

ETHICAL AWARENESS AND MORAL SENSITIVITY AMONG HEALTHCARE STUDENTS: EVALUATION AND INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

Healthcare students encounter ethically complex situations in their future careers, highlighting the need for strong ethical knowledge and moral sensitivity to provide holistic patient care. This study aims to assess healthcare students' academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity and explore the relationship between these aspects. Using a descriptive correlational research approach, we survey a convenient sample of nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University. Data are collected through the Academic Ethical Awareness Questionnaire and Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire, with analyses including descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and regression. Academic level and integrated classroom and clinical learning positively impact students' ethical awareness. These findings emphasize the importance of monitoring students' professional conduct to uphold integrity and academic ethics. Ongoing efforts are crucial to enhance healthcare ethics education with engaging content and innovative instructional methods to foster academic integrity and ethical care.

Key Words: Healthcare Students, Ethical, ANOVA, Regression

1. Introduction

In the field of healthcare, ethical competence is paramount for ensuring quality patient care and maintaining professional integrity. Healthcare students, particularly those in nursing, frequently encounter ethically challenging situations that demand a solid foundation in ethical principles and heightened moral sensitivity. This study aims to assess academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity among nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University, Malaysia, and explores the relationship between these two dimensions.

Previous research underscores the importance of integrating ethical education into healthcare curricula to prepare students for real-world ethical dilemmas. For instance, Nobahar et al. (2023) emphasize the positive impact of teamwork on moral sensitivity and reduced missed nursing care among ICU nurses, highlighting the critical role of collaborative environments in fostering ethical competence. Similarly, Mohammadi et al. (2022) demonstrate that moral courage and sensitivity are crucial for ensuring safe care in special care nursing settings, suggesting that ethical training can significantly enhance patient outcomes.

In this study, a descriptive correlational research design is employed, utilizing the Academic Ethical Awareness Questionnaire and the Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire. These instruments, validated in prior studies, are used to collect data from a sample of nursing students. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and regression to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing ethical awareness and moral sensitivity.

Findings indicate that higher academic levels and the integration of classroom and clinical learning experiences significantly enhance students' ethical awareness. This aligns with research by Ahansaz et al. (2024), which highlights the relationship between moral sensitivity and missed nursing care, stressing the importance of educational interventions to improve ethical competence. Additionally, Costello et al. (2021) report that effective teamwork within nursing units positively correlates with ethical behavior, reinforcing the need for collaborative learning environments.

These results highlight the critical need for ongoing efforts to enhance ethics education in healthcare. Developing engaging and innovative instructional methods is essential to fostering academic integrity and ethical care. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, prioritizing the ethical training of future professionals is imperative for ensuring the delivery of holistic and morally sound patient care.

1.1. Problem Statement

Healthcare students frequently encounter ethically complex situations in their careers, necessitating robust ethical knowledge and heightened moral sensitivity to deliver holistic patient care. Despite recognizing the importance of ethical training, understanding the current levels of academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity among healthcare students, particularly in nursing education, remains limited. This gap hinders the development of effective educational strategies to enhance ethical competence in healthcare students.

1.2. Research Objective

1. To assess the current level of academic ethical awareness among nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University.
2. To evaluate the variations in moral sensitivity among nursing students across different academic levels.
3. To explore the relationship between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity in nursing students.
4. To determine the impact of integrated classroom and clinical learning experiences on the ethical awareness and moral sensitivity of nursing students.

1.3. Research Framework

1.3.1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is designed to explore the relationship between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity among nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University. It integrates key elements that influence ethical competence in healthcare education.

1.3.2. Component of Framework

Independent Variables:

Academic Ethical Awareness: Measured by the Academic Ethical Awareness Questionnaire (AEAQ), this variable encompasses students' understanding and adherence to academic integrity and ethical decision-making in academic contexts.

Academic Level: The different stages of the nursing program, such as first year, second year, and final year.

Integrated Learning Experiences: The extent to which classroom and clinical learning are combined to provide practical, hands-on experiences.

