
Assertiveness and Psychological Empowerment Among Nursing Students: A Malaysian Perspective.

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Abstract

Background: In the past several decades, assertiveness and psychological empowerment have played an important role in developing successful nurses. Nurse leaders who can empower others will be able to motivate the frontline nurses with whom they work and help them manage difficult events in the workplace. The purpose of the study was to examine the correlation between the level of assertiveness and psychological empowerment possessed by the year 3 Diploma in nursing students at a private healthcare University College in Malaysia.

Methods: A quantitative cross sectional survey design with convenience sampling was used in this study. The questionnaires were distributed to 144 prospective respondents using google forms. The response rate was 86% (n-119).

Findings Based on the findings, the final-year students are non-assertive (53.8% representing 64 respondents) and not psychologically empowered (100% representing 119 respondents). Moreover, the study showed a positive and significant correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment at 0.570 with a p-value <0.01. Hence, a conclusion can be made that the level of assertiveness influences the level of psychological empowerment. All the subscales of psychological empowerment showed significant correlation with assertiveness such as meaning ($r= 0.539$), competence ($r= 0.597$), self-determination ($r= 0.568$) and impact ($r= 0.470$). This study has shown a correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment.

Conclusion: The importance assertiveness or psychological empowerment among nursing students should be considered as cultivating one variable will positively impact the other variable. This is crucial for nursing students as they have to overcome hardships in their practical training, theory-based classes and daily life. Hence, educational institution should emphasize on

curriculum revision to include elements of assertiveness or psychological empowerment as soft skills development during nursing training.

Keywords: assertiveness, psychological empowerment, nursing students, emotional intelligence, soft skills.

1. Introduction

In the past several decades, assertiveness and psychological empowerment have played an important role in developing successful nurses. Being assertive helps a person to become more self-confident. Assertiveness can be defined as being forthright about our requirements while considering the rights and needs of others. Nurse leaders who can empower others will be able to motivate the frontline nurses with whom they work and help them manage difficult events in the workplace. According to Bushra (2018), an assertive nurse defends the client in every aspect. It can also be defined simply as conveying one's point of view, which affirms the individual's right without violating the other person's rights. It enhances honesty and dedication in the nursing profession. It is not only being confident in what we speak but also in our body language, which is exhibited in every life situation. Nurses have to cultivate assertiveness among themselves to protect the rights of nurses and clients who come for nursing care. Assertiveness by a nurse will show behavior based on certain principles like equality, respect, responsibility, and accountability. Being assertive, a nurse is not selfish; rather, it promotes the rights of the client, fairness and equality in the job description and most importantly, efficiency and effectiveness of nursing practice attained. Assertiveness is considered a unique and priceless component in nursing, rewarding nurses, clients, other workers and the community.

On the other hand, empowerment plays a similar role to assertiveness. The nursing profession has gone through many changes and earned gratitude by becoming a well know healthcare profession. By having that accreditation, empowerment should be applied side to side with assertiveness in executing their role confidently as the nurses are given the authority to provide nursing care. Other elements, such as critical thinking and reasoning for action, should also be incorporated so that nurses do not violate the authority given to them and earn the trust of other healthcare professionals. In this competitive working environment, the frequency of nurses hired, the quality of nursing care and the satisfaction level of nursing care among the patients indirectly determines the endurance level of a healthcare organization. Hence, the demand for excellent services has led healthcare organizations to instil high psychological empowerment to get normalized to new management practices. Instilling high psychological empowerment in nurses also means granting "power" to nurses. The conception of psychological empowerment was first brought up in the 1980s. Psychological empowerment is defined as transforming the physical labour force into an intellectual force; hence a proper understanding of psychological empowerment can yield good results. Psychological empowerment includes four elements: sense, competence, autonomy and influence. All four elements of being psychologically empowered have influenced the nurses to be productive, happier, and innovative and produce higher quality nurses than non-empowered nurses. In terms of nursing students, three elements of being valued play an important part in nursing students being psychologically empowered: being

valued as a learner, being valued as a team member during practical and being valued as a person (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2011). Significant factors such as effective mentorship and a supportive environment influence a student to be psychologically empowered. The study aimed to examine the correlation between the level of assertiveness and psychological empowerment possessed by the year 3 Diploma in nursing students at a private healthcare University College in Malaysia.

