

Exploring the Link between Empathy and Assertive Communication in Healthcare Settings

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Abstract

When it comes to the communication of healthcare professionals, the concept of competence in this area cannot be considered a complete concept if it does not include communication that is based on empathy and is not applied using assertiveness. It can be said that empathy and assertiveness are indispensable links in the interpersonal communication of healthcare professionals, whether it is communication directed towards patients or the organizational aspect of communication. Therefore, the goal of this research was to determine whether there is a connection between empathy and assertiveness in the communication of healthcare professionals. In this paper, a systematic review of literature was conducted, as part of which the Web of Science and Scopus databases were examined, and the key words according to which the databases were searched were empathy, assertiveness, and communication. The results of a systematic literature review showed that this is a relatively unexplored area in the recent period. This paper also represents a scientific basis for research of connection between empathy and assertiveness in the communication of healthcare professionals in Croatia.

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Introduction

When it comes to the communication of healthcare professionals, the concept of competence in this area cannot be considered a complete concept if it does not include communication that is based on empathy and is not applied using assertiveness.

Empathy is considered as one of the basic human skills (Goleman, 1996) and it is extremely important that healthcare professionals possess a high level of empathy because showing empathy develops trust and sense of security in the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients. In the simplest terms, empathy can be defined as the ability to recognize other people's emotions (Goleman, 1996), but the theory of empathy nevertheless says that it is a complex concept that consists of cognitive awareness of the inner state of other people (about their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and intention), and consequently from an effective response directed at others (Hoffman, 1984). It has been scientifically proven that empathy allows nurses to see and understand patients in their entirety, including the pathology of the disease and the medical procedures to which they are subjected, and all the elements that result from this and directly affect their private life (Vioulac et al., 2016). Various scientific studies have established that empathy is also a protective factor when it comes to exposure to stress and professional burnout. Research conducted by Wilczek-Ruzyczka (2020) shows that nurses who possessed a higher level of empathy choose more constructive methods of coping with stress in the workplace and showed less exposure to professional burnout. The results of the research conducted by Villacieros et al. (2017) also showed that empathy affects the reduction of burnout among healthcare professionals.

Along with empathy, another important concept in communication of healthcare professionals is assertiveness. Assertiveness represents the ability to express one's feelings, opinions, and beliefs. The main assumption of assertive communication is that such communication it is direct, open, and honest, and at the same time does not violate the rights of other persons (Ellis & Harrtley, 2005, as cited in Ünal, 2012). It is unquestionable that communication between healthcare professionals and patients should be open and honest, and that both sides should respect the rights of others. However, healthcare providers are experts in their field, and when it comes to exchanging information, patients may find themselves in a subordinate position. Healthcare providers should assess the level of health literacy of health service users, but it should be considered that even users with a high level of health literacy may feel subordinated in that relationship. Richard et al. (2023) state that professional assertiveness enables healthcare professionals to exchange information with patients about their health conditions while respecting patients' full autonomy. Another problem that can arise when it comes to the application of assertive communication in the healthcare setting is mutual communication between the healthcare professionals themselves. Omura et al. (2018) point out that one of the main obstacles to the application of assertive communication is the hierarchical nature of healthcare environments. It is precisely the hierarchical nature that can make it difficult for healthcare professionals to be assertive in mutual communication, which can ultimately directly or indirectly affect patient safety.

It can be said that empathy and assertiveness are indispensable links in the interpersonal communication of healthcare professionals, whether it is communication directed towards patients or the organizational aspect of communication. Therefore, the goal of this research was to determine, through a systematic literature review, whether there are recent scientific studies in which the connection between empathy and assertiveness in the communication of healthcare

professionals has been examined. A research question arises from the goal of this research:

- RQ: Is there a connection between empathy and assertiveness in the communication of health professionals?

The paper was structured as follows: In the Introduction, the basic terms and the aim of the research are presented. In the Methodology section, the systematic literature review procedure is described, and the detailed analysis is shown in the Results section. The next, final section presents a discussion as well as a conclusion with an outline direction for further research.

