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RESEARCH

Longitudinal Study of Empathy and Self-esteem during Four-year Counselor Education

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Abstract

Latent growth curve models (LGCM) were applied to analyze the empathic tendency and self-esteem scores of undergraduate students ($n=97$) receiving four-year counselor education over time. Results revealed that the average score of empathy increased 1.096 units, and the average score of self-esteem increased 0.513 units annually. The negative and significant correlations between the intercept and slope calculated from the LGCM for both variables indicated that students with higher empathic tendency or self-esteem in the first year of university experienced a lower increase in their empathic tendency and self-esteem throughout their university education than others.

Keywords Self-esteem · Empathic tendency · Latent growth model · Counselor education

Counselor education is meant to equip counselor candidates with theoretical knowledge and skills, as well as to offer them the chance to utilize these skills and knowl-

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edge in practice (Stargell, 2017). The training of counseling students in competencies such as counseling micro-skills, multicultural awareness, and knowledge of particular subject areas such as career/vocational counseling, human development, and statistics/research design are frequently the focus of discussions about counselors' education (Galassi & Akos, 2004; Gonzalez-Voller et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2005). According to Hill and O'Brien (1999), counselors hold a unique position in the helping process, not just due to their educational background but also because of their personal traits, demographic factors, beliefs, perspectives, value judgments, life experiences, and cultural heritage. Hanna and Bemak (1997), and Garner et al. (2016) emphasize that a counselor's effectiveness in supporting others is more closely tied to their personal qualities than to their formal education, professional experience, or theoretical expertise. Among these personal qualities, empathy and self-esteem are essential qualities for counselors' professional competence and effectiveness in practice. Empathy plays a vital role in the therapeutic process as it enables counselors to understand and engage with the emotional experiences of their clients, thereby enhancing the therapeutic alliance (Corey, 2023). Self-esteem, on the other hand, contributes to counselors' perceived preparedness (Goreczny et al., 2015), confidence in dealing with insecurity, and uncertainty related to efficacy (Orlinsky & Howard, 1986), competency in working with clients (Wiggins & Giles, 1984), ability to maintain professional boundaries (Corey, 2023). Counselors with high self-esteem are less likely to experience burnout (Lee et al., 2010) and are good at maintaining professional boundaries (Corey, 2023).

Integrating personal and professional identities and characteristics is crucial in counseling (Dewane, 2006; Edwards & Bess, 1998). To enhance therapeutic practice, counselors must possess not only strong academic credentials but also essential personal qualities, traits, and preparedness, which are crucial for successful outcomes in their work with clients (Lumadue & Duffey, 1999). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP] (2001) encourages counselor preparation programs to assist in counseling students' personal and professional development and progress. Among the different skills and competencies, empathy development has consistently been regarded as an essential aspect of counselor education (Bell, 2018).

According to the CACREP (2016) standards, counseling programs are expected to emphasize fundamental interviewing and counseling skills, evidence-based counseling techniques, and approaches for building and sustaining relationships, along with counselor traits that impact the counseling process. As pointed out by Schurz et al. (2021), "the capacity to understand what other people think and feel remains one of the most elusive mental faculties" (p. 315). Further, according to Myers et al. (2003), more counseling education could result in a higher level of well-being. However, few studies have investigated the contribution of counselor education on the well-being of counselor candidates. Roach and Young (2007) looked at general trends in students' wellness levels at three different stages of their training (beginning, middle, and end of the program). Although the trend analysis results showed no significant trends in well-being levels, a number of students stated that their program's emphasis on personal development and self-awareness increased their sense of self-worth.

To enhance the personal growth and well-being of counselor candidates, it is crucial for counseling programs to focus more on developing competencies beyond merely technical skills. The cultivation of empathy and self-esteem is an essential competency for counselors, and counseling programs are responsible for promoting and evaluating students' levels of these competencies. It was also stated in the literature that further research is needed to understand the impact of counselor education programs on counselor development (Bloom et al., 2018; DePue & Lambie, 2014). Therefore, the objective of this study was to investigate changes in empathic tendency and self-esteem among undergraduate students throughout their four-year guidance and counseling program.

