

Impact of Effective Communication and Empathy Skills Awareness Training for Non-Judicial Officers

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Abstract

Background: Working life constitutes a significant aspect of adulthood. Non-judicial officers in courthouses frequently encounter vulnerable groups, leading to potential issues such as crises, anger outbursts, and communication breakdowns. Given this context, enhancing empathic self-efficacy skills among these officers is essential to help mitigate potential challenges.

Objectives: For this purpose, our study examined the impact of awareness training to improve the effective communication and empathy skills of non-judicial officer working in a courthouse in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Material and Methods: The “Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale” was performed to the participants before and after the awareness training.

Results: Among the 302 non-judicial officers in the study, 55.6% were male and 44.4% female. Service duration showed that 25.8% had 1-5 years of experience, while 24.5% had 16 or more years. Analysis of daily communication with defendants revealed that 25.5% interacted for less than one hour per day. A statistically significant difference was observed in empathic self-efficacy mean scores pre- and post-training, following the educational program for non-judicial officers ($p=0.014$).

Conclusion: As a result, it is thought that providing therapeutic jurisprudence awareness trainings to non-judicial officers to improve their effective communication and empathy skills is important in the face of increasing workload.

Key words: Non-judicial officer; Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy; Social Self-Efficacy; Awareness Training

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Introduction

Therapeutic jurisprudence, emerging quietly in the U.S. in the late 1980s, is now applied in drug, domestic violence, and mediation courts. In Turkey, while not formally conceptualized, this approach underpins probation and mediation practices. The framework, established by Wexler and Winick, emphasizes law's therapeutic effects.¹ This concept, using an interdisciplinary approach, examines both therapeutic and non-therapeutic legal outcomes, emphasizing the treatment of individuals within the legal system. In drug and mediation courts, judges are expected to base decisions on preventive, curative, and therapeutic principles. Beyond the legal relationship between judge and convict, the interactions within court processes impact individuals' understanding and resolution of crime. Central to this is the decision-makers' empathy and recognition of "rejection" and "acceptance" behaviors, drawing from behavioral psychology and motivational theory.²

Interdisciplinary studies in the early 2000s focused on how well judges could apply therapeutic principles in specialized courts, like drug courts.³ Unlike traditional courts, drug court judges often see themselves as therapeutic agents involved in defendants' treatment rather than merely as authority figures. Emphasizing therapeutic approaches and psychosocial support is believed to promote a restorative justice perspective among judges.

In Turkey, the procedural processes before and on the lawsuit, date are as crucial as the court hearings. The communication patterns established by non-judicial officers during prosecution can have significant short- and long-term effects on defendants, regardless of the penalty imposed. Therapeutic jurisprudence seeks to promote social rehabilitation for offenders from the crime's commission through to conviction.

Working life, a key developmental task in adulthood, fulfills individuals' economic, psychological, social, and cultural roles through physical or mental labor. Professions requiring constant face-to-face interaction can heighten anxiety, influenced by working and living conditions.¹⁰ Public personnel in courthouses, prisons, hospitals, and social services often work

with vulnerable groups due to the nature of these institutions. As a result, they frequently encounter crises, anger, and communication issues arising from these groups or their relatives. Developing empathic self-efficacy among public personnel is essential for reducing potential problems. Non-judicial officers, in particular, face a highly stressful environment, regularly interacting with defendants and their families in the judicial system¹¹ and have to work with the defendants and their relatives requires them to develop their ability to communicate empathetically and effectively in terms of therapeutic jurisprudence principles.

In our study, the effectiveness of awareness training given to non-judicial officers working in a courthouse in Turkey-Eastern Mediterranean Region to develop effective communication and empathy skills was examined.

Material and Methods

In this study, one group pretest-posttest model, which is one of the weak experimental models, was used. The symbolic view of the research model is shown in Figure 1. Accordingly, in this model, first a single group (G) is made the pretest measurement (O₁), then the experimental procedure is applied (X), and at the end of the experimental procedure, the final test (O₂) is done.¹² In this study, the effect of awareness training (X) prepared for non-judicial officers and awareness training (dependent variable) on improving the officer's effective communication and empathy skills was examined.