Methodology

In this research, the method of systematic literature review was used, as part of which the Web of Science and Scopus databases were reviewed. A systematic literature review was conducted on February 16, 2024. Considering that the goal of research was to examine whether previous research has established a connection between empathy and assertiveness in the communication between healthcare professionals, the keywords according to which the databases were searched were “empathy”, “assertiveness”, and “communication”. In this way, search strings were created, based on which the total number of papers was obtained (Table 1).

Table 1
Search strings and number of hits

	Web of Science	Scopus
Search string	((ALL=(assertive OR assertiveness)) AND ALL=(empathy)) AND ALL=(communication)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (assertive OR assertiveness) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (empathy) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (communication)
Number of hits	84	122

Source: Own research

As can be seen from the table above, this approach resulted in 206 hints (84 in Web of Science and 122 in Scopus). In the next step, the search was limited to papers written in English and those that are published no earlier than 2019. After this step, a total of 69 papers were obtained, 30 in Web of Science and 39 in Scopus database. After removing duplicates, there were 45 papers left. In the next step, the titles and summaries of the remaining papers were read with the aim of elimination all papers that are not full and research papers on the topic of empathy and assertiveness in the communication of healthcare professionals whether it is communication directed towards patients or in the context of mutual communication between healthcare professionals. Research with sample of health students were also considered. After this step, 14 research remained that were included in the final review. The final 14 research (with authors, year of publication and title) are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

List of final 14 research for further analysis

ID	Authors, year of publication	Title
1	Placek et al. (2019)	A Cross-Sectional Study of Emotional Intelligence in Military General Surgery Residents
2	Laughlin et al. (2023)	Attitudes and Perception of the REFLECT Communication Curriculum for Clinical Oncology Graduate Medical Education
3	Grilo et al. (2023)	Attitudes toward Patient-Centred Care, Empathy, and Assertiveness among Students in Rehabilitation Areas: A Longitudinal Study
4	Hernández-Xumet et al. (2023)	Beyond scientific and technical training: Assessing the relevance of empathy and assertiveness in future physiotherapists: A cross-sectional study
5	Fong Betancourt et al. (2021)	Evaluation Of Assertive Communication Competencies In Nurses Using Neutrosophic Statistics
6	Reid et al. (2022)	Examining the relationship between clinician communication and patient participatory behaviors in cardiology encounters
7	Brotos et al. (2022)	Improvement of medical students' performance in simulated patient interviews by pre-clinical communication training
8	Montezeli et al. (2019)	Improving social skills in care management provided by nurses: intervention research
9	De Bruyn et al. (2020)	Off-label prescribing of stimulant medication to students: a qualitative study on the general practitioner perspective
10	Choi et al. (2023)	Technology-based interactive communication simulation for Korean nurses: A randomized controlled repeated-measures design
11	Briceño et al. (2022)	University assertive communication meta-capability: Analysis in nursing teachers
12	Smith et al. (2022)	Use of Situational Judgment Tests to Teach Empathy, Assertiveness, Communication, and Ethics
13	Pina et al. (2021)	Users' Perception of Violence and Conflicts With Professionals in Primary Care Centers Before and During COVID-19. A Qualitative Study
14	Serafin et al. (2020)	What is the most needed competence for newly graduated generation z nurses? Focus groups study

Source: Own research

The analysis of all obtained final papers is presented in the next section.

Results

Placek et al. (2019) conducted their research with the aim to examine the emotional intelligence among general surgery residents who are employed at one military medical center. In their research, they were examining the levels of assertive and empathic facets but only as a part of other factors that ultimately conceptually represent the model of emotional intelligence (Placek et al., 2019). The analysis of the

data obtained in this research included only the factors within which these concepts are, and the connection between these was not examined.

