Do Emotional Intelligence and previous caring experience influence student nursing performance?

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Background: Reports of poor nursing care have focused attention on the education of nurses, and in particular the selection of candidates onto nursing programmes. Some scholars have advocated previous caring experience as a precursor to successful subsequent student nurse performance. Others have focused on abilities and traits ideally present in recruits such as emotional intelligence. In particular ‘sociability’ has been identified as a potentially useful predictor of future performance. This study prospectively examined primary evidence for the impact of these factors on student nurse performance.

Aim: To examine the impact of 1) previous caring experience, 2) emotional intelligence, 3) sociability, on performance and retention in a cohort of first year nursing students in Scotland.

Method: Adult, mental health and midwifery students completed Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-short form (TEIQue-SF) and Schutte’s Self Report Emotional Intelligence Scale (SSREIS) during induction to their programmes at the largest nursing university in Scotland in 2013. Sociability was measured from the ‘social disconnection’ factor within the TEIQue-SF. Students stated whether they had any previous caring experience or not. Student performance was calculated as the mean score from all modules undertaken in year one. The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Previous caring experience will lead to better performance
2. Emotional intelligence will be associated with performance
3. Social disconnection will predict withdrawal from the course

Results: 598 students completed baseline measures. 315 students declared previous caring experience, 277 not. Mean(SD) performance for the full cohort was 57.5(10)%. Those without previous caring experience scored higher (58.5 ± 9.89) than those with previous caring experience (56.0 ± 10.0), a statistically significant difference of 2.48 (95% CI, 0.65 to 4.31), $t_{(457)} = 2.66$, $p = .008$. Emotional intelligence scores were not associated with performance on either measure of EI. Social disconnection scores for those withdrawing from the course (mean rank = 186.83) and those remaining on the course (mean rank = 289.08) were statistically significantly different, $U = 7653$, $z = -4.12$, $p < 0.001$.

Discussion: These results show that previous caring experience led to worse performance in this cohort. Emotional intelligence was not a useful indicator of performance, but lower scores on the social disconnection factor were associated with withdrawal from the course. Strengths and limitations of these findings are discussed.