Single Group Pretest-Posttest Pattern



O₁: Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale

O₂: Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale

X: Awareness Training for Staff to Develop Effective Communication and Empathy Skills

Population and Sample of the Research

The research universe includes all personnel at the regional courthouse, with the sample selected via

convenience sampling. In this method, the researcher exercises discretion, and not all individuals have an equal chance of selection. This approach is used to quickly gather data and is suitable for studies where staff participation may be challenging to secure.¹³

Inclusion criteria in the study

- Being 18 years of age or older
- Not having any communication problems
- To volunteer

Data Collection

Data were collected using a "Sociodemographic Data Collection Form" and the "Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale," designed by the researcher to capture participants' characteristics. The "Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale" was administered twice, pre- and post-awareness training, to assess changes in effective communication and empathy skills among courthouse personnel.

- Sociodemographic Data Collection Form:

In the form we prepared, there are questions about the age, marital status, years of service, corporate belonging and short-term plans for the future.

- Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale:

The Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy and Social Self-Efficacy Scale, developed by Di Giunta et al.,¹⁴ consists of 11 items and two dimensions and a 5-point Likert type ("1" Not appropriate at all, "5" fully appropriate). High scores obtained from the first sub-dimension of the scale, empathic self-efficacy, show the individual's perception of being able to respond empathetically to the needs and feelings of other people. High scores obtained from the second sub-dimension, social self-efficacy, indicate that the individual perceives himself as competent in initiating and managing interpersonal relationships. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients of the scale ranged from .66 to .81. In the validity study, positive correlations were found between empathic self-efficacy and empathy ($r = .53$), and between social self-efficacy and energy-extraversion ($r = .57$). In addition, positive relationships were found between empathic self-efficacy and social self-efficacy, psychological well-being ($r = .23$ and $r = .44$, respectively), active

coping (respectively; $r = .22$ and $r = .31$), emotional support (respectively; $r = .22$ and $r = .16$) and self-esteem ($r = .12$ and $r = .33$, respectively).¹⁵

Procedure

The researchers provided training on empathic and effective communication, communicating with vulnerable groups, communicating with the opposite sex, crisis management, anger control and interpersonal problem-solving skills, covering a total of 12 hours, 2 hours a week for 6 weeks. A pilot study was conducted by the researchers on the training to be given to a group of 12 adult university students aged 18-29. The content of the training was subsequently revised in accordance with the feedback received. This awareness training was held in their own institution buildings, with the condition of not obstructing the working hours and workflow, taking into account the voluntariness of the participating personnel, provided that permission was obtained from the relevant institution.

Our general aim is to improve the communication skills of personnel working with vulnerable groups and their relatives in a public institution (courthouse) in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The six weeks of skill training are as follows:

1. Developing empathic and effective communication skills
2. Communicating with vulnerable (disadvantaged) groups
3. Developing the ability to communicate with the opposite sex
4. Developing crisis management skills
5. Developing anger management skills
6. Developing interpersonal problem-solving skills

Analysis of Data

SPSS 26.0 package program was used in the statistical analysis of the data. In the study, all analyzes were taken as 95% confidence interval, type 1 error level as 5%. Significant application effects were then explored using the Wilcoxon analysis for each group separately.

Ethical Dimensions

This study was conducted with approval from the Çukurova University Non-Interventional Clinical

Research Ethics Committee (dated 14.02.2020, number 96/35). Further, we obtained institutional permission from the faculty and permission from the developers of the instruments used in this study. In addition, participation was voluntary, and non-judicial officer’s consent was obtained by providing the necessary explanations on the form.

Results

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of non-judicial officers

VARIABLES (n=302)		Number (%)
Gender	Male	168(55,6)
	Female	134(44,4)
Marital status	Single	85(28,1)
	Married	195(64,6)
	Divorced	20(6,6)
	Partner passed away	2(0,7)
Educational status	Highschool	24(7,9)
	Associate degree	90(29,8)
	Bachelor’s degree	188(62,3)
Number of children	Childless	101(33,4)
	One child	67(22,2)
	Two or more children	134(44,4)

