DO THE DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES CONTRIBUTE TO EMOTION REGULATION AND EMPATHY AMONG NAVY PERSONNEL?

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Abstract

Education level and work duration are some of the factors that may enhance one's understanding of the phenomena in their work environment. Specific improvements include comprehending other people's perspectives, capably managing emotions, and espousing a receptive attitude. To examine these occurrences, a study was conducted involving 66 navy personnel from different academic backgrounds. Results showed that the education level of the participants contributed to 8.4% of the variance in cognitive empathy and 8.5% of the variance in emotion regulation. Navy personnel who scored high in terms of educational attainment also had high scores in cognitive empathy and emotion regulation. However, such effects were not found with respect to affective empathy. Work duration had no effect on the three dependent variables (cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and emotion regulation). This study's outcomes may help us reflect on the reality that education level may help enhance our capacity and ability to regulate emotions. The findings were thoroughly discussed in comparison with past studies and relevant theories, with a focus on the personnel of a naval base located in Sepanggar, Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysia.

Keywords: Emotion regulation, cognitive empathy, affective empathy, navy personnel.

1. Introduction

Empathy and emotion regulation are two essential elements of interaction in any profession or organisation. Empathy has previously been studied in various professions, such as medical staff (Cunico et al., 2012; Hakansson et al., 2018; Petruccil et al., 2021), teachers (Wilson, 2020; Makoelle, 2019), and military professions (Roopa & Joseph, 2007; Cosmas & Kamarulzaman, 2021). Lack of empathy and emotion regulation may affect social interaction and understanding among workers within an organisation. Navy personnel, who typically work in teams and deal with various tasks in different locations, need to understand each other and manage their emotions well. This can foster good teamwork and prepare them for any circumstance that they may face. McDougall (2019) states that today's military leaders must properly understand, develop, and apply empathy to build cohesive teams and make better decisions in future operating environments. This was supported by Yap (as cited in Parmar, 2016), who served as a Navy SEALs and observed that empathy is an essential element that contributes to strong teamwork. Empathy is about gaining understanding, not generating personal feelings. According to Herink (2021), empathy can help enhance a group's desire to work together to achieve a shared mission. Understanding among the members in a group can create good relationships and better communication. Empathy can also help build teams, nurture new generations of leaders and inspire followers. Empathy that is nurtured among team members may help to build bonds, provide insight, guide understanding, sharpen people skills, and cultivate better communication (Herink, 2021). In a military context, leaders need to be empathic when dealing with their subordinates (Roopa & Joseph, 2007), and this may promote good team spirit among team members and leaders.

Some psychologists have stated that affective empathy is innate and can be perceived in infants. This is supported by the study of Roth-Hanania et al. (2011), who found that indicators of empathy (affective and cognitive) are already present in infants aged eight to ten months and will develop gradually until the age of two years. Proponents of this position suggest that empathy is further strengthened through social learning by engaging in voluntary or charity work. Empathy develops as an individual grows and becomes cognitive empathy, which allows one to feel the condition of others who

are in need. It is believed that empathy can be instilled and learned through education, personal experiences, or engaging in voluntary and community work. People with high levels of empathy can imagine themselves in others' situations and can feel and understand other people's difficulties and concerns. This may lead to more understanding and closer relationships. Wilding (n.d.) states that empathy is like a glue that holds relationships together, especially in a busy, complex, and stressful world. The inability to empathise can lead to conflicts at work, in families, and in society.

The term 'empathy' was first introduced in 1909 by psychologist Edward Titchener as a translation of the German term *Einfühlung*, which means 'feeling into' (Numanee et al., 2020). Teens with a supportive family and secure attachment demonstrated more empathy with close friends (Jaggo, 2021). Empathy is helpful to a person experiencing negative moments and who needs understanding from others. Conversely, it may add burden and distress when a person empathically shares the unhappiness or misery of other people (Sutherland, 1986). There are different types of empathy, such as cognitive, affective, and compassionate empathy. Cognitive empathy is referred to as perspective-taking, which suggests the idea of putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. Cognitive empathy can be attained by logically embracing another's situation and is attached to knowing what others feel and what they might be thinking. Cognitive empathy skills can be learned through reasoning and connecting with others through thoughtful reflection. Affective empathy, on the other hand, is embedded in the emotional response to another person's feelings or predicaments. It is inherent, which allows a person to experience another's emotions (Numanee et al., 2020). When we experience affective empathy, we are moving from the cognitive perspective into shared emotional experiences (Clarke, 2020). The third type of empathy is compassionate empathy, which is more operational in the sense that it leads a person to understand others' feelings with them and to offer help if it is necessary.