Dependent Variable:

Moral Sensitivity: Assessed using the Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire (MSQ), this includes the ability to recognize ethical issues, engage in ethical reasoning, and respond emotionally to ethical dilemmas.

Moderating Variables:

Demographic Factors: Age, gender, and previous ethical training, may influence the relationship between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity.

1.3.3. Research Framework

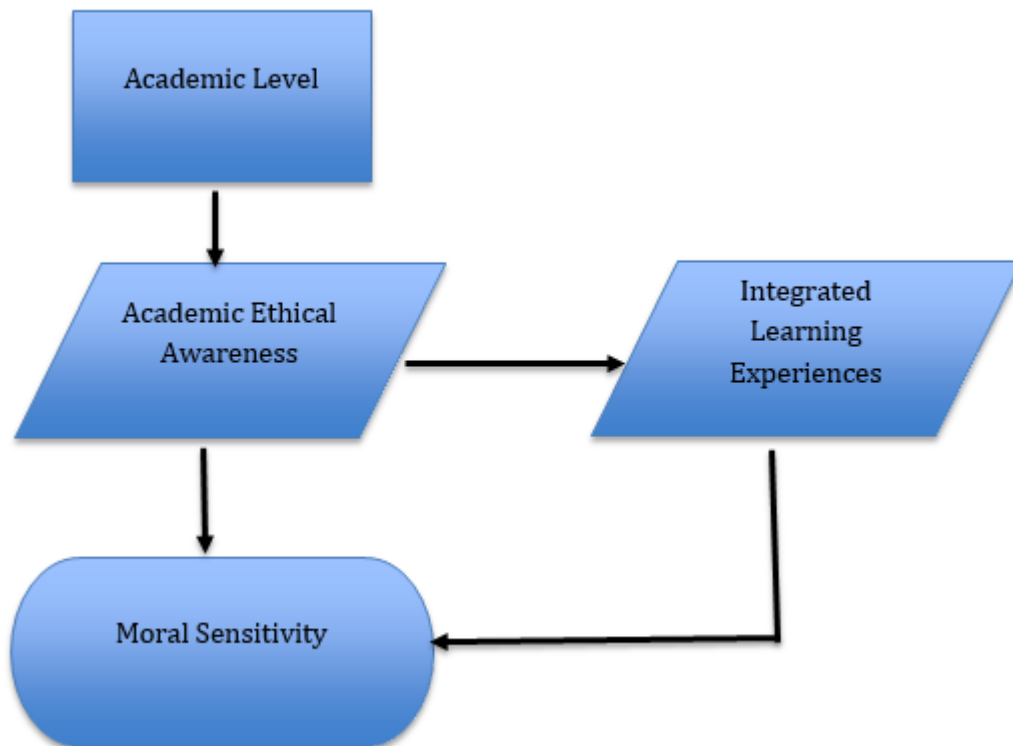


Figure 1: Research Framework

In this study, the framework revolves around several key variables: Academic Ethical Awareness, Academic Level, Integrated Learning Experiences, and Moral Sensitivity. Academic Ethical Awareness, the core independent variable, reflects students' knowledge and adherence to ethical principles in an academic setting. Academic Level is expected to influence both academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity, with higher levels of education associated with greater exposure to ethical training. Integrated Learning Experiences, involving practical, hands-on experiences in clinical settings, are hypothesized to enhance both ethical awareness and moral sensitivity. Moral Sensitivity, the primary dependent variable, represents the students' ability to recognize and respond to ethical issues in healthcare settings.

The study hypothesizes that higher academic levels correlate with increased academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity; integrated learning experiences positively impact both academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity; and there is a significant positive relationship between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity.