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Family income status	Very good	4(1,3)
	Good	60(19,9)
	Normal	191(63,2)
	Insufficient	47(15,6)
Years of service	1-5 years	78(25,8)
	6-10 years	67(22,2)
	11-15 years	83(27,5)
	16 years or more	74(24,5)
Communication status with the clients during the day	Less than 1 hour	77(25,5)
	At least 1 hour	92(30,5)
	2 hours or more	133(44,0)
Love of work	I don’t like it at all	28(9,3)
	I like it a little	40(13,2)
	I like it	192(63,6)
Desire to continue in the current unit	I love it	42(13,9)
	I want	190(62,9)
	I don’t want	112(37,1)

Our study found that 55.6% of the non-judicial officers attending the training were male, and 44.4% were female. In terms of service years, 25.8% had worked for 1-5 years, while 24.5% had served for 16 years or more. Regarding daily client interactions, 25.5% of participants communicated with clients for less than one hour per day. Additionally, 13.2% reported their corporate belonging as “I like it a little,” while 9.3% expressed “I don’t like it at all.”

Table 2: Comparison of pre-test and post-test results of empathic self-efficacy and social self-efficacy mean scores of non-judicial officers

Scale Means	Pretest		Posttest		p*
	n	±S.D. Median [Min- Max]	n	±S.D. Median [Min- Max]	
Perceived Empathic Self-Efficacy(E.S.E.)	302	24,54±2,72 24 [15-30]	302	24,83±2,74 24 [16-30]	0,014
Social Self-Efficacy (S.S.E.)	302	21,02±2,44 20 [12-25]	302	21,09±2,43 20 [13-25]	0,565

p<0,05*

According to the findings of our study, the E.S.E and S.S.E sub-dimension mean scores were examined by Wilcoxon analysis, it was observed that there was

a statistically significant difference in the mean E.S.E scores of all non-judicial officers with the training given (p=0.014).

Table 3: Comparison of pre-test and post-test results of empathic self-efficacy and social self-efficacy scale subscale mean scores of non-judicial officers according to gender variable

Gender	E.S.E. Pretest-Posttest		p**	S.S.E. Pretest-Posttest		p
	±S.D.			±S.D.		
	Median [Min- Max]			Median [Min- Max]		
Female (168)	24,87±2,76 24,50 [17-30]	25,01±2,90 24 [16-30]	0,317	21,01±2,64 20,50 [12-25]	21,12±2,57 21 [13-25]	0,505
Male (134)	24,12±2,64 24 [15-30]	24,59±2,52 24 [18-30]	0,015	21,03±2,16 20 [15-25]	21,04±2,26 20 [15-25]	0,928
p*	0,018	0,179		0,966	0,776	

p<0,001* p<0,05**

As shown in Table 3, the impact of training on the E.S.E and S.S.E sub-dimensions was analyzed by "gender." A statistically significant difference was found between pretest E.S.E scores of female and male non-judicial officers (p=0.018), though no

significant difference was observed in posttest scores. Additionally, male participants showed a statistically significant difference between their E.S.E pretest and posttest scores (p=0.015).

Table 4: Comparison of pre-test and post-test results of empathic self-efficacy and social self-efficacy scale subscale mean scores of non-judicial officers according to daily communication time

Daily Communication Time	E.S.E. Pretest-Posttest		p**	S.S.E. Pretest-Posttest		p
	±S.D.			±S.D.		
	Median [Min- Max]			Median [Min- Max]		
Less than 1 hour (77)	24,23±2,73 24 [15-30]	25,63±2,69 24 [19-30]	0,008	21,01±2,49 21 [12-25]	21,00±2,64 20 [13-25]	0,963
At least 1 hour (92)	24,84±2,54 24 [18-30]	24,97±2,69 24 [19-30]	0,519	21,31±2,48 21 [15-25]	21,20±2,57 21 [13-25]	0,578
2 hours or more (133)	24,52±2,83 24 [15-30]	24,68±2,82 24 [16-30]	0,341	20,83±2,37 20 [12-25]	21,07±2,20 20 [14-25]	0,095
p	0,356	0,696		0,337	0,866	

p<0,001* p<0,05**

The effect of the education given in Table 4 on the sub-dimensions of E.S.E and S.S.E was examined according to the variable of "daily communication time with clients". According to this, a statistically significant difference was found when the E.S.E sub-dimension score averages of the participants who stated that they communicated with clients less than an hour a day were examined. (p=0.008)

