What do we need for shaping the intention to show empathic behavior? Using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) for identifying relevant factors for medical undergraduate students

Ingrid Preusche

Department of Medical Education, Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
ingrid.preusche@meduniwien.ac.at

Background: Learning objectives for communication skills courses in medical curricula often comprise “showing empathic behavior”. However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding relevant factors for medical undergraduate students influencing their intention of “always displaying empathic behavior in a communication setting with standardized patients (SPs)”.

Summary of work: Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 2012) data from 48 undergraduates in their 2nd year were analyzed regarding their behavioral, normative and control beliefs towards empathic behavior. A combined inductive and deductive content analysis was conducted.

Summary of results: The undergraduates’ answers regarding a certain belief were categorized separately, resulting in six to nine categories for each question. For example, patients, teachers and psychologists are seen as relevant person groups supporting empathic behavior, whereas medical student peers function as role models.

Conclusions: The answers mirror the level of education of the target group: Having no patient contact at this level, our medical students in their second year specifically name factors that are relevant to them – this is scarcely transferable to other levels or settings. However, to gain understanding on the development of empathic behavior and on effective training approaches these factors play an important role. Only with exact knowledge of the relevant factors, the examination of the concrete influence of these factors on the intention to show empathic behavior is possible, and only then the linkage to actual behavior can be subsequently analyzed.

Take-home message: The intention to show empathic behavior is influenced by specific factors related to the level of training in medical curricula.

References: