

Assertiveness and the Factors Affecting it Among Nursing Students of Tehran University of Medical Sciences

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Abstract— Assertiveness is viewed as a skill and capacity in interpersonal communications. Assertive individuals are able to express and respond to their positive and negative feelings without anxiety and unnecessary anger. Assertiveness is necessary for effective nurse/patient communication, and it is suggested that its development may also aid the confidence of the profession as it develops. Little information is available about assertiveness among students. This study was carried out to assess the assertiveness and the factors affecting it among nursing students. This was a descriptive cross-sectional study. 68 males and 105 females (173 participants) nursing students was selected respectively by census and quota sampling in 2007. The data was collected by personal-social questionnaire and Assertion Inventory (AI) of Gambrill and Richey. The data was analyzed by descriptive and inferential (Spearman test, Kruskal-Wallis test, Mann-Whitney test, stepwise multiple regression test) statistical tests. The results showed that 71.1% of the students had different degrees of deficit in assertiveness. The meaningful relation was found between assertiveness and year of education ($p < 0.04$), participation in the process of decision making in family ($p < 0.01$), and working beside education ($p < 0.05$). Also there was a meaningful and reverse relation between assertiveness and age ($p < 0.04$). From different variables, age and participation in the process of decision making in family, had the most effect on the level of assertiveness. Since a good majority of students had deficit in assertiveness, performance of some educational plans about assertiveness is required during the nursing educational period. Further studies must be done in order to find the best and accurate method for training social skills and assertiveness.

Index Terms—Assertiveness, Nursing, Students, Iran

I. INTRODUCTION

Assertiveness refers to one's ability to express and advocate ideas, interests, and feeling easy, appropriately and without anxiety (Lizarage et al. 2003). According to Alberti and Emmons (1977), assertiveness is viewed as a skill and capacity in interpersonal communications [1]. The psychological concept of assertiveness covers three major principles of human expression: behavior, cognition, and emotion. From the behavioral aspect, assertiveness is the skill that enables a person to freely express his feelings and defend his objectives and goals (Townend, 2007). In terms of

affectivity, assertive individuals are able to express and respond to their positive and negative feelings without anxiety and unnecessary anger (Townend, 2007). Researchers have indicated that training skills on problem solving, stress management, assertiveness, anger management and emotional self-awareness bring about higher levels of happiness in individuals (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009) [2]. An assertive person can create a close relationship with others, prevent others from abusing her or him, and express a wide range of positive and negative thoughts and needs without feeling guilty, stressful, anxious, and violating the rights of others [3]. Assertiveness is among the treatable interpersonal communication aspects. It is also among the most important and essential social skills making a part of the extensive concept of interpersonal and behavioral skills. The simultaneous presence of low assertiveness and high anxiety in the students' results in interrupted educational performance, poor learning process, weakened ability, and undeveloped talents [4]. Day to day life requires that nursing students develop strategies to establish and maintain better relationship with all those they have contact with. Good communication is crucial to the well-being of nursing students, allowing them to cooperate with the various specialists and patients they interact with [5]. Assertiveness is necessary for effective nurse/patient communication, and it is suggested that its development may also aid the confidence of the profession as it develops [6]. Based on the study carried out by SeyedFatemi and colleagues (2013), a good majority of bachelor's nursing students had assertiveness skills at the middle level [7]. Also in accordance with the study done by Taghavi and colleagues (2010), %71.1 of students are encountered with some degrees of assertiveness disabilities [8]. In addition, based on the research done by Zare and colleagues (2007), the nurses with more assertiveness, are able to care their patients more efficiently [9]. Based on the findings of McCartan and Hargie (2004), there is a meaningful and direct relation between assertiveness and clinical skills [10].

