

Abstract

Title: Assessing empathy: Measurement characteristics and interviewer effects
Language: English
Keywords: Empathy, Interpersonal Reactivity Index, IRI, Social Skills Inventory, SSI, self-other judgement, selection interview, interrater reliability, confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling.
ISBN: 91-7346-397-3

The main focus of this thesis is to explore the nature and the measurement of empathy from a perspective that is relevant to judgements of personality constructs in selection interviews. It comprises four empirical studies, based on two sets of data. The first three studies treat the internal structure of empathy, with the aim of reaching an improved understanding of the nature and the measurement of the construct. The fourth study focuses on methodological problems related to judgements of personality constructs such as empathy. The participants were 222 eleventh grade students and their parents, 127 applicants for nursing and social work degree programs and 16 interviewers with greater or less experience of selection procedures.

The background is the increasing interest, in Sweden, of using the interview as a critical component in admission procedures for selecting applicants for higher education programs. This type of selection method is relevant for education programs which prepare for professions that demand certain personal qualities of importance in professional relationships. All previous research has supported the superiority and the use of structured interviews, which are formal and research guided. In spite of this, the typical selection interview more closely resembles the unstructured approach, which is informal and guided by intuition.

Empathy is one dimension related to interpersonal skills, which is held to be a core characteristic of any caring relationship. Thus, it has relevance for recruitment and admissions processes within all of the caring professions. Since there is a lack of consensus on what empathy is, how it may be defined, and consequently how it can be measured, the issue of construct validity is of central concern in this thesis. The internal structure of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which is comprised of four subscales (empathic concern, perspective taking, fantasy and personal distress) was examined using confirmatory factor analysis. The IRI scale seems to be the most comprehensive empathy measure, which is why an analysis of its internal structure might give a valuable contribution to the understanding of the structure of empathy.

The results indicate that empathy is hierarchically organized with one general dimension at the apex. This general dimension is identical to empathic concern and overlaps with perspective taking and fantasy. It is suggested that the general dimension of empathy constitutes an integrated entirety with its main emphasis on emotional reactivity by also involving cognitive processes. The results from the selection interview study demonstrate that the use of relevant criteria concretized from theoretical concepts into sets of subcriteria and making ratings on subcriteria might provide a user-friendly and effective selection interview. The results also indicated that training for the interviewers might increase the interrater reliability and validity. The hypothesis for further inquiries is that multiple separate interviews and the use of some level of question standardization would provide a more effective and yet user-friendly method of selecting candidates in educational settings.