Empathy

Although there are different definitions of empathy in the literature, in their latest review on the nature of empathy, Eklund and Meranius (2021) reported four common themes among different definitions as "understanding, feeling, sharing, and maintaining self-other differentiation" (p. 306). In other words, it includes "understanding the client's frame of reference or way of experiencing the world…" and it is "a complex construct consisting of a variety of different acts used in different ways" (Elliott et al., 2011, p. 133). Empathy occurs in two dimensions: cognitive and affective (Davis, 1983; DePue & Lambie, 2014). Affective empathy refers to an individual's tendency to feel the emotions of others, while cognitive empathy involves the ability to comprehend or envision others' experiences (Ho, 2024). Similar to affective empathy, empathic tendency includes the emotional processes of empathic responding and feelings or understanding how others feel in everyday situations (Spreng et al., 2009; Surma-aho & Höltta-Otto, 2022). Empathic tendency has components similar to empathic concern (Hall & Schwartz, 2019), which involves being aware of and prioritizing another's well-being, recognizing the source of their emotions, and shifting focus from one''s own feelings to those of the empathy target (Jami et al., 2024). People can act compassionately and care for others when they empathize. This requires understanding one's frame of reference and affective experiences (Elliott et al., 2011). Genuine empathic behavior occurs when individuals feel concern for the suffering person rather than distress and can identify the origin of the emotion (Jami et al., 2024). It is believed that self-awareness paired with learning about differences and similarities in others leads to an increase in empathy (Blandin et al., 2017; Stebbins, 2005).

According to previous research, empathy is a critical component of the therapeutic process and has been extensively researched among Rogers' facilitative conditions (Bell, 2018). Clients' perceptions of being understood by their therapists consistently and robustly correlated with outcomes. The relationship between therapeutic alliance and perceptions of therapist empathy was moderate in a meta-analysis (Nienhuis et al., 2018). Empathy serves as a medium-sized predictor of psychotherapy outcomes (Elliott et al., 2011). DePue and Lambie (2014) highlighted the importance of perceiving empathy as a counseling competency in counselor education. In particular, certain counseling skills, namely, reflecting skills, are related to counselors' empathic

skills. Multiple dimensions of empathy have been explored among counselor trainees. Trusty et al. (2005) found that counseling students with the highest levels of empathy demonstrates lower avoidance and higher anxiety. Lovell (1999) surveyed 340 graduate student members of a large professional counseling association across the United States, and the results indicated that empathy and cognitive development were positively related.

Rogers (1986) posited that empathy is an ability and willingness to be molded through training. Previous studies have shown that training and educational programs are highly effective in forming and improving the quality of empathy for prospective helpers (Hojat et al., 2005). Teding van Berkhout and Malouff (2016) conducted a meta-analysis to assess the impact of empathy training programs across different populations, such as university students, health professionals, patients, adults, teenagers, and children. The researchers analyzed the effects of cognitive, affective, and behavioral empathy training and discovered a statistically significant medium effect size overall. Studies conducted at several medical schools have shown that there is an increase in the quality of student empathy during a 3-year educational program. The results of research by Gayati et al. (2018) regarding improving prospective nurses' attitudes toward empathy through empathy care training revealed that there were differences in attitudes toward empathy after engaging in the training. Many counselor educators argue that effective techniques for instructing students to cultivate and maintain empathy for their clients should be included in counselor education programs (Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Greason & Cashwell, 2009). Further, DePue and Lambie (2014) examined the effect of a counseling practicum on the self-assessed empathy levels of master's-level counseling students. They found that affective empathy levels increased after the practicum.