Considering the importance of assertiveness and how significant of a role it plays in students' mental health and also the lack of studies on factors affecting the students' assertiveness, this study was designed and done in order to determine the level of assertiveness and the factors affecting it among nursing students of Tehran University of medical sciences.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a descriptive and cross sectional study. The community research of this study is all nursing students who educate at Tehran University of medical sciences in

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2007-2008. After determining the sample size, considering the small number of male students all of whom were selected by census sampling. The female students were selected by quota sampling. Some samples were excluded from the study because of their mental or physical disorders or incomplete questionnaires. Finally, 173 nursing students (68 males and 105 females) were analyzed. The inclusion criteria were being bachelor's degree students and studying in daily courses. The exclusion criteria were guest or transfer student and having mental or physical disorders. The following questionnaires have been used in this study for gathering the data:

1. Personal-social questionnaire: This questionnaire was made based on the elements that probably have effects on assertiveness of students. The questionnaire is consisted of 25 questions about age, gender, marital status, year of education the number of family members, the sequence of children's birth, parents alive, residence, participation in the process of decision-making in family, family income sufficiency, interest in discipline and etc.

2. Assertion Inventory (AI) of Gambrill and Richey: This questionnaire is used to assess the assertiveness. This scale is considerably accurate in showing the level of perceived distress among the students in specific situations [14]. This questionnaire includes 9 categories which measures the level of assertiveness. These 9 categories are: rejecting the request, expressing own limitations, requesting, to initiate a social interaction, expressing the positive feelings, accepting the criticism, accepting the differences between individuals, being present at situations that helping is required, and giving negative feedback.

This scale has 40 questions that each of them reflects a reality that needs assertive behavior. The participants are asked to declare the level of distress in some situations such as rejecting the friend's request, acceptance of ignorance in some fields, and expressing the opposing ideas. These questions are scored based on the 5 score Likert scale (from no distress=1 to high amount of distress=5). The overall score is reported between 40-200. The lower score indicates the more assertiveness and vice versa. The level of participants' assertiveness was categorized in three clusters. The highest assertiveness is given to those participants with less than 25% of scores achieved, whereas average assertiveness for the participants with 25-75% of scores, and lowest assertiveness for the ones receiving more than 75% of available scores.

There is a high correlation between the questions of this questionnaire. The scientific credit of Gambrill and Richey assertiveness scale is reported 39-70%. Also the questionnaire credit coefficient has been reported 0.87 with test and posttest by Gambrill and Richey (1975). The reliability of this questionnaire was reported 0.82 by Amali (1995) in a study at Tehran Psychiatric Institute [15]. This questionnaire has been translated by Bahrami (1977). She made some changes on it because some criteria of this scale were mismatched with Iranian culture. The reliability of this new questionnaire has been reported 0.88 by Bahrami [16]. The internal reliability of this questionnaire was reported 0.9652 by Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

The ethical considerations were observed in this study. All the questionnaires remained unknown and all the participants were explained about the aims of study. Spearman test, Kruskal-Wallis test, Mann-Whitney test, stepwise multiple

regression test, and SPSS 11.5 were utilized in order for the data to be analyzed.

III. RESULTS

Based on the findings, most of the participants were between the ages of 22-24 years old (36.4%). Female (60.7%), single (91.3%), first child of family (24.3%), having over five members in family (71.7%), parents alive (88.4%), self-employed father (50.9%), the housewife mother (92.5%), and most of their parents were illiterate or having elementary education (28.4%).

The first table shows that a good majority of students had participation in the process of decision making in their family (93.6%), and also the family income sufficiency is reported acceptable by them (45.1%). Most of the participants were interested in their discipline (49.7%), in addition they declared that the attitude of their parents towards their discipline was positive (52.6%).

According to the findings, the majority of students had middle level of assertiveness (59.5%), while 11.6% of whom had low level of assertiveness and 28.9% of whom had high level of assertiveness. On the other hand, it could be said that the ones with low and middle level of assertiveness had problem in assertiveness and in overall 71.1% of the students had different degrees of deficit in assertiveness.

