

The Mediating Effect of Empathy on the Relationship between Self-Esteem and Practice Performance of Social Work College Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to verify the mediation effect of empathy on the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance of social work college students. To examine the effect, this study sought to answer how self-esteem and the empathic ability of social work college students impact their practice performance. We collected data by conducting a survey on social work college students in their junior and senior years in Jeonbuk who had completed field placement. A total of 146 students' data was used for the analysis. Structural equation modeling using AMOS 22.0 of the three latent variables—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 social work college students have a significant effect on their practice performance. Second, empathic ability has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between their self-esteem and practice performance. These results have significance in that they set the direction for social work education to improve the practice performance of such students who are potential social workers.

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

Introduction

Social welfare or social work is a practice-based study that promotes improvement of life quality for everyone by solving problems and fulfilling the needs of individuals, families, and communities, increasing in the rapidly changing modern society. Accordingly, efforts are made in social work educational settings to improve practice performance along with ensuring well-rounded education for undergraduate students majoring in relevant fields. To this end, the Korean Council on Social Welfare Education includes social work practice and field placement in the social work curriculum guide [20]. Moreover, according to the 2018 social work curriculum guide, the legally required courses include theories of social work practice and skills and techniques for social work practice. Furthermore, the social welfare field placement course, completion of which is mandatory to become a qualified social worker, recommends increasing the field placement time stated in Article 3 of the Enforcement Regulations of the Social Welfare Services Act to at least 120 hours (recommended 160 hours). As such, efforts are made to develop the ability to practice in the social work educational settings, and studies are actively conducted on practice performance as well. Practice performance also has positive effects on school life adaptation or creative activities of undergraduate students [23], [24], [25].

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 their credentials before they engage in social work, and it helps them deal with the various situations that can occur in such a setting [8]. According to prior studies, factors affecting practice performance include

personal factors such as self-esteem [4], [12] and empathy [5], [6], [7], and field experience factors such as school classes [9], [14], volunteer work [14], and field practicum [8], [16].

Since social work service is provided based on human relationships, the personal attributes of a service provider can be an important factor affecting practice performance. Among many other traits, self-esteem has been 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], provides the insights required in the field, and makes them proactive in their roles [4].

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

With regard to this, Park and Jung [12] explained that increased self-esteem and empathic ability lead to improved communication skills, which helps develop clinical competency of nursing students. In other words, self-esteem is believing in oneself and acknowledging this, and empathic ability is understanding and feeling another person's emotions or mental state as one's own. Kim and Sung [5], who studied cultural sensitivity of social work college students, laid stress on empathic ability and self-efficacy—they described empathy as arising from the response of an individual based on another person's experience, and self-efficacy as the measurement of one's belief and expectation in performing a planned task. In sum, self-esteem is an awareness and emotion of oneself, whereas empathy is one's understanding and response caused by and toward another person.

Prior studies have shown that the higher the self-esteem in a person, the higher the level of their 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.

Park and Jang [11] predicted and analyzed that empathic understanding of therapists will have a critical effect on the treatment process, and proved that cognitive empathy has a statistically significant correlation with self-esteem. Furthermore, Jung [15] analyzed self-esteem and empathic ability that affect communication skills of nursing students, and found that there was a significant difference. Meanwhile, Lee and Yang [18] who studied the love life of college students analyzed the mediation effect of empathic ability, discovering that higher self-esteem leads to higher empathic ability, which increases satisfaction with love life; in other words, empathic ability fully mediates the relationship between self-esteem and satisfaction with love life of college students.

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

Based on the above-mentioned studies, the following two research questions were addressed: How do self-esteem and empathic ability of social work college students affect their practice performance? Does empathic ability mediate the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance of social work college 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 types of factors have an effect: 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 engaged in based on human relationships, personal traits of the social service provider can be a significant factor affecting practice performance.

First, personal factors can be more specifically examined as follows. Kim and Jung [4] examined the effects of clinical practice stress, self-esteem, and communication skills of nursing students on their clinical competency. Similarly, Park and Jung [12] added empathic ability to self-esteem and communication skills of nursing students and analyzed their relation. Meanwhile, Kim and Sung [5] studied the relationships between cultural sensitivity, empathic ability, and self-efficacy to emphasize the cultural competence of college students majoring in health and welfare with the emergence of the multicultural era; their results showed that empathic ability ($\beta=.32$, $p<.001$) and self-efficacy ($\beta=.26$, $p<.001$) were factors with statistically significant effects. Furthermore, personal factors are also considered important in terms of the job performance of hands-on workers in the field of social work practice. Kim and Lim [7] examined the impact of empathic ability and communication skills on the job performance of public social workers; their results showed that both empathic ability ($\beta=.383$, $p<.001$) and communication skills ($\beta=.589$, $p<.001$) had statistically significant effects.

