



Empirical research on empathy in medicine—A critical review

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ABSTRACT

Objective: There is a growing amount of empirical research on empathy in medicine. This critical review assesses methodological limitations in this body of research that have not received adequate attention. **Methods:** Scientific publications presenting empirical research on medical students' or physicians' empathy were systematically searched for.

Results: 206 publications were identified and critically reviewed. Multiple empirical approaches have been used. However, there are some remarkable tendencies given the complexity of the study object: empathy is often not defined. Qualitative approaches are rarely used and the predominant quantitative instruments have a relatively narrow or peripheral scope. For example, the concrete experiences, feelings, and interpretations of the physician and the patient, and empathy in clinical practice, are often neglected. Furthermore, possible influences of medical training and working conditions on empathy have not been adequately explored.

Conclusion: The empirical studies of empathy in medicine tend to separate empathy from main parts of clinical perception, judgment, and communication. Thus, important aspects and influences of empathy have been relatively neglected.

Practice implications: Future studies should include transparent concepts, more than one method and perspective, qualitative approaches, the physician's and the patient's concrete experiences and interpretations, and the context in which empathy is developed and practiced.

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1. Introduction

Empathy is generally considered important and positive to help patients in a good way, and empirical research on medical students' and physicians' empathy is growing. For example, many studies have shown that empathy may be stunted or reduced during medical training (see Section 3.5.1), and these tendencies have given rise to considerable concern.

Generally, empathy in medicine may be described as appropriate understanding of the patient [1]. However, there is no general agreement concerning how to define, teach, or study empathy. Some conceptual issues that have been hotly debated are whether empathy is emotional or cognitive, subjective or objective, and whether empathy includes communicating the understanding generated or acting appropriately based upon this understanding. Some researchers have argued that empathy is a multidimensional construct and have used more inclusive methods, while others have chosen to study selected dimensions. Empirical studies of empathy have been reviewed in various

publications (see e.g. [2–13]). However, after reading publications in which empirical research on medical students' or physicians' empathy has been presented or discussed, my impression was that important methodological assumptions, ideals, and trends did not receive adequate attention. Furthermore, none of the previous reviews were systematic reviews including both qualitative and quantitative methods used to study empathy in medicine. Thus, this critical review was undertaken. The focus in this article is on the methods used to study empathy in medicine – in particular methodological limitations and challenges – and the reported results in the reviewed publications are only presented where relevant to illustrate methodological aspects. Thus, the publications reviewed include many positive contributions and interesting results not presented here.

2. Methods

A systematic literature search in Ovid MEDLINE(R), PsycINFO, EMBASE, and CINAHL was performed from May to August 2008. Publications presenting empirical research on medical students' or physicians' empathy were searched for (through subject headings related to empathy [AND] medical students or physicians [AND] empirical research; see Box 1. Languages included: English, German, Spanish, and the Scandinavian languages). In addition, other publications were identified

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Box 1. Subject headings used^a.

	Ovid MEDLINE(R)	PsycINFO	EMBASE	CINAHL
Empathy—subject heading	Empathy	Empathy	Empathy	Empathy
Medical students or physicians—relevant subject headings used	Medicine; education, medical; education, medical, continuing; education, medical, graduate; education, medical, undergraduate; clinical clerkship; internship and residency; physicians; students, medical; physician–patient relations; psychotherapy; psychotherapeutic processes	Medical students; physicians; medical education; medical internship; medical residency; psychiatric training; medical personnel; psychotherapeutic processes; psychotherapists; psychotherapy; psychotherapy training; psychiatry	Medicine; medical school; residency education; medical student; medical education; physician; medical decision-making; doctor patient relation; medical practice; psychotherapy; psychotherapist	Medicine; physicians; education, medical; students, medical; education, medical, continuing; physician–patient relations; psychotherapeutic processes; psychotherapy; psychotherapists
Empirical research—relevant subject headings used	Research; methods; questionnaires; qualitative research; focus groups; interviews as topic; observation; data collection; health care surveys; behavioral research; case reports; clinical trial; controlled clinical trial; multicenter study; randomized controlled trial; comparative study; evaluation studies; meta-analysis; validation studies; retrospective studies; prospective studies; longitudinal studies; follow-up studies; cross-sectional studies; intervention studies; reproducibility of results; nursing research; psychological tests; research design; models, biological; neurosciences; galvanic skin response	Empirical methods; methodology; experimental methods; observation methods; behavioral assessment; qualitative research; quantitative methods; experimental design; between groups design; clinical trials; cohort analysis; follow-up studies; hypothesis testing; longitudinal studies; repeated measures; experimentation; psychometrics; statistical analysis; test construction; surveys; measurement; consumer surveys; mail surveys; telephone surveys; data collection; Likert scales; needs assessment; questionnaires; interviewing; case report; meta-analysis; test validity; test construction; testing; rating scales; multidimensional scaling; personality measures; test reliability; error of measurement; inter-rater reliability; test standardization; psychometrics; statistical validity; consistency (measurement); statistical correlation; statistical measurement; statistical samples; item analysis (statistical); statistical tests; statistical reliability; statistical significance; psychological assessment; galvanic skin response; experimental design; neurosciences	Research; methodology; interview; grounded theory; qualitative research; observational method; non-participant observation; participant observation; quantitative study; applied research; behavioral research; descriptive research; empirical research; ethnographic research; evaluation research; questionnaire; open-ended questionnaire; structured questionnaire; exploratory research; nursing research; delphi study; semi-structured interview; structured interview; unstructured interview; psychologic test; biological model; neuroscience	Research; empirical research; research methodology; methodological research; interaction (research); evaluation research; descriptive research; action research; ethnographic research; professional practice, research-based; summative evaluation research; exploratory research; survey research; outcomes research; applied research; research, medical; clinical research; phenomenological research; research, interdisciplinary; education research; research, intradisciplinary; medical practice, research-based; ethnological research; quality of care research; predictive research; health services research; basic research; questionnaires; qualitative studies; ethnological research; ethnonursing research; grounded theory; naturalistic inquiry; psychological tests; models, biological; study design; neurosciences; quantitative studies; research, nursing; observational methods; non-participant observation; participant observation; interviews; behavioral research; open-ended questionnaires; structured questionnaires; semi-structured interview; structured interview; unstructured interview

^a All subject headings were used with “explode” function and within each database, subject headings relating to medical students or physicians were combined with [OR]. The same was done with the subject headings relating to empirical research.

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