The meaningful and reverse relation was found between age and level of assertiveness by Spearman correlation coefficient ($p < 0.004$ and $r = -0.215$). In addition, there was a meaningful relation between assertiveness and participation in the process of decision making in family ($p < 0.01$) and also between assertiveness and working beside education ($p < 0.05$). The meaningful statistical deference was reported between assertiveness and year of education (0.04) by Kruskal-Wallis test (Table number 2). Mann-Whitney test revealed that there is a meaningful statistical deference only between first year students (98.46 ± 20.98) and fourth year students (87.56 ± 21.8) ($p < 0.07$).

In accordance with the findings, the average of assertiveness in male students (91.58 ± 21.74) were lower than female students (95.60 ± 22.62), but it is not a reflection of meaningful statistical deference ($p = 0.845$).

No meaningful relation between assertiveness and marital status, number of family members, the sequence of children's birth, parents alive, residence, family income sufficiency, the attitude of family towards students' discipline, and interest in discipline have been found in this study.

Table 1. Absolute and relative frequency of some social and individual criteria of participants.

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Age	18-20	41	23.7
	20-22	63	36.4
	22-24	52	30.1
	24 and >24	17	9.8
Gender	Male	89	39.6
	Female	136	60.4
Year of education	1 st year	57	32.9
	2 nd year	48	27.7
	3 rd year	32	18.5
	4 th year	36	20.8
Parents alive	Father and mother	200	88.9
	Only father	6	2.7
	Only mother	17	7.6
	None of them	2	0.9
Interested in discipline	Completely	67	38.7
	Approximately	86	49.7
	No interest	20	11.6
Residence	Dormitory	119	68.8
	Private house	52	30.1
	Rental house	2	1.2
The attitude of family towards their child's discipline	Positive	120	53.3
	Approximately positive	97	43.1
	Negative	8	3.6
Participation in the process of decision making in family	Yes	162	93.6
	No	11	6.4
Working beside education	Yes	28	12.4
	No	197	87.6

Based on the table number 3, the multiple correlation of statistical coefficient test showed that between the variables which had the meaningfulness level of less than 0.2, age (B= -3.61, p<0.05) and participation in the process of decision making in family (B= 14.96, p<0.001) had the most effect on students' assertiveness. The linear regression equation for assertiveness based on these two variables is: Assertiveness= 75.34-3.61(Age) + 14.96 (Participation)

Table 2. The relation between some demographic variables and the level of assertiveness among the participants

Variables		Assertiveness			Test's Results
		Low	Middle	High	
Age	18-20	7	26	8	Spearman Test r = -0.215 *p<0.004
	20-22	8	39	16	
	22-24	3	31	18	
	24 and >24	2	7	8	
Year of education	1st year	7	40	10	Kruskal Wallis Test $\chi^2 = 8.309$ df=3 **p<0.04
	2nd year	7	26	15	
	3rd year	3	18	11	
	4th year	3	19	14	
Participation in decision making	Yes (93.1±21.84)	17	96	49	Mann-Whitney Test Z= -2.573 **p<0.01
	No (108.5±16.1)	3	7	1	
Working beside education	Yes(84.67±17.01)	0	12	9	Mann-Whitney Test Z= -1.918 **p<0.05
	No (95.39±12.12)	20	91	41	

1.X±sd 2.the greater average means the lower level of assertiveness
*p<0.001; **p<0.05

Table 3. Regression statistical indicators of some demographic variables with the level of assertiveness among the participants

Regression	B	SE	Beta	t
Constant	75.343	13.144	-	*5.732
Age	-3.61	1.84	-0.15	** -1.95
Year of education	-1.32	1.63	-0.063	-0.8
Father's education level	1.11	1.16	0.077	0.95
Mother's education level	-0.94	1.38	-0.05	-0.68
Parents alive	-4.56	2.72	-0.11	-1.67
Family income efficiency	1.41	2.31	0.04	0.61
Participation in decision making	14.96	6.11	0.16	**2.44
Working beside education	8.18	4.77	0.12	1.71