In the Turkish literature, some other studies have indicated that training to develop empathy skills can help counselors (İkiz & Karaca, 2011; Sargın, 1993) and nursing students (Karaca et al., 2013) develop their empathy skills. However, other studies have revealed that the undergraduate counseling program itself did not change empathy levels. For instance, Düşünceli et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the empathy levels of counseling candidates studying at a university and found that the basic empathy levels of prospective counselors did not change during their undergraduate years. Cross-sectional studies conducted with counselor candidates showed that the second, third, and fourth graders' empathy skill levels (Alver, 2005) and empathic tendency levels (Ünal, 1997) were significantly higher than those of the first graders. Considering the relevance of empathy to counseling outcomes and the role of education in developing empathy, this study focused on how undergraduate counseling education longitudinally affects the emphatic tendency levels of counseling students.

Self-Esteem

Rosenberg et al. (1995) defined self-esteem as an individual's overall positive or negative attitude toward themselves. In Bandura's (1997) definition, self-esteem refers to a "judgment of one's own worth" (p. 11). According to self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), motivation for behavior is both internally and externally

stimulated and influences various aspects of life, including career goals. This theory posits that new behaviors can be stimulated by either internal or external factors, depending on current circumstances and experiences. Among the four categories of SDT, one is internal motivation, which is influenced by self-esteem. This category emphasizes that an individual's self-worth can drive their motivation to engage in certain behaviors.

Multiple correlates of self-esteem have been extensively studied, making it a crucial element of psychological health. According to Orth et al. (2012), high self-esteem is consistently linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression, promoting general mental health and emotional stability. Socially, those with higher self-esteem typically have more fulfilling relationships and stronger social skills, which help create social networks that are helpful (Marshall et al., 2014). Higher self-esteem promotes a greater drive and perseverance to achieve goals, leading to higher success in school and work (Baumeister et al., 2003). In the workplace, it supports social integration, productivity, high performance (Judge & Bono, 2001), a sense of competence (Bowling et al., 2010), and reduced burnout (Butler & Constantine, 2005).

Self-esteem is essential in counselor development and is regarded as a vital personal attribute for an effective counselor by both practicing and trainee counselors (Caulfield & Perosa, 1983). Hogan (1964) outlined four phases of therapist development, which therapists may revisit throughout their careers. (1) Insecurity-dependency: Therapists depend on their training and skills. (2) Dependency-autonomy: Therapists integrate personality with formal education, resulting in fluctuating self-esteem and confidence in providing therapy. (3) Self-esteem: With reflective practice and experience, therapists build self-esteem and sustain motivation and engage in self-confrontation. (4) Creativity: Therapists achieve self-sufficiency and confidence through creative practices. Goreczny et al. (2015) found a significant correlation between self-esteem and counseling students' anticipation of working with clients, as well as their perceived preparedness for that work. In line with this, counselors with a high self-esteem score tended to be the one who felt competent in working with clients within a structured framework regardless of ratings or scores on other variables (Wiggins et al., 1990). Wiggins and Giles (1984) found that counselors with low self-esteem were less effective in assisting students than those with high self-esteem. Moreover, according to Orlinsky and Howard (1986), there was a positive correlation between therapist self-confidence and client outcomes in two-thirds of research results. However, there was no positive correlation between therapist "unsureness" and outcome. In brief, as Corey (2000) stated, it is impossible to give others what they (counselors) do not have.

The relationship between self-esteem and self-efficacy among counselor trainees has been well-documented in the literature. Perceived self-efficacy refers to judgments of personal capability in a given activity; however, self-esteem refers to a global construct that reflects the affective evaluation of the self. Self-esteem, a crucial aspect of an individual's overall self-worth and confidence, plays a significant role in the development of counseling self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) supported the idea that mastery experiences, such as successful counseling sessions, are the most potent source of self-efficacy. By successfully navigating challenging counseling situations,

trainees build a robust belief in their capabilities, which translates into higher self-esteem and professional efficacy.

