

Nursing and midwifery students' perceptions of instructors' unethical behaviors

Ghazanfar Rafiee, Marzieh Moattari¹

ABSTRACT

Background: Although nursing faculties may believe that they possess a core of knowledge about ethical interactions with students, they may unwittingly risk crossing an ethical boundary in the learning environment. The ethical dimension in education exists because the instructor has authority to contribute to or impede the students' acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the views of Iranian baccalaureate nursing and midwifery students regarding the occurrence rate of their faculties' unethical behaviors.

Materials and Methods: In this study, 115 subjects, including 61 nursing and 54 midwifery students, completed a questionnaire (response rate = 67.6%). The questionnaire consisted of demographic data and 27 short statements which described the faculties' unethical behaviors. Reliability of instrument was confirmed (0.92) using Cronbach-Alpha.

Results: Delaying in announcing the exam results (40%), lack of a positive learning environment (35.7%), failure to keep regularly scheduled office appointments (35.7%), and failure to update lecture notes when teaching a course (31.3%) were reported by the students as the main faculties' unethical behaviors. Data analysis confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences between nursing and midwifery students' responses (the two-tailed *t*-test was not significant at alpha 0.05 levels; $P > 0.05$).

Conclusion: The study findings suggest that more emphasis should be put on faculties being accessible for consultation out of class time, announcing the exam results in a timely manner, and creating a positive learning environment.

Key words: Ethics, nursing faculty, nursing student, perception

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a field of philosophy which focuses on human attitudes and behaviors. It is a discipline which explores whether human behaviors are good or bad, right or wrong, and sees itself as the science of moral act.^[1] In organizations, including educational institutions, ethics can be defined as a set of formal and informal standards for directing people how to guide their behavior.^[2] Generally, these standards are derived from core values, such as honesty, respect, and trust and formalized in the mission and value statements.^[3]

In general, the teaching-learning interaction is complex and its effectiveness depends on the teaching and learning styles of the instructors and the students. Moreover, the nurse educator is in a unique position to assess cognitive,

emotional, and learning strengths and weaknesses in order to contact with the students. Although nursing faculties may believe that they possess a core of knowledge about ethical interactions with the students, they may unwittingly risk crossing an ethical boundary in the learning environment. The ethical dimension in education exists because the instructor has the authority to contribute to or impede the students' acquisition of knowledge.^[4] Clinical teaching excellence could be achieved by having effective clinical instructor characteristics such as professional competence, expert knowledge, demonstrable clinical competence with skills in clinical teaching, positive interpersonal relationships with students that portray confidence, respect, support and accessibility, with effective communicative and collaborative skills.^[5] Schmitz and Schaffer (1995)^[6] reported that nursing students believed the greatest violation of ethics by nursing instructors was lack of caring about the students. Caring was identified as an important element for managing positive relationships by both the student nurses and faculties and was an important aspect of the student nurses' learning experiences. In one study surveying the professors' ethical attitudes toward the students, ethical professors were those who were fair, did not ignore cheating among the students, and did not take advantage of their position or authority.^[7] To understand the registered nurse students' perceptions of the importance of faculty behaviors,

Department of Medical and surgical nursing, Nursing and Midwifery School, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran,

¹Department of Medical and Surgical Nursing, Shiraz Nursing and Midwifery School, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran

Address for correspondence: Mr. Ghazanfar Rafiee, Department of Med-Surg Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. E-mail: raf_gh2003@yahoo.com

Viverais-Dresler and Kutschke (2001)^[8] examined the responses of 56 participants. The data from answering open- and close-ended questions supported a profile of a teacher of clinical nursing who was accessible, impartial, direct, honest, and fostered mutual respect. Kibler^[9] found that disciplinary policies and faculty assistance were the factors which affected a student's level of ethics. Murray *et al.* (1996)^[10] contend that all educators should be proactive in the development of principles for their ethical behavior. The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education identified several concepts basic to the core of ethical teaching in higher education, including content competence, current high-level skills specific to a clinical area, confidentiality, and ensuring that students have the right to trust the instructor to treat specific issues, such as grades, class attendance, and private communication, in confidence and with privacy. A better understanding of how students view the ethical behavior of their instructors may help not only the understanding of their behaviors but also the awareness of the importance of acting as role models to their students.^[11] Although ethical behaviors in clinical nursing practice and areas of nursing research have been already studied, there are a limited number of researches focusing on ethical concerns among baccalaureate students of nursing and midwifery with their educators.^[4]