IV. DISCUSSION

Efficient human resources play a determinant part in the growth and development of social and cultural process. Undoubtedly, educated human resources require close care and attention. Students are able to provide community with better achievements in future and also these achievements are highly dependent on students' health. One of the most effective elements that influence the mental health of students is assertiveness. The students' mental health could be strengthened by further studies in the field of assertiveness and the factors influencing on it. In this study, 71.1% of the students had different degrees of deficit in assertiveness. It could be said that the main reason of this fact is the nurture system of family and parenting styles. And also one question remains, what is the role of educational and cultural systems in teaching social skills such as assertiveness?

Based on the findings of present study, most of the students reported middle level of assertiveness. In the studies of Rasouli and Zare (2015), Baghani and colleagues (2013), and Taghavi and colleagues (2014), most of the nursing students had middle level of assertiveness [11, 12, and 13]. The findings of these studies are aligned with the present study. While Unal and colleagues (2012) in a study on nursing students, who experience verbal violence during practical training, reported that more than half of the nursing students have low level of assertiveness [14]. This deference is probably due to considering the negative effect of verbal violence and conflicts on assertiveness in clinical field.

The present study showed a reverse and meaningful relation between age and assertiveness. Based on the study of Baghani and colleagues (2013), by increasing the age, the assertiveness will be raised. This fact could be as a result of communication skills' improvement and social maturity during increasing the age [12]. Eskin (2003) also declared that the level of assertiveness will be increased by age [15]. Therefore, it could be concluded that one of the significant factors which have an influence on the relation between age and assertiveness is being the majority of students in the lower age range. Hence further studies are suggested in this regard.

The present study did not show meaningful relation between assertiveness and gender. This finding is similar with the studies of SeyedFatemi and colleagues (2013) and Taghavi and colleagues (2010) [7, 8]. This is probably due to the fact that the submissive nature of nursing versus medicine prevents suitable assertive behavior even for male students. This could lead to further reduction of assertiveness [16]. However, Baghani and colleagues (2013) declared that the level of assertiveness is higher in female students than male students, while Dinciyurek and colleagues (2009) reported that the level of assertiveness is higher in male students than female students [12, 17]. The different findings of various studies could be due to some differences in culture, religion and customs of each community.

The present study showed that the level of assertiveness in last year students (87.56 ± 21.48) is obviously higher than first year students (98.46 ± 20.98). This result is aligned with the studies of Taghavi and colleagues (2010) and Baghani and colleagues (2013) [8, 12]. In addition, Begley and Glacken (2004) did a study about the level of assertiveness among nursing students and they said that the level of assertiveness

increased after finishing the three year period of education [18].

In a study about the assertiveness of last year students in Turkey which was carried Out by Karagozolu and colleagues (2007), no meaningful relation was showed between assertiveness and the level of parents' education and the job of parents [19].

The findings showed that the students who had participation in the process of decision making in their family and also the ones working beside their education were more assertive than other students. In this regard, it could be concluded that the students who are more independent and receive more respect about their opinions and feelings, have more level of assertiveness. Moreover, in accordance with the results, age and participation in the process of decision making have had the most effect on assertiveness of students.

V. CONCLUSION

In today's world, one of the most important aims of education is to train the individuals who are able to cope with different and hard situations and the ones who have the ability of decision making in critical situations. The universities play a vital role in providing the community with these assertive and creative human resources. Based on the results, a good majority of students had degrees of deficit in assertiveness, therefore, some educational programs had better to be designed in order for assertiveness to be upgraded among the students.

Since the self-reported scales have some restrictions, it is recommended to use behavioral assessment techniques in further studies. According to the results of present study it is highly suggested to give a close care and attention to psychological supportive systems such as students' counseling offices. Also some educational plans must be designed by the ones working in this field to teach assertiveness for students. In addition, in order to rectify the lack of information in this field, it is suggested to do further studies for comparing the level of assertiveness among the students of other disciplines.

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