2. Method

Design and sampling

This cross-sectional study was conducted at a private University College, Nilai, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The questionnaire was distributed to 134 students with a response from 119 year 3 Diploma in nursing students with a response rate of 89%. The sampling method used in this study was purposive sampling as the year 3 Diploma in Nursing students are in their final year of education; hence it will be easier to see the optimum level of assertiveness and psychological empowerment experienced in their final year of education based on including and excluding criteria.

Study tools

The instruments applied in this study were survey questionnaires. There were sections in the questionnaire which consist of the personal information form, which is also known as socio-demographic characteristics in “section A”, the Rathus’ Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) in “section B”, and the Spreitzer's Psychological Empowerment Scale in “section C”. These instruments are adapted from another study by Azizi et al. (2020) that uses the same instruments. In section A, the personal information form contains five items, including questions about gender, age, ethnic group, level of education and the semester in Year 3. Section B consists of Rathus’ Assertiveness Schedule (RAS), designed by Rathus (1973) to measure the level of assertiveness. The adapted Rathus Assertiveness Scale (RAS) is a validated and reliable instrument. This scale includes 30 items. Its scoring is based on the 6-option Likert scale, including “*very much like me* (score +3)”, “*rather like me* (+2)”, “*slightly like me* (+1)”, “*slightly unlike me* (-1)”, “*rather unlike me* (-2)”, and “*very much unlike me* (-3).” The score range is from -90 to +90. A score closer to +90 indicates more assertiveness and vice versa. Scores closer to -90 represent a low level of assertiveness. Those who obtain a score of less than +10 are considered shy or non-assertive, and those who obtain the above +10 are considered assertive (Azizi et al., 2020)). Section C consists of the Spritzers psychological empowerment scale used to measure psychological empowerment. The adapted Spreitzer's psychological empowerment scale is a validated and reliable instrument. This scale consists of four components: competence, self-determination, meaning, and impact. It has 12 items, and the responses will be based on the 6-option Likert scale, ranging from “*very strongly disagree*” to “*very strongly agree*” from one to six. The score range for the questionnaire is from 12 to 72. The higher score indicates a higher sense of empowerment in the person. The Cronbach’s Alpha value obtained for the three parts was 0.980. Thus, this result suggests good internal consistency. The questionnaires were distributed virtually in Google Forms through a mobile messaging app called “WhatsApp” as most universities highly practised to prevent further escalation of the spread of COVID-19. The questionnaires were attached with the informed consent and a brief explanation regarding the

questions. All of the data obtained was entered onto password-protected SPSS file for analysis, and only researcher has access to it hence this preserves the confidentiality of the respondents. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequencies, percentage) and inferential statistics was used to calculate the study variables. Spearman's correlation was used to examine the relationship between relations between psychological empowerment and student nurses' assertiveness. Before that, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (K-S Test) was used to evaluate the normality of the data by testing the null hypothesis that these data came from a normally distributed population. The results from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed an abnormal distribution of variables of assertiveness and psychological empowerment. Hence, Spearman's correlation coefficient was used. In order to investigate the correlation between psychological empowerment and assertiveness, the Spearman's correlation coefficient was used. The significance level of more than 0.05 is considered significantly correlated. Finally, data analyzed was made explicit and the procedures justified.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from the Research Management Committee (RMC) of the University College to seek approval to start the research project. The proposal for this study was reviewed and approved by RMC. The purpose of the study, informed consent, and the respondent criteria regarding privacy and confidentiality are attached and briefly explained in the google form.