Nursing and midwifery students need to learn more about ethics in order to prevent violations of ethical issues from occurring, once they enter the workplace. By having students learn and understand ethics in college, they will be more prepared to successfully incorporate these principles into their profession. Nursing students also have the right to be taught with good quality, treated appropriately, and know what ethical behavior is. Therefore, they need role models to enhance their approach toward patients and their families as well as other professional team members. Presence of unethical behavior in nursing and midwifery instructors, violates the teaching and learning environment for students and may lead to a non caring atmosphere for patients. As mentioned, since a paucity of the data about ethical concerns between undergraduate nursing students and nurse educators in educational context especially in our nursing and midwifery schools exists, we decided to do this descriptive study to determine the views of Iranian baccalaureate nursing and midwifery students regarding the occurrence rate of their faculties' unethical behaviors. Therefore, the main question of this study is "What is the nursing students' perception of their faculties' unethical behaviors?"

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study was conducted at Shiraz nursing school, Iran. Nursing and midwifery students, enrolled in

the fall of 2008, served as the study population. The total population (baccalaureate nursing and midwifery students) under the study were 400 students (nursing 270 and midwifery 130) disregarding the first year students. A simple randomized sample size ($n = 109$) was determined, based on sampling formula and according to attrition rate 35%. Total of 170 questionnaires were distributed among the subjects. From 170 respondents, 115 nursing and midwifery students, studying at different years of their education, completed the questionnaire yielding a response rate of 67.6%. Fortunately, respondent rate was in a range that did not interfere with the sample size. To ensure that the students had reasonable familiarity with university life, we selected those students who had already completed at least two semesters of school to participate in the study.

In this descriptive study, the researcher made a questionnaire for data collection. This structured questionnaire was developed based on an intensive review of the literature. The items in the questionnaire were based on faculties' common unethical behaviors in our context in three domains: Educational domain (eight items), individual domain (eighteen items) and organizational domain (1 item). The questionnaire was reviewed for content validity by a panel of nurse educators. The items which were identified as confusing, irrelevant, or lacking variability were modified. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested through a pilot study on a sample of 55 students and Cronbach-Alpha was obtained as 0.92. The participants were asked to anonymously rate the occurrence of the instructors' unethical behaviors in their academic activities in the questionnaire on a five-point Likert-style scale including the options of (1 = almost never, 2 = seldom, 3 = do not know/not sure, 4 = frequently, and 5 = almost all times), and give information about their age, sex, and type of nursing program in which they were enrolled. For every item, 5 = almost all times option was important, and as a result, this option was reported. The data were collected by the researcher personally in a period of 2 months from November to December of 2008. Data collection from each classroom was performed at the beginning of the class sessions with the permission of the instructors. Moreover, data analysis was performed by obtaining descriptive statistics, frequencies and percentages for sample characteristics, and measuring the students' responses to the questionnaire items indicating the students' views of their faculties' unethical behaviors. The differences in the mean scores of two groups (nursing and midwifery students) were determined using Independent *t*-test. Two-tailed significance level of 5% was used for this test.

Ethical considerations

The purpose of the study was explained to the students at the beginning of the study. It was emphasized that

participation in the research study was voluntary and the students' confidentiality was guaranteed. Consent for participation was confirmed by the subjects' acceptance to fill out the questionnaire, as was clarified in the cover letter. Formal approval to conduct the study was obtained from the appropriate authorities.

RESULTS

This descriptive study aimed to evaluate the occurrence rate of unethical behaviors among the students' faculties. The majority (88.7%) of the samples were females as compared to 11.3% of males. Among the 115 students who answered the questionnaires, 61 were nursing students (53%) and 54 were midwifery students (47%). Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 years (mean = 22.5 years). First, we examined the frequency distributions for each of the 27 items rated by students ranging from almost never to almost all times. The respondents indicated four faculties' unethical behaviors occurring frequently by faculties. Mean scores and standard deviations for almost never and frequently items were calculated to determine the occurrence ranking of unethical behaviors. In the mean scores, the highest mean score implied most unethical behaviors, whereas the lowest mean score implied least unethical behaviors. The four behaviors had a high frequency and the highest mean score [Table 1].