Second, typical field experience factors of social work college students are training factors. Jung [16] revised, supplemented, and proposed a practice performance scale with the aim of having an effective guide to social work field placement, through which the impact of training factors could be verified, such as supervision, training activities, and training agencies that affect practice performance of social work college students; however, though that study examined personal factors, it focused on training factors, and thus only included the general aspects such as sex, age, major, and the trainees' number of training sessions, failing to include individual traits such as self-esteem, empathic ability, and communication. Studies on practice performance of social work college students have been continuously conducted even after that. Um, Kim, and Kwak [14] examined factors affecting practice performance, and their study was different from others' in that it added training satisfaction. Moreover, No, Joo, and Lee [8] studied school social work trainees, which differentiates their study from others'. Do [9] developed a scale to measure social work practice skills by reviewing prior studies and discussing with the advisor, and also added identity formation to the dependent variable. In addition, others included volunteer work experience [14] or social work field experience [8] in the analysis.

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 level of self-esteem tend to have the necessary insight in a social work setting [4], and it allows them to deal with various situations more effectively and proactively [17].

Meanwhile, practice performance in social work practice tends to be focused on field experience factors [8, 16] rather than personal ones even when targeting social work college students, or tends to be studied in terms of abilities and job performance of hands-on workers like public social workers [7]. Thus, we

intended to broadly examine the aspect of performance in other fields that provide personal (or interactive) service.

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.

To determine nursing students' level of clinical competency, Seo and Park [13] analyzed the relationships between self-esteem, critical thinking disposition, satisfaction with clinical training, teaching efficiency, self-leadership, professional self-concept, clinical training stress, and clinical competency. The results showed that the explanatory power of seven independent variables for the dependent variable of clinical competency was 47.4%; self-esteem was ($\beta=.09$, $p<.05$). Furthermore, Kim and Jung [4] determined the relationships between clinical practice stress, self-esteem, communication skills, and clinical competency of nursing students. The results showed that clinical competency and self-esteem ($r=.321$, $p<.001$) demonstrated a statistically significant positive correlation, indicating that higher self-esteem leads to higher clinical competency.

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 social work college 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 else's shoes [10]. It serves as a key factor in positively developing the relationship between social worker and client. It is an ability required in social work practice, which helps both the social worker and client understand the latter's internal difficulties. Empathy has a positive effect on competencies related to clinical training or practice performance. In prior studies, Park and Jung [12] and Kim [6] explained that empathy has a significant effect on clinical competency, and that it is an essential quality that helps nurses provide high-quality service. Park and Jung [12] examined the relationships between self-esteem, empathic ability, communication skills, and clinical competency of junior and senior nursing students; their results showed that nursing students with better communication skills and higher self-esteem also had higher clinical competency. Moreover, empathy has a significant effect on cultural competence of social work college students. In addition, Kim and Lim [7] examined the relationship between empathic ability and communication skills as factors affecting job performance to find a way to improve the job performance of public social workers in Gyeonggi-do; they found that higher empathic ability and communication skills lead to higher job performance. These results imply that empathy will affect practice performance of social work college students, and that it is an essential quality these students must have before they actually start working in the field.

Self-esteem and empathic ability, both of which are expected to influence practice performance, have been found to have a significant correlation with one another. Park and Jung [12] claimed that people with higher self-esteem empathize more with others. Moreover, according to Jung [15], there is a significant correlation between self-esteem and empathy—more specifically, the study intended to determine the

self-esteem, empathic ability, and interpersonal relations to promote communication skills of nursing students; the results showed that there was a significant correlation ($r=.22$, $p<.05$) between self-esteem and empathic ability. Moon, Lee, and An [22] discovered that college students with a high self-differentiation level, which is the state of taking action based on values and beliefs, also have high empathy. In addition, according to Park and Jang [11] and Lee and Yang [18], people with higher self-esteem also have higher empathy. More specifically, Park and Jang [11] conducted a study to determine the relationship between self-esteem of occupational therapists and their empathic ability toward others; the results showed that out of the three sub-factors of empathic ability—cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and social skills—cognitive empathy had a statistically significant positive correlation ($r=.379$, $p<.01$) with self-esteem. Lee and Yang [18] examined the mediation effect of empathic ability on the relationship between self-esteem and satisfaction with love life of college students; their results showed that self-esteem had a statistically significant indirect effect ($\beta=.15$, $p<.001$) on satisfaction with love life, mediated by empathic ability.

