

THE MEDIATION EFFECT OF EMPATHETIC ABILITY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND THE PRACTICE PERFORMANCE OF UNDERGRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

Soim Lee¹, Jihyeon Jeong² and Soongyu Kim^{3*}

^{1,2,3}*Dept. of Social Welfare, Jeonbuk National University, South Korea*
¹patrasu95@hanmail.net, ²jihyun5836@gmail.com, ³soongyu@jbnu.ac.kr

Abstract— This study examined the mediation effect of empathic ability on the relationship between self-esteem and the practice performance of undergraduate social work students. To examine the effect, this research sought to answer how self-esteem and the empathic ability of undergraduate social work students impacts their practice performance. The data were collected from a survey of 146 undergraduate social work students in their junior and senior years, who finished their field practicum and were enrolled in universities in the southwestern province of Jeollabuk-do. Structural equation modeling using AMOS 22.0 of the three latent variables of Self-esteem, Empathy, and Practice Performance was carried out to verify the mediation effect. The results of this study are as follows: First, self-esteem and the empathic ability of undergraduate social work students have a significant effect on their practice performance. Second, empathic ability has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between the students' self-esteem and practice performance. These results support the inclusion of reflective practice and nonviolent communication focused coursework in the curriculum to improve the practice performance of undergraduate social work students.

Keywords— Practice Performance, Empathic Ability, Individual Factors, Self-Esteem, Social Work Education, Social Work Student

1. INTRODUCTION

Social work is a practical academic discipline that aims to promote people's quality of life by solving the problems of individuals, families, and communities and satisfying their increasing needs in a rapidly changing, modern society. To meet those needs, universities are making an effort to enhance the practice performance of social work students while various studies on practice performance are being carried out.

Practice performance is a combination of professional attitudes, knowledge, and skills required of social workers to perform their duties successfully in a social work setting. This capability is one of the credentials for social work students before they engage in social work, and it helps students to deal with various situations that can occur in a social work setting [8]. According to prior studies, there are two primary factors affecting practice performance: a personal factor [7], [12] and a field experience factor [8], [14], [16].

Since social work service is provided based on human relationship, the personal attributes of a service provider can be an important factor affecting practice performance.

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* Corresponding Author



Among many other traits, self-esteem was reported to make a positive contribution to practice performance in many studies [4], [12]. High self-esteem strengthens a social worker's resilience when they meet a client with negative emotions [2], gives insight required in the field, and makes them proactive in their roles [4].

Additionally, empathic ability was found to have a positive influence on practice performance [3], [6], [7]. Empathic ability develops a positive social worker-client relationship by helping the social worker to be more sensitive to the client's needs and provide appropriate intervention [1].

Prior studies have shown that the higher self-esteem a person has, the higher the level of empathy [11], [15], [18], and therefore, it can be inferred that self-esteem has a significant effect on empathy and that empathy mediates the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance.

This study aimed to examine the relationship between self-esteem, empathic ability, and practice performance of undergraduate social work students. In particular, it was essential to investigate the mediation effect of empathy because empathy could work as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance.

Based on the above-mentioned studies, two research questions were raised, as follows: First, how do self-esteem and empathic ability of undergraduate social work students affect their practice performance? Second, does empathic ability have a mediation effect on the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance of undergraduate social work students?

2. EXPERIMENTAL MODEL

In social work studies, training and educating competent social workers to meet people's social needs is of paramount importance. To achieve this goal, practice performance, a set of attitudes, knowledge, and skills required of social workers to perform their duties needs to be emphasized more than ever.

According to prior studies, two main factors affect: personal factors, such as self-esteem [4], [12] and empathic ability [5], [6], and field experience factors, such as school classes [9], [14], volunteer work [14], and field practicum [8], [16]. Since social work, as a practical academic discipline, is executed based on a human relationship, personal traits of the social service provider can be a significant factor affecting practice performance.

Among the personal factors influencing practice performance, self-esteem is a person's overall sense of self-worth and personal value. People with a high degree of self-esteem tend to have the necessary insight in a social work setting [4], and self-esteem allows people to deal with various situations more effectively and proactively [17]. Practice performance has been examined through the parallel concept of clinical competency in nursing science, which refers to nursing expertise encompassing the appropriate attitudes, knowledge, and skills that a nurse uses in a clinical situation [12]. In short, clinical competency, which means superior performance in a clinical situation corresponding to a social work setting, is similar to the concept of practice performance. Regarding this subject, a study by Park and Jung [12] investigating the relationship between self-esteem and clinical competency of undergraduate nursing students showed that self-esteem has a significant effect on clinical competency. The studies by Seo and Park [13] and Kim and Jung [4] also revealed the same result. These studies confirm that undergraduates with high self-esteem have a higher level of performance; therefore, it is possible to predict that the higher the self-esteem of undergraduate social work students, the better their practice performance.