In an experimental longitudinal study conducted by the Grilo et al. (2023), the influence of different educational programs (person-oriented and technique-oriented programs) on the development of attitudes and perception about health care and communication skills was investigated. Assertiveness and empathy were one of the concepts that were examined in these forms, and the research was conducted on a sample of nursing and allied health students. Measurements were made on two occasions, during the first and during the third academic year. Although the connection between assertiveness and empathy was not examined in this study, the obtained results show the influence of different educational programs on their development. The results had shown that in the first year, it was not determined that there was a statistically significant difference in empathy, assertiveness, and the perception of communication skills between these two groups of students. Even more, all the students showed a moderate to high level of empathy and assertiveness and perceived their communication skills as good. In the third year, the students that attended person-oriented programs showed statistically significant higher level of empathy in relation to the level of the empathy in the first year. The same was not found on the students from technique-oriented programs, meaning that their level of empathy remained at the same level. In post-assessment measurement, students that attended person-oriented programs showed even statistically significant higher level of empathy than the students from technique-oriented program. When it comes to the frequency in which students act assertively, the research did not find that there were statistically significant differences, neither between the two measurements nor between the groups. However, in both groups it was noticed that during the education there were a statistically significant increase of discomfort when students are required to act assertively. In addition, students who attended the technique-oriented program had a statistically significantly higher increase in anxiety level compared to students who attended the person-oriented program. The students who attended the person-oriented program in the third academic year also had a significantly better perception of their communication skills than students who attended the technique-oriented program (Grilo et al., 2023). Another technology based experimental study was conducted by Choi et al. (2023) and the aim of their research was to examine the influence of communication simulation on the communication competences and assertiveness of nurses. The level of empathy was not examined in this research, and the results related to the level of assertiveness showed that attending the simulation training did not lead to an improvement in the level of assertiveness (Choi et al., 2023).

In the research conducted by Hernández-Xumet et al. (2023) the aim was to determine the levels of empathy and assertiveness of physiotherapy students. In this research, the concept of empathy was based on four dimensions, two of which were representing the cognitive aspects in which individuals are able to identify themselves with other (perspective taking dimension) and to put themselves in fictitious situations (fantasy dimension). Another two dimensions were representing individuals' emotional reactions to negative experiences (empathic concern and personal distress or discomfort dimensions). The research results showed that the levels of empathy and assertiveness of the physiotherapy students were acceptable, and in addition, the correlation between empathy and assertiveness was examined. The correlation test determined a statistically significant negative correlation between personal distress and assertiveness, while the remaining correlations were not significant (Hernández-Xumet et al., 2023).

Fong Betancourt et al. (2021) conducted their research with the aim of examining assertive competencies of nurses. In their research, they evaluated following components: empathy and ability to work with emotions, assertiveness in conflict situations and communication skills. The results showed that nurses were generally at a very good level in all the mentioned components, while correlation between these components was not examined in this study (Fong Betancourt et al., 2021).

Reid et al. (2022) conducted their research with the aim of examining the quality of communication between cardiologists and their patients. In this research, communication skills of cardiologists that are based on empathy, and, in contrast, the assertiveness of patients in their communication with cardiologists were examined. However, cardiologist's assertive communication was not one of the examined variables, so the correlation between empathy and assertiveness of cardiologists could not be examined either (Reid et al., 2022). The importance of communication in the relationship between physicians and patients was also discussed in the qualitative research conducted by De Bruyn et al. (2020) who examined how communication affects the decision-making of general practitioners in prescribing medications. In this study, communication was examined in the context of achieving a certain sociological influence, and the components that were examined were the level of empathy of general practitioners and, in contrast, the assertiveness of patients. In this research, the level of assertiveness of the general practitioners was also not examined, and therefore neither was the connection between empathy and assertiveness (De Bruyn et al., 2020)