Feelings of incompetence are also associated with low self-esteem. Regardless of counselors' experience level, self-doubt, insecurity, and uncertainty about one's efficacy are common obstacles in psychotherapy, according to Mahoney (1997). These emotions can be harmful to both the practitioner and the therapeutic process (McLeod, 1990). These may cause disengagement (Thériault & Gazzola, 2006), therapeutic alliance breaks, and premature or delayed termination (Brady et al., 1996) during therapy. Therefore, in this study, we focused on the effect of counseling education on the self-esteem levels of counseling students.

Counselor Education in Türkiye

In Türkiye, counselor education is primarily offered at the undergraduate level; however, there are also opportunities to pursue master''s and doctoral degrees. Counseling education programs at all levels are regulated and supervised by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) (Doğan, 1996). Currently, there are 118 undergraduate guidance and counseling programs (Higher Education Program Atlas, 2024). The contents of guidance and counseling programs at different universities are largely similar. Students who pass a national entrance exam are granted admission to the program.

Guidance and counseling undergraduate programs include theoretical and practicum courses. Practice and supervision within the scope of the practicum constitute the most important processes in the education of counselor candidates and are an integral part of counselor education. Theoretical courses offered in undergraduate counselor education curricula are like "Introduction to Philosophy", "Introduction to Psychology", "Introduction to Sociology", "School Counseling", "Human Relations and Communication", "Developmental Psychology", "Learning Psychology", "Social Psychology", "Measurement and Evaluation", "Statistics", "Research Methods", "Abnormal Psychology (child)", "Abnormal Psychology (adult)", "Exceptional Children", "Theories of Counseling", "Counseling Skills and Techniques", "Group Counseling", "Family Counseling", "Vocational Guidance", "Career Counseling", "Crisis Counseling", and "Ethics". Practicum courses include "Individual Counseling Practicum 1–2", "Group Counseling Practicum", "Career Counseling Practicum", and "School Counseling Practicum".

Several studies have highlighted the importance of assessing the effectiveness of counseling programs in fostering empathy (Bloom et al., 2018) and evaluating student learning outcomes to determine the impact of the program (DePue & Lambie, 2014). In this study, we focused on empathic tendency because counselors who have the potential to identify and comprehend the feelings of others are more likely to go through an automatic empathy process, which involves regulating their own emotions. Thus, they can better recognize the emotions they produce as a result of the empathy process (Ho, 2024). We also investigated changes in self-esteem because self-esteem in personal life can positively influence professional self-esteem and vice versa. According to Stoltenberg (2005), counselor-in-training is assumed to have

insecurities. Kurtyılmaz (2015) also reported that counselor candidates experience fear and anxiety about being a professional, conducting the counselling process, being evaluated by the supervisor, and being a good counsellor.

Counselors who feel good about themselves are more likely to feel competent and effective in their professional roles, because self-esteem is also seen as an antecedent of self-efficacy. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no published research in Türkiye has examined how counseling students' involvement in undergraduate guidance and counseling programs from the beginning of the program until graduation has affected their empathy and self-esteem over time. Therefore, the findings of our study would contribute to previous findings, and these results would help inform counselor education. The purpose of the current study was to examine changes in the levels of empathic tendency and self-esteem of counselor candidates at four different points during undergraduate counseling education. In particular, we addressed the following question:

- How do empathic tendency and self-esteem change during a four-year undergraduate guidance and counseling program?