Prior studies also suggest that empathy, which is one of the personal factors, affects practice performance. Empathy is the ability to share and experience other people's feelings and circumstances by putting oneself in someone's shoes [10]. Empathic ability plays an important role in developing the social worker-client relationship [1] by helping

the social worker understand the client's inner conflicts and agonies [3]. The studies by Park and Jung [12] and Kim [6] revealed that empathic ability has a significant effect on clinical competency; the study by Kim and Lim [7] identified the positive effect of empathic ability on job performance, which can be translated into practice performance in a social work setting. Therefore, based on these results, it is possible to predict that empathy affects the practice performance of undergraduate social work students.

Self-esteem and empathic ability, both of which are expected to influence practice performance, were found to have a significant correlation with one another. According to the study by Park and Jung [12], the higher self-esteem a person has, the better they empathize with others. The study by Jung [15] identified a significant correlation between self-esteem and empathic ability; the studies by Park and Jang [11] and Lee and Yang [18] also found a positive correlation between self-esteem and empathic ability. Based on the results of these studies, it can be inferred that the self-esteem of undergraduate social work students has a significant effect on their empathic ability and that empathy plays a mediating role in the relationship between the two.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of self-esteem and empathic ability on practice performance and identify a mediation effect of empathic ability in the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. DATA

This study surveyed undergraduate social work students in their junior and senior years, who completed their field practicum and who are enrolled in universities in Jeollabuk-do. A total of 146 responses were used for analysis, and the survey was carried out following the submission of a research proposal and approval from the Institutional Review Board to protect the psychological, material, and physical interests of the participants.

3.2. VARIABLES

To measure practice performance, this study used the measurement scale adjusted by Jung [16]. Jung reviewed related studies by Holden *et al.*, (2002) and J. Kim (2003) and modified and supplemented the previous scale. Practice performance is composed of five sub-factors: supportive relationship building skills, intervention skills, case management skills, ability to understand the community, and professional identity. The rating scale used was an 11-point scale from 0 to 100, and the degree of reliability in this study was .961.

For the self-esteem measurement scale, this study used the adjusted version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale designed by S. M. Han (2016). The scale was composed of 10 questions, rated on a five-point Likert scale. The degree of reliability in this study was .885.

Empathic ability was measured by employing the Korean version of the empathy quotient (K-EQ) scale. The K-EQ was derived from the Empathy Quotient (EQ) developed by Baron-Cohen and Wheelwrights (2004) and the reliability and validity of the K-EQ were validated by J. H. Heo and C.J. Lee (2010). The scale was composed of 17 questions, rated on a five-point Likert scale. The degree of reliability in this study was .789.

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

This study analyzed the structural equation model to verify the mediation effect, using the software AMOS 22.0.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The general characteristics of the participants are described in Table I. Of the 146 participants, there are 97 females (66.4%) and 49 males (33.6%). Students in their 20s represent the largest portion, with 135 students (92.5%). Students in their senior years total 75 (51.4%) while students in their junior years total 71 (48.6%).

Table I. General Description of the Participants' Characteristics (N=146)

Category	Group	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	49	33.6
	Female	97	66.4
Age	20s	135	92.5
	30s	3	2.1
	40s	5	3.4
	50s	3	2.1
School Year	junior	71	48.6
	senior	75	51.4

4.2. MEASUREMENT MODEL ANALYSIS

Prior to analysis, normality and multicollinearity were examined. It is widely accepted that the values of skewness and kurtosis close to 0 means being normally distributed. If the absolute value of skewness is 3 or higher, and if the absolute value of kurtosis is 10 or higher, it implies being out of a normal distribution. In this study, the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis are .028 to .312 and .191 to .474, respectively, indicating that there is no problem with normality. In terms of multicollinearity, it is considered that a strong multicollinearity exists if the variance inflation factor (VIF) is 10 or higher. However, the value of the VIF stands at 1.032, and therefore, there is no problem with multicollinearity in this study.