3. Findings

A total of 119 respondents participated in this study shows, 83% of the total population. Table 1 shows a majority of 117 female students representing 98.3%, took part in this study. Only two male respondents represented 1.7% of the population. Table 1 also shows the data of the respondents from the age group of 20 years old to 23 years old. Nursing students in the age group 20 years old were the respondents with the highest participating percentage at 89.9% (107 respondents). Followed by respondents aged 21 years old at 5.9% (7 respondents), 22 years old at 2.5% (3 respondents), and respondents aged 23 at 1.7% shows, two respondents of the total population. According to Table 4.1, the three ethnic groups that actively participated in this study are Malay, Indian and Bidayuh. The percentage of Malay nursing students participating in this study is 89.9%, representing 107 respondents. The Indians comprised this percentage at 7.6% (9 respondents) and 2.5% (the Bidayuh students), showing three respondents. This study is focused only on the Diploma in nursing students. Hence the percentage showed that 100% of the participating students were diploma holders representing 119 respondents of the total population. Table 4.1 also illustrates the semester of study of the respondents. The results showed that 86.6% (103 respondents) of the participants were in semester 6, and 16 were in semester 5, at 13.4%.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the study samples

Level of Education	Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	
Diploma in Nursing	Gender			
	Female	117	98.3	
	Male	2	1.7	
	Age	20	107	89.9
		21	7	5.9
		22	3	2.5
23		2	1.7	
Ethnic group	Malay	107	89.9	
	Indian	9	7.6	
	Bidayuh	3	2.5	
	Semester	5	16	13.4
		6	103	86.6

In this second subdivision of the chapter, the level of assertiveness was discussed. Table 2 shows the mean scores of assertiveness in year three students at 95.20 ± 31.93 .

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of assertiveness in final year diploma in nursing student.

Variable	Assertiveness
	Mean \pm SD*
Year 3 – Diploma in Nursing	95.20 \pm 31.93

*Standard deviation

Table 3 shows 53.8%, representing 64 respondents of the final year students are non-assertive, and 46.2% (64 respondents) of students are assertive.

Table 3 Frequency of assertiveness of the final year diploma in nursing student

Variables		Year 3 – Diploma in Nursing	
		n	(%)
Assertiveness	Assertive	55	46.2
	Non-assertive	64	53.8
Total		119	100

*N= Frequency, %= Percentage

The level of psychological empowerment was discussed in this third subdivision of the chapter. Table 4 shows the mean scores of psychological empowerment in year three students at 44.82 ± 15.21 .

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of psychological empowerment in final year diploma in nursing student.

Variable	Psychological Empowerment
	Mean \pm SD*
Year 3 – Diploma in Nursing	44.82 \pm 15.21

*Standard deviation

Table 5 shows 100% representing 119 respondents of the final year students is empowered, and none of the students is empowered at 0%. The correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment was discussed in this fourth subdivision of the chapter.

Table 5 Frequency of psychological empowerment of the final year diploma in nursing student.

Variables	Year 3 – Diploma in Nursing		
	N	(%)	
Psychological Empowerment	Empowered	0	0
	Non-empowered	119	100
	Total	119	100

*N= Frequency, %= Percentage

The results illustrated in Table 6 was analyzed using Spearman’s correlation coefficient. The results showed a positive and significant correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment at 0.570 with a p-value <0.01.

Table 6. Correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment

Variables	Assertiveness	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Meaning	0.539**	<0.01
Competence	0.597**	<0.01
Self-determination	0.568**	<0.01
Impact	0.470**	<0.01
Total score of Psychological Empowerment	0.570**	<0.01

The finding showed that there is a significance between assertiveness and psychological empowerment. Hence, a conclusion can be made that the level of assertiveness influences the level of psychological empowerment. All the subscales of psychological empowerment showed significant correlation with assertiveness such as meaning ($r= 0.539$), competence ($r= 0.597$), self-determination ($r= 0.568$) and impact ($r= 0.470$). The subscale of psychological empowerment that showed the strongest correlation with assertiveness is competence, followed by self-determination, meaning and the weakest correlation is possessed by impact.