Brotos et al. (2022) conducted their research with the aim of determining whether there is a difference in the level of communication skills between medical students who attended communication training and those who did not. Communication skills that were examined included eight components, and among them were assertiveness and empathy. The results showed that students who attended communication training had statistically significantly higher level of communication skills in general as well as a level of assertiveness. Students who attended communication training showed that they also possessed a higher level of empathy, but this difference was not statistically significant. The correlation between these two variables was not examined in this research (Brotos et al., 2022)

Briceño et al. (2022) conducted their research on the sample of nursing students, and the goal of the research was to analyse the assertive communication meta-capability of their teachers. Although this research examined the perception of assertive communication and empathy, the correlation between these two variables was not examined. Also, this research was conducted in the context of teaching-learning process between teachers and students, and not in the context of the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients or in the context of mutual communication between healthcare professionals employed in clinical practice.

The following two studies were structured as qualitative research, which means that the correlation between assertiveness and empathy in the communication of healthcare professionals was not examined in them. Pina et al. (2021) conducted their research using the focus group method with the aim of examining the potential causes of violent behaviour and their prevention. One of the main conclusions of this research was based on the attitudes of the interviewees, who consider that healthcare professionals who work with patients in primary care should attend training aimed at developing assertiveness and other communication skills (Pina et al., 2021). Serafin et al. (2020) also conducted their research using the focus group method. The aim of their study was to define nurses' competence among Generation Z nurses and as a conclusion, the authors state that six of the most necessary competencies were

defined in this study, among which are communication skills and empathy (Serafin et al., 2020).

The correlation between assertiveness and empathy in the communication of healthcare professionals was also not examined in the remaining three papers that were obtained by conducting a systematic review of the literature. Laughlin et al. (2023) conducted their research with the aim to evaluate the attitudes and perception of the new communication curriculum among oncology trainees. This new curriculum called REFLECT was designed to improve the interaction between physicians and patients, and assertiveness and empathy represented only one part of this curriculum (Laughlin et al. (2023)). Montezeli et al. (2019) conducted their research with the aim of analysing the educational program for the improvement of social skills among nurses. This research resulted in a development of a 30-hour educational program that will be used to improve social skills (including, among others, communication skills, assertiveness, and empathy) (Montezeli et al., 2019). While the previous two studies aimed to improve educational programs, Smith et al. (2022) conducted their research with the aim of developing a situational judgment test for use in teaching empathy, assertiveness, and interprofessional communication among pharmacy students. Therefore, in this research, the levels of assertiveness and empathy among the participants, as well as the connection between assertiveness and empathy, was also not examined.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to determine whether there are any recently conducted scientific studies that examined the connection between empathy and assertiveness in communication of healthcare professionals. Using the method of systematic literature review, 14 scientific articles were obtained, of which only one research investigated the connection between empathy and assertiveness in communication of healthcare professionals. Authors Hernández-Xumet et al. (2023) found in their research that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between personal distress and assertiveness, while no statistically significant correlation with assertiveness was found between the remaining three components of empathy. Therefore, the answer to the research question is that there is a partial connection between empathy and assertiveness among healthcare professionals. However, it should be considered that this conclusion is derived from only one research that was conducted on physiotherapy students. In addition, it should be considered that this research examined the assertiveness of physiotherapy students, but not application of assertiveness in their communication, so results of this research should be considered with caution. This alone raises the question of application of assertiveness in the communication of healthcare professionals, that is, the possible existence of obstacles in which assertive individuals would apply communication that is not assertive.

The results of conducting systematic literature review indicate that empathy and assertiveness are important components in the communication of healthcare professionals. It can be said that empathy and assertiveness represent the fundamental determinants of effective communication, and these two competencies can be considered as key competencies that all healthcare professionals must possess. However, the lack of research on the relationship between these two concepts indicates that this is an unexplored scientific area in recent time.

This paper also represents a scientific basis for further research because, in addition to the question of the connection between empathy and assertiveness in the communication of healthcare professionals, the question arises whether there are differences in the level of these competencies in different profiles of healthcare

professionals, as well as what is the role of formal education in acquiring them in Croatia.

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