Based on the results of these studies, it can be inferred that the self-esteem of social work college 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 aimed to investigate the effect of self-esteem and empathic ability on practice performance, and identify empathetic ability's mediation effect on the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data

This study surveyed social work college students in their junior and senior years, who had completed their field practicum and 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 comprises five sub-factors: supportive relationship building skills, intervention skills, case management skills, the 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). It comprised 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 comprised 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, 97 are female (66.4%) and 49 are male (33.6%). Students in their 20s constitute the largest portion—135 (92.5%); those in their senior years total 75 (51.4%), while those in their junior years total 71 (48.6%).

Table 1. 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
	Senior	75	51.4

4.2. Measurement Model Analysis

The general tendency of variables used in the analysis is as shown in the table below. Three latent variables—practice performance, self-esteem, and empathy—each comprise three observed variables, and the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis of the variables are as follows.

Table 2. General Tendency of Variables (N=146)

Latent Variables	Observed Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Practice Performance	1	6.62	1.48	-.269	.029
	2	5.88	1.46	.053	.207
	3	6.39	1.46	-.021	-.545
Self-esteem	1	3.63	.79	-.168	-.627
	2	3.78	.75	-.462	-.183

	3	3.76	.75	-.463	-.170
Empathy	1	2.78	.56	.099	-.265
	2	2.59	.62	.063	-.522
	3	2.49	.58	.044	-.383

Prior to the analysis, normality and multicollinearity were examined. It is widely accepted that the values of skewness and kurtosis close to 0 mean being normally distributed. If the absolute value of skewness is 3 or higher and that of kurtosis is 10 or higher, it implies being out of a normal distribution. In this study, the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis were -.462 to .099 and -.627 to .522, respectively, indicating that there is no problem with normality.

We conducted a reliability analysis to verify the internal validity of the observed variables that form the latent variables, as well as original scale factor analysis to verify the suitability of measurement. Structure and content of each observed variable were based on theoretical grounds. In addition, direct oblimin was used based on the assumption that the items are correlated with one another. Moreover, after forming the items through factor loading, significance level, and content suitability, we verified the suitability of measurement among variables through confirmatory factor analysis of each sub-factor unit. We then analyzed the correlation, and verified the variance inflation factor (VIF) to confirm the multicollinearity among factors after verifying the content validity and construct validity of the sub-factors.

It is considered that a strong multicollinearity exists if the VIF is 10 or higher. The VIF value stood at 1.032—in other words, there is no problem with multicollinearity in this study.

The correlation among 11 observed variables is shown in the following table III. More specifically, the correlation coefficient of Practice Performance₃ and Self-esteem₂ is the highest ($r=.539, p<.01$), while that of Gender and Self-esteem₃ is the lowest ($r=-.168, p<.05$)

The measurement model was verified to answer the research questions, and the results are shown in Table IV. To ensure the suitability of the measurement model, the GFI and CFI fitness indexes should be at least .9 and RMSEA .09 or below to be considered at least a mediocre fit. This study's GFI value was .933, CFI value .975, and RMSEA value .076. The values of composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) are also important in determining the model's suitability. The accepted CR and AVE values are .7 or higher and .5 or higher, respectively. In this study, both values exceeded these levels, thus confirming the model's suitability.

Table 3. Correlation Among Variables (N=146)

	Gender	Age	Practice Performance1	Practice Performance2	Practice Performance3	Self-esteem1	Self-esteem2	Self-esteem3
Gender	1	.087	-.096	-.132	-.167*	-.193	-.139	-.168*
Age	.087	1	.160	.135	.115	.089	.127	.136
Practice Performance1	-.096	.160	1	.711**	.737**	.435**	.445**	.442**
Practice Performance2	-.132	.135	.711**	1	.734**	.452**	.467**	.398**
Practice Performance3	-.167*	.115	.737**	.734**	1	.491**	.539**	.465**
Self-esteem1	-.193*	.089	.435**	.452**	.491**	1	.810**	.832**
Self-esteem2	-.139	.127	.445**	.467**	.539**	.810**	1	.841**
Self-esteem3	-.168*	.136	.442**	.398**	.465**	.832**	.841**	1
Empathy1	.063	-.006	.454**	.320**	.352**	.217**	.220**	.226**
Empathy2	.036	.027	.352**	.186*	.258**	.254**	.205*	.326**
Empathy3	-.035	.032	.456**	.472**	.420**	.267**	.276**	.246**

p<.05*, p<.01*

Table 4. 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, X²=44.214 (df=24, p<.01), GFI=.933, CFI=.975, RMSEA=.076, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