4. Discussion

4.1 Level of Assertiveness

The study's findings revealed that the mean assertiveness score in year three students is 95.20 ± 31.93 . This higher mean obtained in the year three students follows the similar results obtained in a study by Begley and Glacken (2004). Results showed raised mean of total assertiveness as the nursing students nearing the completion of their three-year pre-registration programme compared to the mean of total assertiveness in their first week of the programme. Based on further analyzed findings, 64 respondents of the final year students are non-assertive, and 55 of the students are assertive. Similar results obtained on assertiveness in final-year students were seen in a study that compared self-esteem and assertiveness by Yılmaz (2000). The lowest level of assertiveness was found in the final-year students, and the assertiveness level gradually increased as they approached their first year at university. Contradictory results are found in a study that investigates the factors affecting assertiveness among nursing students at Port-Said University, Egypt, showed that the fourth-year students show the highest assertiveness percentage at 67.2% representing 41 students out of 125 students that were assertive from different scholarly levels (Ibrahim, S.A.E.A., 2011).

Similarly, another study titled self-esteem and assertiveness of last year students in baccalaureate degree programs at Cumhuriyet University Nursing School (Karagözoğlu et al., 2008) shows that

the level of assertiveness was generally high at 24.53 ± 25.13 . Since the researcher's findings state that the assertiveness level is low among the final-year diploma students, this matter should be tackled effectively and urgently. According to the study done by Maheshwari & Kanwaljit (2020) on "Relationship of Assertiveness and Self Esteem among Nurses", it is found that non-assertive behaviour and low self-esteem are major problems in the nursing profession. This can be supported by another study stating that it is believed that students in Asian societies struggle with low levels of assertiveness. Various studies have been done to measure assertiveness in students, but very few studies have been done specifically on nursing students. Hence these differences in the levels of assertiveness might be affected by other factors, such as the study field and the environment. As a result, only literature from future studies on levels of assertiveness in nursing students can help to conclude that final-year nursing students generally possess low levels of assertiveness.

4.2 Level of Psychological Empowerment

The findings showed the mean score of psychological empowerment in year three students at 44.82 ± 15.21 . The data also showed that 100%, representing 119 respondents out of 144 of the final year students, are non-empowered, and none of the students is empowered. Unfortunately, there was a lack of research studies regarding psychological empowerment among final-year nursing students. As mentioned, all the 119 respondents in the year three diploma in nursing are not psychologically empowered. This finding is similar, but the study done by Ibrahim (2011) reported that the fourth-year (29 students) nursing students possessed lower psychological empowerment compared to the first (32 students) and third (32 students) year nursing students, followed by the second-year students who represent the least psychologically empowered at 14 students. According to studies, psychological empowerment can reduce job burnout (Obrien, 2011), increase organizational commitment, increase job satisfaction (Ouyang et al., 2015) and increase nurses' work engagement (Wang et al., 2015). In addition, psychological empowerment plays an important role in increasing cognitive skills, managing stress at work, effective communication, spiritual intelligence and work engagement (Torabi et al., 2016). As a result, this showed the importance of cultivating psychological empowerment among the final year nursing students, as psychological empowerment is low among the final year diploma students.

4.3 Correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment

In this study, Spearman's correlation coefficient showed a positive and significant correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment in the final year diploma students at the private Healthcare University College ($r= 0.570$, $p= <0.01$). Adding to this, all subscales of psychological empowerment, meaning ($r=0.539$), competence ($r=0.597$), self-determination ($r=0.568$) and impact ($r=0.470$) have a positive correlation with assertiveness. Although there is a lack of research studies on the correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment among nursing students, two literatures support the findings obtained by the researcher. According to the study by Ibrahim (2011), a positive correlation ($r= 0.003$, $P=0.980$) between student assertiveness and psychological empowerment was found. In another study on 200 Iranian nursing and midwifery students (Azizi et al., 2019), there was a positive and significant correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment ($r= 0.212$,

P=0.037). Among the subscales of psychological empowerment, only meaning ($r=0.247$) and self-determination ($r=0.240$) had a significant correlation with assertiveness ($P\leq 0.01$). Giving authority and responsibility to the nursing students for making decisions in all aspects is positively and significantly associated with their ability to direct self-assertiveness and respect their feelings and thoughts. Hence, it can be concluded that the non-assertive and non-empowered qualities in final year diploma nursing students at private Healthcare Colleges can be transformed by being assertive and empowered by giving good coaching as helping to cultivate one quality will directly help to boost the other quality.