DISCUSSION

This study showed nursing and midwifery students' perception of the occurrence and rating of unethical behaviors in their instructors in the mentioned school we surveyed. We found that the majority (17 items) of the instructors' unethical behaviors rated by the students were deemed to happen less frequently. On the other hand, the study results indicated that delaying in announcing the exam results, lack of creating a positive learning environment, failure to keep regularly scheduled office hours/appointments, and failure to update lecture notes when teaching a course were top-rated instructors' unethical behaviors. These results differed from those

of the study by McKay *et al.*,^[12] where plagiarism, data falsification, violations of confidentiality, accepting money from students, abusing organizational resources, treating others differently on the basis of sexual orientation, refereeing with bias, and intimate relationships with students were found to be unethical. In another study, Kuther (2003) studied the ethical behaviors of professors from the viewpoint of college students. She used a five-point Likert-style scale ranging from: 1 = "Unethical under any circumstances" to 5 = "ethical under all circumstances." The behaviors which were viewed as most unethical were: "Teaching while under the influence of cocaine or other illegal drugs" (mean = 1.10); "teaching while under the influence of alcohol" (mean = 0.13), "insulting or ridiculing a student in his/her absence" (mean = 1.21); "telling colleagues confidential disclosures made by a student" (mean = 1.29); "insulting or ridiculing a student in the student's presence" (mean = 1.31); "ignoring strong evidence of cheating" (mean = 1.43); and "ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment" (mean = 1.47).^[13] In the same line, Savage *et al.* (2006)^[4] showed that 42% of the respondents indicated experiences of their instructors insulting a student in front of others and 33% mentioned experiences of their instructors expecting a gift from the students at the end of their clinical practice. Friedman *et al.* (2005)^[7] found that fairness in grading was the critical factor that many students use in determining whether a professor was ethical or unethical. Furthermore, Schmitz and Schaffer (1995) as well as Schaffer and Juarez (1993) found that students perceived nursing faculty to be unfair and uncaring; similarly, Theis (1988) showed that the participants most frequently reported concerns of lack of respect by the instructors.^[4,14] Including a material on a test which was not covered in the lectures or assigned reading was rated as the lowest unethical behaviors. This is an important ethical behavior that the faculties consider to give test on the materials they assign for the students and our faculties tried to do it. In a study conducted by Keith-Spiegel *et al.* (1993),^[15] the students reported that their instructors in their undergraduate education were ethical in their interactions with the students.

The findings of the current study revealed no statistically significant difference between nursing and midwifery students' responses. Although the nursing students rated four frequently unethical behaviors more than the midwifery students, data analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between nursing and midwifery student's responses in this regard. Among the four top-rated unethical behaviors, delaying in announcing the exam results was rated as the first unethical behaviors by both study groups.^[4]

Table 1: Ratings of four items of faculties' unethical behavior as reported by the students (highest frequently)

Rank	Items	Frequency	%	M	SD
1	Delaying in announcing the exam results	46	40	3.26	1.2
2	Lack of creating a positive learning environment	41	35.7	2.91	1.3
3	Failure to keep regularly scheduled office appointments	41	35.7	2.93	1
4	Failure to update lecture notes when teaching a course	36	31.3	2.87	1.2

SD: Standard deviations; M: Mean

In our college, nursing and midwifery faculties train students in the morning in the clinical settings and teach theoretical classes in the evening during the week and they have a great number of responsibilities. Therefore, they are not in their office most of the time and they had better inform the students when and how they can have access to them.

Overall, the findings suggest that nursing and midwifery students had experienced their instructors' delaying in announcing the exam results. It seems that the faculties are very busy and do not have enough time for timely delivering the exam results.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that we only assessed the students at one college and consequently, our results may not be representative of other colleges. Another limitation of this study was that the conclusions were based on the students' estimation of the events as opposed to a direct measure of the actual activities.

Implications and recommendations

Our goal is most importantly helping the instructors be aware of the situations which they may commit unethical behavior and help guide them in managing or avoiding those situations. The findings of this study suggest that greater emphasis should be put on the faculties' being accessible for the students to seek help from them out of the class time, performing their grading duties in a timely manner, and creating a positive learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the data from the current sample supported to the idea that nursing professors seldom behaved unethically in most of their interactions with the students. Of course, educators need to take steps toward eliminating these rare unethical behaviors toward the students and we look forward to the continued research and presentation of this important topic. We invite questions or comments which may be directed to either author. By having students learn and understand ethics in college, they will be more prepared to successfully incorporate these principles into their profession. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge about how the faculties should behave and teach the students.

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