The measurement model was verified to answer the research questions, and the results are shown in Table II. To ensure the suitability of the measurement model, the GFI and CFI fitness indexes should be at least .9 and an RMSEA should be .09 or below to be considered at least a mediocre fit. This study meets the GFI value of .933, the CFI value of .975, and the RMSEA value of .076. In addition, the values of composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) are important in determining the suitability of the measurement model. The accepted range of CR and AVE values are .7 or higher and .5 or higher, respectively. In this study, both values exceed the acceptable level. Therefore, the suitability of the model was confirmed.

Table II. Measurement Model Analysis

Latent Variable	Factor	Estimate		SE	C.R.	CR	AVE
		B	β				
Self-esteem	1	1.026	.897	.060	17.123***	.961	.892
	2	.992	.910	.056	17.674***		
	3	1.000	.923				
Empathy	1	1.000	.689			.895	.740
	2	1.032	.634	.167	6.190***		
	3	1.185	.787	.174	6.826***		
Practice Performance	1	1.000	.854			.790	.556
	2	.963	.834	.080	11.986***		
	3	1.011	.870	.080	12.635***		
N=146, $X^2=44.214$ (df=24, $p<.01$), GFI=.933, CFI=.975, RMSEA=.076, $p<.05^*$, $p<.01^{**}$, $p<.001^{***}$							

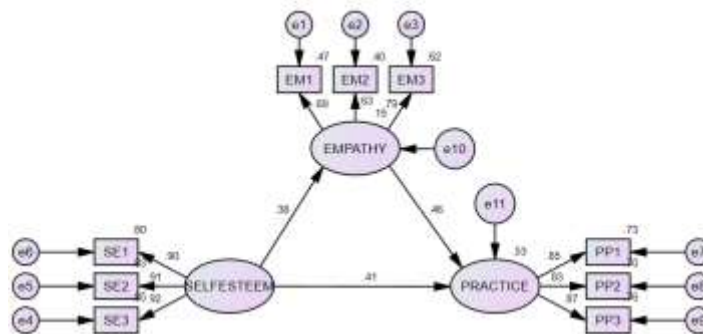
4.3. STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL ANALYSIS

Table III shows the results of verifying the mediation effect of empathy. The self-esteem of undergraduates majoring in social work was found to have an effect of .382 ($p<.001$) on empathy and .414 ($p<.001$) on practice performance. Empathy was found to have an effect of .464 ($p<.001$) on practice performance. Therefore, it can be inferred that empathic ability has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance, and that empathic ability is a contributing factor promoting the positive effect of self-esteem, which is a factor affecting practice performance.

Table III. Structural Equation Model Analysis

Path			Estimate		SE	C.R.
			B	β		
Self-esteem	→	Empathy	.212	.382	.056	3.788***
Self-esteem	→	Practice Performance	.758	.414	.150	5.057***
Empathy	→	Practice Performance	1.524	.464	.329	4.632***

N=146, $X^2=44.214$ (df=24, $p<.01$), GFI=.933, CFI=.975, RMSEA=.076, $p<.05^*$, $p<.01^{**}$, $p<.001^{***}$



5. IMPLICATIONS

In a rapidly changing modern society, social workers who are competent and equipped to perform their duties successfully are an invaluable asset to their fields, where social workers' ongoing activities to satisfy people's needs take place. To meet these social needs, there have been constant efforts to seek effective ways to enhance the practice performance of undergraduate social work students in the educational sphere.

Regarding practice performance, this study attempted to lay the theoretical foundation for ways to improve the performance of undergraduate social work students by examining whether empathic ability mediates the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance of those undergraduate students.

The results of the study are as follows: First, the self-esteem and empathic ability of undergraduates majoring in social work indeed affects their practice performance. Second, empathic ability has a mediation effect on the relationship between self-esteem and the practice performance of those undergraduate students.

These results are significant in that they suggest the direction of future education to improve the practice performance of undergraduate social work students who are prospective social workers. In particular, the results of this study emphasize that apart from studying theories and attending a field practicum, there should be opportunities for students to reflect on themselves and to gain confidence in the course of education to boost their self-esteem. Since the mediation effect of empathy on the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance was

demonstrated in this study, it would be worth considering a training program to promote students' empathic ability, such as nonviolent communication, during in-class practice. Furthermore, besides empathy, efforts to investigate various factors with a mediation effect are needed in future studies.

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