5. Limitations and recommendations

The first limitation of this study is the passive response from the respondents. This study was carried out among the final year diploma nursing students at the private University College, Nilai. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the questionnaire was constructed and shared through “Google Forms”. The distribution of questionnaires was done in the mid of November 2020, but the response from the targeted population was still around 40% till the mid of December. Various strategies were used to increase the response rate but the response was still slow. After a long period of approaching the respondents, the researcher finally achieved 83%, representing 119 respondents out of 144 targeted sample sizes in the second week of January 2021. It took more than two months to obtain an adequate number of respondents to carry on with the data analysis. A Digital approach through “Google Forms” was the easiest way to distribute the questionnaires, but it also came with consequences. It could never replace the response rate achieved through a physical approach.

The second limitation experienced by the researcher is the lack of previous studies on assertiveness and psychological empowerment. Most importantly, only a number of researchers have done similar studies among nursing students; hence it was difficult to discuss the data analyzed in chapter 4. Due to the limited literature, it was very challenging to relate the data analyzed following the objective of this study. The third limitation is the targeted respondents. The questionnaire was only administered among the year 3 Diploma in nursing students without including the Bachelor in nursing students. This is due to the number of year three students with diplomas compared to students pursuing a degree in nursing. By doing this, the researcher will find it easier to see the difference in assertiveness in a particular group of students of a similar course. The final limitation is the difficulty in data analysis. The quantitative study requires extensive statistical analysis, which can be difficult to perform for researchers from non-statistical backgrounds. Statistical analysis is based on scientific discipline and hence is difficult for non-mathematicians to perform. Quantitative research is much more complex for social sciences, education, anthropology and psychology. The effective response should depend on the research problem rather than just a simple yes or no response.

This study's result strongly recommended that further research should be done on the level of assertiveness, psychological empowerment and the correlation between assertiveness and psychological empowerment among nursing students. Such a study title seems not a preferred research title, as evidenced by the reduced number of available literature and previous studies

done among nursing students. By conducting similar studies on nursing students, the level of assertiveness and psychological empowerment can be observed, and further measures can be taken to instill such qualities before the nursing students start their journey as registered nurses.

Final-year nursing students should be assisted in their quest for employment and preparing for their futures in their last year of education. They should be granted the ability to interview experienced, trained nurses employed in multiple areas. Furthermore, nurse educators must allow their students to share their opinions and personal rights, and they should pay close attention to empowerment and strengthen it in, students. Creating a suitable assertive training curriculum for undergraduate nursing students will help to build assertive and psychological empowerment. For example, education on assertiveness should be directed to the entire patient-client interface and organizational level unit and should actively include students and qualified staff.

6. Conclusion

The study aimed to determine the level of assertiveness and psychological empowerment among year three nursing students. This study shows that the final-year nursing students are less assertive and non-empowered. Therefore, effective measures should be implemented to increase and strengthen the level of assertiveness and psychological empowerment this is even crucial for nursing students as they have to overcome hardships in their practical training, theory-based classes and daily life. Assertiveness and psychological empowerment can be regarded as the catalyst that keeps them moving forward without being consumed by challenges throughout their academic education. The institution should look into this issue faced by the final year diploma in nursing students as they will soon graduate and step into a challenging environment as registered nurses. Hence, the institution should simultaneously emphasize their academic achievement and mental health by holding workshops and coaching concerning this issue. Alongside this, further studies on assertiveness and psychological empowerment should be done on nursing students as this will help produce excellent nursing graduates.

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