The research framework provides a structured approach to understanding the factors influencing ethical competence in nursing students. By examining the interplay between academic ethical awareness, academic level, integrated learning experiences, and moral sensitivity, this study aims to offer valuable insights for enhancing ethical education in healthcare.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethical Awareness and Moral Sensitivity in Healthcare Education

Ethical awareness and moral sensitivity are crucial for healthcare professionals, enabling them to recognize and address ethical issues effectively. Ethical awareness involves understanding ethical principles and recognizing moral issues, while moral sensitivity involves perceiving and interpreting these issues with empathy and foresight. Nobahar et al. (2023) find that enhanced teamwork and a supportive work environment significantly increase moral sensitivity and reduce missed nursing care among ICU nurses, underscoring the importance of collaborative ethical training in healthcare settings. Similarly, Mohammadi et al. (2022) demonstrate that moral courage and sensitivity are crucial for ensuring safe care in specialized nursing settings, suggesting that robust ethical training can significantly improve patient outcomes. These studies highlight the need for healthcare education programs to focus on developing both ethical awareness and moral sensitivity to prepare students for the ethical challenges they will face in their careers.

2.2. Integration and Challenges of Ethical Training in Nursing Curricula

Integrating ethical training into nursing education is essential for developing both ethical awareness and moral sensitivity. Ahansaz et al. (2024) highlight the relationship between moral sensitivity and missed nursing care, stressing the importance of educational interventions to improve ethical competence. Effective integration involves not only theoretical instruction but also practical, real-world applications through simulations, case studies, and clinical placements. However, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of ethical training. These challenges include variability in curriculum content, lack of standardized ethical training modules, and insufficient time allocated for ethics education within the crowded nursing curricula. Shayestehfard et al. (2020) identify gaps in educators' preparedness to deliver ethical training, emphasizing the need for better training and resources for educators. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that nursing students receive comprehensive and effective ethical education.

2.3. Innovative Approaches and the Impact of Learning Environments

Innovative approaches to ethical education are necessary to address the challenges in traditional training methods. Blended learning, combining online and face-to-face instruction, provides flexible and comprehensive ethical training. Virtual simulations and role-playing scenarios offer interactive and immersive learning experiences that enhance students' ethical decision-making skills. Kim et al. (2022) emphasize the effectiveness of these methods in improving ethical competence among nursing students.

Research indicates that academic level and learning environments significantly impact students' ethical awareness and moral sensitivity. Advanced academic levels are associated with higher ethical awareness due to increased exposure to ethical issues and more extensive clinical experiences. Rosengarten (2022) reports that senior nursing students demonstrate higher ethical awareness compared to their junior counterparts, underscoring the importance of continuous ethical education throughout the academic journey. Monitoring and supporting students' professional conduct is also crucial for fostering a culture of integrity and ethical behavior. Kakemam et al. (2021) find that continuous assessment and feedback on professional conduct significantly enhance ethical awareness and moral sensitivity among nursing students. This approach ensures that students not only learn ethical principles but also apply them consistently in their practice.

Ethical awareness and moral sensitivity are foundational elements in healthcare education, essential for preparing nursing students to navigate the ethical complexities of their future careers. Integrating comprehensive and innovative ethical training into nursing curricula, supported by experiential learning and continuous professional conduct monitoring, can significantly enhance ethical competence. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, prioritizing ethical education remains imperative to ensure the delivery of holistic and ethically sound patient care.

3. Data And Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive correlational research design to investigate the relationship between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity among nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University, Malaysia. Descriptive correlational studies are particularly suitable for examining relationships between variables and understanding how different factors interact in real-world settings without establishing causal connections (Polit & Beck, 2021).

3.2. Data

The study targets nursing students enrolled at KPJ Healthcare University, employing a convenient sampling method to ensure a representative sample. Inclusion criteria include active enrollment in the nursing program and consent to participate in the study. The diverse academic backgrounds of participants provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of ethical awareness and moral sensitivity across different educational stages.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Two validated instruments are utilized for data collection:

Academic Ethical Awareness Questionnaire (AEAQ): The AEAQ measures students' knowledge of academic integrity, ethical decision-making in academic contexts, and adherence to ethical standards. This instrument has been validated and used in similar studies to ensure its reliability (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire (MSQ): The MSQ assesses moral sensitivity, including dimensions such as moral perception, ethical reasoning, and emotional responses to ethical dilemmas. This tool has proven effective in measuring moral sensitivity in healthcare settings (Ye et al., 2022).

