

Empathy levels of American and Bahamian Special Education graduate students and students in other majors

Abstract

This study investigated the empathy of Special Education graduate students in the USA and the Bahamas, and of Counseling and Organizational Learning students. About 180 students were administered the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to assess: fantasy, perspective taking, empathetic concern, and personal distress. Significant differences existed by major and country.

Statement of the Problem

Although the concept of empathy might contradict our perception of the modern workplace (e.g., competitive, cutthroat, and a place where employees climb over each other to reach the top), the ability to connect with and relate to others, empathy in its purest form, is the force that moves businesses forward (Boyers, 2013). According to Carifio and Hess (1987), the ideal supervisor demonstrates empathy, respect, self-disclosure, concreteness, and authenticity in his or her interactions with supervisees. As universities aim to prepare competent students for the workforce, which requires cooperation, networking, and the development of professional relationships with others, empathy becomes an important component in achieving these aims (Rodrigues, Mascarenhas, Dias, & Paiva, 2009). This is true for most professions, although it has been found that empathy may be more salient in certain professions than in others, particularly in helping professions, such as nursing (Ouzoni & Nakakis, 2012), teaching (Adalsteinsdottir, 2004; Coffman, 1981; Ray & Gartmeirer, 2010), and special education (Cooper, 2004; Vaughn, 1987), and although empathy may differ cross- culturally (Chung & Bemak, 2002; Hollan, 2012).

Purpose and/or Research Question(s)

This study aimed to investigate whether differences exist in the empathy levels of graduate students pursuing a degree in Special Education, Counseling, and Organizational Learning, as well as to assess whether cross-cultural differences exist between graduate students in the Bahamas and in the USA.

Literature Review

Empathy is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon that has been conceptualized either as a natural and intrinsic trait (Morse, Anderson, & Bottoff, 1992) or as a learned phenomenon (Ouzoni & Nakakis, 2012). It has been defined as the ability to see the world, including one's own behavior, from another person's point of view (Hollin, 1994) and the act of constructing for oneself another person's mental state (Hogan, 1969). Empathy includes the capacity to participate vicariously in the experiences and emotions of others (i.e. emotional empathy) and to understand intellectually and creatively the mental states and behaviors of others (i.e. cognitive empathy) (Mičák & Zášková, 2008). In layman's terms, it is the ability to walk in another person's shoes and to feel and understand what another person feels.

Studies have assessed the empathy levels of teachers of students with special needs (Cooper, 2004; Vaughn, 1987), nurses (Herbek & Yamarino, 1990), business professionals (Brown, et al., 2010), therapists (Watson, 2007), and university students in general (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Some groups have shown higher degrees of empathy, including nurses (Penprase, *et al.*, 2013), and teachers and counselors (Ray & Gartmeier, 2010). Other studies have focused on cross-cultural differences, showing that empathy is altruistic, many people around the world fear its misuse, inaccuracy, or are concerned with concealing or revealing their first-person subjective experience from other (Hollan, 2012). Those studies have not focused

exclusively on the empathy levels of students pursuing helping and non-helping professions, as well as on assessing cultural differences between Bahamians and American students.

Research Methodology

Participants included approximately 180 Master's degree students pursuing the following Majors: Special Education, Counseling and Organizational Learning and Leadership. Special Education graduate students resided either in the USA or in the Bahamas (Nassau and Freeport).

All students were administered the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980). The IRI consists of four subscales: fantasy, perspective taking, empathetic concern, and personal distress. The IRI has proven good test-retest reliability, and convergent validity is specified by correlations with other recognized empathy scales. Gender differences exist for each subscale, with females inclining to score greater than males (Davis, 1980). The fantasy scale measures a person's predisposition toward fictional stories and to visualize oneself as the fictional character(s), while the perspective taking scale measures the tendency to consider the psychological point of view of others. The empathic concern scale measures a person's emotional empathy toward others and the personal distress scale measures the type of feelings one experiences when others are in distress.

Findings or Results

For each subscale, a three-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), by Country, Age and Gender, was conducted to compare the scores between Special Education students in the Bahamas and in the USA. In addition, three –way ANOVAS by Major, Age and Gender were conducted for each subscale to assess whether differences existed among Majors in the USA. Preliminary results indicated that Special Education students in the USA obtained significantly higher scores in perspective taking, $F(1, 44) = 4.63, p < 0.05$ and in empathy concern, $F(1, 44) =$

19.59, $p < 0.001$ than their counterparts in the Bahamas. However, Special Education graduate students in the USA had significantly lower fantasy level scores, $F(2, 146) = 3.01, p < 0.05$ and empathy scores, $F(2, 146) = 19.59 p < 0.001$ than Counseling and Organizational Learning students. Age and Gender were related to most of the assessed factors. Interaction effects existed between Major, Age and Gender for empathy scores.

Implications for the Field

This study could provide better insight into the personal characteristics of students who gravitate to specific majors. However, one finding could change the assumption that students pursuing certain professions (e.g., teachers) have more empathy than business professionals (Ouzoni & Nakakis, 2012). The higher degrees of empathy seen in Special Education students in the USA compared to those in the Bahamas, suggest a lower awareness about other groups of persons, including persons with disabilities, in the Bahamas. The sensitivity training and awareness workshops performed in the USA could be a model to be implemented with Special Education teachers in the Bahamas.

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