Based on the preceding statement, empathy may help us to understand and feel others' emotions and situations or to appreciate their perspective. Various factors have been identified which can help to enhance people's empathy, such as education level and work duration. For instance, a study by Cunico et al. (2012) found that 103 nursing students who were engaged in a three-year degree programme showed higher levels of empathy after they had completed their courses. This showed that empathy can be learned and enhanced through education and practice. This study is in line with Petruccil et al. (2021), who found that third-year health students in Albania showed higher empathy than first- and second-year students. It was revealed that monitoring empathy levels is fundamental to the adoption of useful educational strategies by faculties in order to improve empathy skills in health professional students and guarantee better care of patients, especially those in need of psychological support. Another study by Hakansson et al. (2018) also found that 326 undergraduate students in their sixth semester of an undergraduate nursing programme expressed more empathy than undergraduate students in their second semester and one-year master's nursing students.

Among military groups, Cosmas and Kamaruzzaman's (2021) study found that navy personnel who participated in a one-day workshop on emotion management scored higher in identifying seven types of emotions compared to those who did not attend the workshop. This showed that participating in educational programmes can help to increase people's knowledge of emotions. However, another study by Roopa and Joseph (2007) contradicted this and found that military medical officers with higher education showed lower empathy. This implies that education does not make a person more sensitive to other people's feelings. In reality, highly educated people may tend to be more analytical, rationalising, and intellectualising, making them less sensitive to others' feelings. The higher one advances in the formal education system, the more emphasis is placed on intellectual and cognitive abilities.

There is still a lack of studies that focus on empathy among military members; thus, to understand the phenomena, this study was conducted to understand the effects of specific demographic factors (education level and work duration) on empathy and emotional regulation among navy personnel. The study focuses on navy personnel because this profession demands various tasks that need to be conducted in groups. In addition, navy personnel can experience a breadth of stressors as identified by Roopa and Joseph (2007), who found that service members in the military are constantly exposed to a variety of stressors that are more severe and intense compared to those encountered in civil professions. Further, due to imposed discipline and lack of opportunities for verbal expression, navy personnel are emotionally more inhibited and need appropriate care, concern, and understanding of their problems (Roopa & Joseph,2007). In addition, empathy is the least understood trait of the Army Leadership Requirements Model but is arguably among the most important. It is important for navy personnel to understand human characteristics like empathy in order to build cohesive teams based on trust and understanding for achieving and accomplishing tasks. In addition, armed forces need leaders who can

apply empathy to understand and lead their team members. Military leaders must not confuse empathy with 'being soft' (McDougall, 2019). Wetten (2020) stated that any aspiring leader should be familiar with their subordinates as much as they genuinely can, supported by the quotation, 'no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care'. In other words, subordinates will only listen to their leaders when they are confident that their leaders genuinely care about them as individuals with needs.

2. Objectives

To explore the preceding phenomenon, a study was conducted to examine the effects of two demographic factors—education level and work duration—on empathy and emotional regulation.

3. Method

3.1. Study design

The study was based on a survey involving 66 navy personnel who worked at the same naval base. Participants were selected based on intentional and random sampling. The inclusion criteria required that all participants were navy personnel who worked at the Kota Kinabalu Naval Base at Sepanggar Bay, Kota Kinabalu and who had already worked there for at least one year.

3.2. Research instrument

A set of questionnaires consisting of four parts was used: Part A measured the demographic profile. There were 10 items used to measure the participants' demographics, including gender, academic level, age, ethnicity, and occupation. Part B measured emotional regulation. The emotional regulation scale consisted of two subscales: the cognitive reappraisal facet (items 2, 4, 6, and 9) and the expressive suppression facet (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10) and developed by Gross and John (2003). Sample items for the cognitive reappraisal facet included 'When I want to feel more positive emotions (such as joy or amusement), I change what I am thinking about', and 'When I am feeling positive emotions, I am careful not to express them'. Sample items for expressive suppression facet are 'I keep my emotions to myself' and 'When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them'. Part C measured empathy using the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) is a 20-item scale developed by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006). The participants had to give the following ratings on a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1 for *strongly disagree*, 2 for *disagree*, 3 for *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 for *agree*, and 5 for *strongly agree*. The sample items were: 'Seeing a person who has been angered has no effect on my feelings' and 'I can understand my friend's happiness when they do well at something'. In a two-factor model (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), nine items assess cognitive empathy (Items 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, and 20), and 11 items assess affective empathy (Items 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, and 18). All participation was voluntary and anonymous.