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data are collected through an online survey platform, facilitating easy distribution and ensuring a high response rate. Participants are informed about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their

participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent is obtained electronically before participants can complete the questionnaires. The online format allows for efficient data collection and minimizes logistical challenges associated with traditional paper-based surveys.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data analysis process involves several statistical techniques to provide a thorough understanding of the research questions:

3.5.1. Descriptive Statistics

These are used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and their responses to the AEAQ and MSQ, including measures such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions.

3.5.2. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

ANOVA is employed to examine differences in ethical awareness and moral sensitivity across various academic levels and learning experiences. This analysis helps identify significant variations and patterns within the data (Field, 2022).

3.5.3. Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is conducted to explore the relationship between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity. This method allows for the identification of key predictors and their relative influence on the outcome variables, providing deeper insights into how these constructs interact.

4. Expected Results

Based on previous research and theoretical underpinnings, we anticipate several key findings from this study.

Ethical Awareness Among Nursing Students

High Levels of Ethical Awareness: Nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University are expected to demonstrate a high level of academic ethical awareness. This aligns with findings from Ahmad et al. (2022), who report that structured ethical training significantly enhances students' understanding and adherence to ethical principles.

Influence of Academic Level: Ethical awareness is anticipated to vary with academic levels, with senior students displaying higher ethical awareness due to increased exposure to ethical issues and more extensive clinical experiences. This is supported by Rosengarten (2022), who finds that advanced academic levels correlate with improved ethical competence.

Moral Sensitivity and Its Predictors

Enhanced Moral Sensitivity: Students are expected to exhibit high moral sensitivity, particularly those engaged in experiential learning environments. Nobahar et al. (2023) demonstrate that teamwork and a supportive learning environment significantly enhance moral sensitivity.

Impact of Integrated Learning: We hypothesize that students who undergo integrated classroom and clinical learning experiences will show greater moral sensitivity. This is consistent with findings from Ye et al. (2022), which indicate that practical, hands-on experiences are crucial for developing moral sensitivity.

Relationship Between Ethical Awareness and Moral Sensitivity

Positive Correlation: A significant positive correlation between academic ethical awareness and moral sensitivity is expected. This suggests that students with higher ethical awareness are more likely to exhibit greater moral sensitivity, as supported by the work of Ahansaz et al. (2024), who highlight the interplay between these two constructs.

Predictive Factors: Regression analysis is expected to identify key factors that predict higher moral sensitivity, such as academic level, integrated learning experiences, and the quality of ethical education received. These findings will align with those of Kim and Park (2022), who identify significant predictors of ethical competence in nursing education.

Implications for Nursing Education

Need for Continuous Improvement: The study is likely to underscore the need for ongoing improvements in ethical education, emphasizing the integration of innovative teaching methods and continuous monitoring of students' ethical development. This mirrors the recommendations of Shayestehfard et al. (2020), who advocate for enhanced ethical training methods to better prepare nursing students for professional practice.

Educational Interventions: Findings are expected to suggest that targeted educational interventions, such as ethics workshops, simulations, and interprofessional learning, are effective in fostering both ethical awareness and moral sensitivity. This is supported by evidence from Mohammadi et al. (2022), who demonstrate the effectiveness of such interventions in improving ethical competence.

In conclusion, this study is expected to provide robust evidence on the current state of ethical awareness and moral sensitivity among nursing students at KPJ Healthcare University. The findings will contribute to the existing body of knowledge and offer practical recommendations for enhancing ethical education in nursing programs. These insights are crucial for developing future healthcare professionals who are not only technically competent but also ethically sound in their practice.

5. Limitation And Recommendation

5.1. Limitation

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged:

Sampling Method: The use of a convenient sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider randomized sampling to enhance representativeness.

Self-reported Measures: Reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. Incorporating objective measures of ethical behavior could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the constructs.

Cross-sectional Design: The cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are recommended to examine changes in ethical awareness and moral sensitivity over time.

5.2. Recommendation And Future Research

Future research should focus on developing standardized ethical training modules that can be universally adopted across nursing schools. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of ethical training on professional practice. Additionally, incorporating feedback from

practicing nurses can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of current educational strategies and inform the development of more relevant and practical ethical training programs.

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