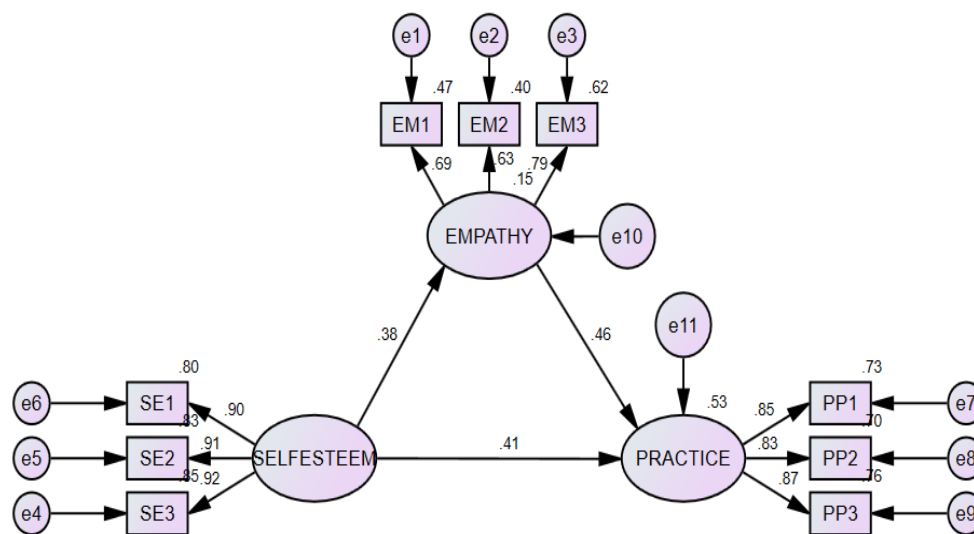
4.3. Structural Equation Model Analysis

Table V 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 it is a contributing factor promoting the positive effect of self-esteem, which is a factor affecting practice performance.

Table 5. Structural Equation Model Analysis

Path	Estimate	SE	C.R.	
				B
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, $\chi^2=44.214$ (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 they undertake activities to satisfy people’s needs. To meet these social needs, there have been constant efforts to seek out effective ways to enhance the practice performance of social work college students in the educational sphere.

This study attempted to lay the theoretical foundation for the same by examining whether empathic ability mediates the relationship between such students' self-esteem and practice performance. The results of the analysis with a focus on the afore-mentioned research questions are as follows.

First, the self-esteem and empathic ability of undergraduates majoring in social work indeed affects their practice performance. This result is consistent with the study by Park and Jung (2015) claiming that self-esteem of nursing students ($\beta=.283$, $p<.001$) has a positive effect on clinical competency, which is practice performance. It is also consistent with the confirmation that empathy of nursing students ($\beta=.22$, $p<.001$) is a factor affecting clinical competency. Moreover, this result implies that higher empathy and self-esteem of social work college students lead to higher practice performance.

Second, empathic ability has a mediation effect on the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance of those undergraduate students. In other words, there is a direct effect in which higher self-esteem of social work college students leads to higher practice performance, as well as an indirect effect in which their higher self-esteem leads to higher empathy, which also increases practice performance.

These results are significant in that they suggest the direction of future education to improve the practice performance of the undergraduate students who are prospective social workers. More specifically, the fact that self-esteem and empathy have a positive effect on their practice performance helps these students clarify their value system and ethical orientation and improve the ability to practice on their own. Accordingly, the Korean Council on Social Welfare Education must provide support to ensure internal stability in conducting courses such as social work ethics and philosophy in the curriculum guide. Moreover, the curriculum related to social work practice must provide students the opportunity to deeply experience and share the philosophy and value of human beings, as well as respect and care for themselves. In other words, while education or training in social work major is important, it is also necessary to provide various curricula to enable students to experience self-understanding and acquire deep insights about life, in addition to understanding clients by participating in counseling or programs on self-esteem and empathy. Furthermore, as empathy mediates the relationship between self-esteem and practice performance, a training program on empathic ability such as nonviolent communication to improve empathic ability can also be implemented in class [21].

In sum, this study has significance in that it emphasizes the importance of practice performance for social workers to do their job in the field, and lays the groundwork to improve the same in the future by examining the relationship between self-esteem and empathy that affects practice performance. However, the fact that the sample is limited to social work college students in four-year universities in Jeollabuk-do can be pointed out as a limitation of this study. Furthermore, efforts must be made to find various relevant factors with a mediation effect in addition to empathic ability examined in this study.

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