4. Results

Of the 66 navy personnel, there were 52 males and 14 females with a mean age of 31.12 ($SD = 6.60$). The mean for work duration was 11.48 ($SD = 7.29$). Other demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Navy Personnel (n = 66).

Variables/Groups	Frequency	Percent (%)
Education level		
The Malaysian Certificate Education (SPM)	40	60.60
The Higher Malaysian Certificate Education (SPTM)	10	15.20
Undergraduate	14	21.20
Post-graduate (master's/PhD)	2	3.00
Work duration		
1–5 years	23	34.8
5–10 years	12	18.2
More than 11 years	31	47.0

The simple regression results show that education level contributed to 8.4% of the variance in cognitive empathy and 8.5% of the variance in emotion regulation among the participants. Navy personnel who scored high in terms of educational attainment also showed a high score in cognitive empathy and emotion regulation. However, such effects were not found with respect to affective empathy. Work duration had no effect on the three dependent variables (cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and emotion regulation).

Table 2. Simple Regression Analyses of the Effects of Education Level and Work Duration on Empathy and Emotion Regulation.

Variables	R square	Beta	Sig
Education level			
Cognitive empathy	.084	.29	.02
Affective empathy	.001	.04	.78
Emotion regulation	.085	.29	.02
Work duration			
Cognitive empathy	.00	.02	.89
Affective empathy	.01	-.10	.40
Emotion regulation	.01	-.10	.45

5. Discussion

5.1. The effect of education level and work duration on empathy and emotion regulation

The study showed that only education level showed positive effects on cognitive empathy and emotion regulation, while work duration did not show any positive significant effect on all dependent variables. Education level can help to enhance navy personnel's cognitive and emotion regulation but not their affective empathy. These findings are also supported by previous studies (e.g., Cunico et al., 2012; Hakansson et al., 2018; Petruccil et al., 2021), which revealed that nurses and health students showed higher levels of empathy when they had more years of study in their degree. Like other critical skills, empathy can be developed when we practice it, although individuals can differ in their capacity to empathise (McDougall, 2019). This aspect makes it imperative for the development of an efficient tool to measure empathic ability (Roopa & Joseph, 2007). Wetten (2020) stated that empathy is a valued skill, and it is also becoming a rarer one. Younger recruits who were immersed in the digital world had the potential to lack of empathy; therefore, there is a need to emphasise empathy in their educational programmes. Regarding work duration, this study showed that it did not contribute to empathy and emotion regulation. This is perhaps due to other elements that are more prominent in enhancing navy personnel's empathy, such as their education level. In addition, according to a study completed in 2021 by the State of Workplace Empathy Study, there is a lack of empathy in all organisations. It was found that only 1 in 4 employees believed that empathy within their organisation was adequate (Peterson, 2020). This might be one of the reasons that work duration in this current study did not show any effect on empathy or emotional regulation. Based on their study of prosocial emotions, Cameron et al. (2019) suggested that showing empathy is not easy, especially when dealing with strangers, because it requires cognitive work. Learning empathy requires time and effort, and practicing it is a challenge. This is because our innate levels of empathy are closely related to our personality and upbringing (Quellmaz, 2021). Empathy, however, can be improved through other external factors, such as education level—as revealed in this current study—and other demographic factors that need to be explored thoroughly. Demographical factors can contribute more to either cognitive or affective empathy. Thus, learning empathy requires one's mental and emotional energy, and they must be willing to learn and practice empathy in their daily life.

6. Conclusion

It is important to discuss empathy within organisations like the navy. As MacDougall (2019) stated, there is a need to encourage the self-development of empathy by using it as an important selection criterion for command and other key leadership positions. If people are central to both leadership and warfare, we need leaders who can decipher human terrain just as well as they can physical terrain. The human behavior is complex; therefore, army leaders need empathy to better understand the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of their subordinates and thus to make better decisions for the benefit of the entire navy.

Acknowledgements

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