Discussion

Empathic self-efficacy is defined as an individual's perceived ability to understand others' emotions from

their perspective, respond appropriately to feelings of distress or misfortune, and recognize the impact of emotions.¹⁶¹⁷ Empathy can enhance interpersonal communication in daily life and improve dialogue between officers and clients in public services. Full compliance of the accused with punishment, execution, and correction processes is vital for justice and reintegration into society. Given defendants' reservations and resistance due to challenging experiences, the communication non-judicial officers establish with them should be constructive, positive,

and sustainable. In their study, Westaby et al. (2020) stated that the work of probation personnel, another type of non-judicial officer, requires emotional labor, and therefore factors such as humor, empathic approach and anger control are included in this emotional labor.¹⁸ The presence of verbal and bodily expressions during communication, particularly in conveying rules and instructions to the accused, is an observable action within the environment.¹⁹ In such cases, the emotional tone of the information conveyed also becomes significant. For healthy communication, it is essential not only which emotions are expressed but also how they are conveyed.²⁰ When one looks at the judicial process practices in Turkey, it may be interpreted that non-judicial officers adopt an organizational approach²¹ in which empathic contact is relatively lacking rather than a societal or therapeutic approach in the communication patterns in which they take an active role. However, it has been determined that the empathic approach is effective in reducing pro-social modeling and recidivism in probation practices.²²

Empathic behavior or empathic self-efficacy as a derivative of empathy shows some differences on the basis of gender. According to studies, it has been observed that women show more and more empathetic patterns compared to men, especially after puberty.^{23,24} Pretest results in our study showed that female participants had significantly higher empathic self-efficacy scores than males. However, posttest comparisons suggest that male participants benefited more from the training in terms of empathic self-efficacy. While this finding indicates potential gender-based differences in the effectiveness of awareness training, it is challenging to draw firm conclusions.

One of the important elements of empathic self-efficacy or empathetic behavior is being open to communication. Recognizing the emotional and intellectual sharing that occurs with mutual interaction by individuals and giving appropriate feedback depends on their empathic self-efficacy levels.^{25,26} The empathic quality of dialogue between non-judicial officers and clients also depends on the duration of interaction. In busy public institutions like hospitals, municipal buildings, and courthouses, communication is often brief due to intense working

conditions.²⁷ Limited communication and low number of words are insufficient to develop empathy. Non-judicial officers in the psychoeducation process work under varying conditions based on their roles, affecting the length of interactions with clients and their relatives. Posttest measurements showed that participants with communication times of less than one hour had higher average scores than others. Since work life holds a central place in people's routines, interpersonal communication skills become crucial. However, individuals with limited interaction time due to their job roles may show lower levels of empathic skills compared to those with more extensive communication. In this context, it has been observed that the training given is effective in individuals with relatively shorter communication times comparing who has more time to communicate with clients and entourage.

In conclusion, an empathic approach is essential for non-judicial officers to provide therapeutic jurisprudence in interactions with defendants and their families. Psychoeducation appears to have positively contributed to the development of empathic self-efficacy. While training varies globally, in Turkey, personnel training is prioritized and supported through numerous in-service programs.

Awareness training in therapeutic jurisprudence for non-judicial officers can enhance communication and empathy skills, helping to reduce stress and foster a sense of belonging amid increasing workloads. Establishing active psychological counseling and guidance units in courthouses could improve service quality and help minimize communication conflicts among staff, citizens, and other courthouse visitors.

Limitations

Our study also has some limitations. The setting where the study was conducted is a large and multifunctional structure serving the region with thousands of people daily. In this context, even if the participation of nonjudicial officers in the training and research is voluntary, the fact that the follow-up test cannot be performed again with the same participant group is due to the intensity in the operation of the institution and the termination of the protocols between the researchers and the institution. In this context, although the one group

pretest-posttest design^{27,28} used in the research design has weaker representation power compared to true experimental designs, it can still be used to detect some changes. According to Campbell and Stanley (2015), the reason behind the difference between the measurements of the group may be due to time-dependent changes such as “natural” maturation.²⁹ Given the sample’s average age and the experience-based nature of empathic self-efficacy, the significant difference between pre- and post-measurements may stem from the training.

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