Place of birth	Village	2	2.2
	County	11	12.4
	Town	76	85.4
The status of choosing the nursing department willingly	Yes	4	4.5
	No	85	95.5
Taking lessons from below	Yes	32	36.0
	No	57	64.0

SD: Standard deviation

In Table 2, the international nursing students participating in the study had a total Intercultural Sensitivity Scale mean score of 89.83 ± 12.39 , and their sub-dimensions mean scores were; Interaction Engagement 25.60 ± 3.93 , Respect for Cultural Differences 23.41 ± 4.32 , Interaction Confidence 17.89 ± 3.66 , Interaction Enjoyment 11.14 ± 2.31 , Interaction Attentiveness 11.76 ± 2.45 . The students' total Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale mean score was 110.70 ± 13.46 , and their sub-dimensions mean scores were; Suffering was found to be 33.49 ± 6.12 , Positive Sharing 21.32 ± 3.30 , Responsive Crying 9.47 ± 2.16 , Emotional Attention 11.34 ± 2.84 , Feel for Others 13.49 ± 2.34 , Emotional Contagion 6.68 ± 2.03 .

Table 2. Distribution of mean scores of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale, the Multi-dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale, and sub-dimensions (n=89)

Measure	Mean (N=89)	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Intercultural Sensitivity Scale	89.83	12.39	59.00	111.00
Interaction Engagement	25.60	3.93	12.00	33.00
Respect for Cultural Differences	23.41	4.32	14.00	30.00
Interaction Confidence	17.89	3.66	8.00	25.00
Interaction Enjoyment	11.14	2.31	3.00	15.00
Interaction Attentiveness	11.76	2.45	11.76	2.45
Multi-dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale	110.70	13.46	66.00	144.00
Suffering	33.49	6.12	10.00	40.00
Positive Sharing	21.32	3.30	11.00	25.00
Responsive Crying	9.47	2.16	5.00	15.00
Emotional Attention	11.34	2.84	4.00	18.00
Feel for Others	13.49	2.34	8.00	19.00
Emotional Contagion	6.68	2.03	2.00	10.00

As a result of the correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between the scales in Table 3, a weak positive correlation²³ was found between the total score of the multidimensional emotional empathy scale and interaction engagement ($r=.431$, $p<.001$), Respect for Cultural Differences ($r=.315$, $p<.001$), Interaction Confidence ($r=.354$, $p<.001$), Interaction Enjoyment ($r=.295$, $p<.001$), Interaction Attentiveness ($r=.405$, $p<.001$), and Intercultural Sensitivity Scale total score ($r=.485$, $p<.001$). A positive correlation was found between the total score on the Intercultural Differences Scale and Suffering ($r=.465$, $p<.001$), Positive Sharing ($r=.465$, $p<.001$), Feel for Others ($r=.267$, $p<.05$), and Emotional Contagion ($r=.209$, $p<.05$). Accordingly, as the empathic skill levels of international nursing students increase, their intercultural sensitivity levels also increase.

Table 3. The relationship between the mean scores of the Multi-dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and their sub-dimensions (n=89)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
1	Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale	1												
2	Suffering	.830**	1											
3	Positive Sharing	.677**	.453**	1										
4	Responsive Crying	.486**	.242*	.181**	1									
5	Emotional Attention	.147	-.037	-.155	.010*	1								
6	Feel for Others	-.597**	.376**	.365**	.379**	-.118	1							
7	Emotional Contagion	-.511**	.194	.485**	.202	.031	.325**	1						
8	Intercultural Sensitivity Scale	.485**	.465**	.465**	.178	-.175	.267*	.209*	1					
9	Interaction Engagement	.431**	.351**	.423**	.179	-.115	.310**	.240*	.834**	1				
10	Respect for Cultural Differences	.315**	.327**	.282**	.091	-.105	.070*	.126	.835**	.584**	1			
11	Interaction Confidence	.354**	.206	.363**	.274**	-.033	.221*	.208	.756**	.587**	.514**	1		
12	Interaction Enjoyment	.295**	.459**	.289**	-.015	-	.325**	.179*	.026	.658**	.352**	.560**	.327**	1
13	Interaction Attentiveness	.405**	.470**	.363**	.061	-.149	.234*	.116	.485**	.376**	.205	.161	.300**	1

* p<.05, ** p<.00

Discussion

Healthcare education providers face rapidly changing conditions in a globalized world, including aging populations, income disparities, mass migration, and challenges in nursing that demand global solutions²⁴. The number of nursing students seeking international experiences has significantly increased²⁵, as has the number of international students in Turkey's higher education system². While studies on caregivers in Turkish culture providing care to foreign patients are common^{9,26,27}, the role of education in fostering intercultural sensitivity and empathy among international nursing students remains underexplored. This study aims to address this gap.

In the study, the mean total score of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale for international nursing students was 89.83 ± 12.39 , indicating a moderate level, consistent with the literature²⁸⁻³⁰. Among the sub-dimensions, the highest score was in Interaction Engagement (25.60 ± 3.93), and the lowest was in Interaction Enjoyment (11.14 ± 2.31), suggesting openness to interaction but lower enjoyment. The literature links lower enjoyment levels to personal experiences, language barriers, and cultural differences^{4,31}. Studies also report higher intercultural sensitivity among students who engage with individuals from different cultures and learn foreign languages³²⁻³⁴. Field practices involving cultural diversity are vital for enhancing nursing students' skills. The total mean score of the Multidimensional Empathy Scale (110.70 ± 13.46) suggests that students generally possess good empathic abilities, aligning with the literature^{35,36}. Among the sub-dimensions, the highest score was in Suffering (33.49 ± 6.12), indicating emotional sensitivity to others' difficulties, while the lowest was in Emotional Contagion (6.68 ± 2.03), reflecting a limited tendency to be influenced by others' emotions. A high score on the Suffering dimension may indicate that students are emotionally sensitive to the difficulties experienced by others. However, a low Emotional Contagion score

indicates that individuals have limited ability to be affected by the emotional states of others^{37,38}.

Although nursing students are sensitive to others' suffering, their limited emotional contagion may stem from insufficient emotional management and awareness. Lin et al³⁹. found that students faced challenges such as pressure, emotional management issues, and lack of courage. These findings indicate that while students empathize with others' difficulties, their emotional involvement remains low, underscoring the need for educational interventions to enhance emotional awareness and empathic sensitivity in nursing education.

Empathy is a key tool for developing sensitivity to cultural differences, promoting understanding, acceptance, and respect⁴⁰. This study found a positive relationship between international nursing students' empathy levels and their intercultural sensitivity. Significant correlations were observed between the total score on the Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale and sub-dimensions of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale, including Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness. These results highlight empathy's role in fostering effective and meaningful interactions across cultures. Prior studies also confirm that empathy enhances perceptions of different cultures and facilitates intercultural communication^{18,26,41,42}.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of empathy in intercultural interactions, helping students communicate more effectively with different cultures. Therefore, nursing education should include programs focused on empathy and cultural awareness. Increasing activities and field applications based on intercultural interactions will allow students to better understand diverse cultures. Additionally, interactive training can help overcome obstacles like language barriers and cultural differences. Future research should assess the effectiveness of programs developing empathy and intercultural sensitivity and explore their practical impact on healthcare services.

Limitations

As this study was limited to international nursing students studying at a university in Istanbul, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Furthermore, because the data were collected based on the subjective statements of the participants, the results can be evaluated at a perceptual level. However, it is thought that the study will contribute to filling the knowledge gap in this area and shed light on future research to be conducted in different countries and cultures.

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