Method

Procedure and Participants

The data of the current study was collected during 2015–2019 academic years within a program evaluation study that was conducted by the lecturers of the Guidance and Counseling program after the Higher Education Council of Türkiye made it possible to change the curriculum of higher education programs to a certain extent. The study was planned as a 4-year longitudinal study at a university located in one of the metropolitan cities in the Central Anatolia region of Türkiye. All first-year students ($n = 135$) were informed of the study process and 120 volunteered to participate in the study. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, based on the informed consent obtained from all participants at each data collection period. Data were collected through online surveys, participation was anonymous, and participants used their nicknames throughout the study. According to the research plan, each year, at the end of the spring semester, the participants were asked to complete the online survey. After four years of data collection, 13 participants were excluded from the study because they did not participate in the online survey during any of the four data collection periods. A total of 107 students completed all the four surveys. Ten participants were excluded from the study during the data screening/cleaning process. Thus, the sample consisted of 97 undergraduate students. Of the students in the study, 88% were female. The average age of these students was 18.7 in the first year and their overall academic grade point average was 3.24. All of the students were of Turkish nationality.

Measures

Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure the participants' global self-esteem. The RSES is a 10 item four-point Likert type scale. The reliability of the RSES is good; test-retest correlations often range between 0.82 and 0.88, and Cronbach's alpha for different samples ranges between 0.77 and 0.88 (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1993; Rosenberg, 1986). Previous studies have reported alpha reliability values for the RSES ranging from 0.88 to 0.90 across the six assessments (Robins et al., 2001). Çuhadaroğlu (1986) conducted a Turkish adaptation study of the RSES. The test-retest reliability was 0.71, and the Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.75 for the Turkish version. A preliminary analysis was conducted on a separate sample of 427 counseling students to assess the reliability of the scale, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 (95% CI [0.85, 0.89]). In the current study, involving a sample of 97 individuals, the Cronbach's alpha was determined to be 0.88 (95% CI [0.84, 0.91]).

Empathic Tendency

This study used the Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS; Dökmen, 1988), which measures an individual's potential to empathize in daily life. The ETS is a 20 item five-point Likert-type scale with three subscales: empathic tendency, self-centered tendency, and sympathetic tendency. In this study, only the empathic tendency subscale was used, with nine items. The internal consistency coefficient for the empathic tendency subscale was 0.73. To assess the reliability of the scale, an initial analysis was performed on a separate sample comprising 427 counseling students, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77 (95% CI [0.74, 0.80]). In the present study, involving a sample of 97 individuals, the Cronbach's alpha is reported as 0.81 (95% CI [0.74, 0.86]).

Data Analysis

Data Screening and Preliminary Analysis

Before analysis, Z-scores were calculated for continuous data, including repeated observations at four different time points ($|Z| > 3.00$ indicates an outlier) (Stevens, 2012). For multivariate outliers, the Mahalanobis Distance statistic (D^2) was checked at 0.001 significance level. For the normality assumption, it was examined whether the skewness and kurtosis coefficients were within ± 1 range. As a result of these examinations, analyses were carried out on the data of 97 people who met the assumptions. In addition to the mean and standard deviation values for the measurements at each time point, the relationships between the variables were analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. All preliminary controls and descriptive statistics were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 24 (IBM Corporation, 2016).

Latent Growth Curve Modeling

Unconditional latent growth curve models (LGCM), which do not include any predictor variables, were created to model the shape of the change in self-esteem and empathic tendency constructs over time. LGCM is based on the idea that individual development (growth or decline) for a given concept is a function of a latent random intercept and a latent random slope (Davidov et al., 2011, p.485). The intercept represents the average initial level of individuals on the variable of interest, and the slope represents the average development (rate of change) over time. In this model, five parameters are considered: the mean and variance of the intercept factor, mean and variance of the slope factor, and covariance and/or correlation between the intercept and slope factor. The loadings of the intercept factor for the related latent variables were limited to one, and this factor represents the initial state of the constructs. The loadings of the slope factor were determined to represent time, and the regression coefficients of latent variables T1, T2, T3, and T4 were limited to 0, 1, 2, and 3, respectively. A linear form of the latent growth trajectory was tested in the models.

LGCM analyses were performed using the program Mplus version 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) and the maximum likelihood estimation (ML). The comparative fit index (CFI) > 0.95, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999) were examined for good model fits. In addition, although χ^2 is a statistic sensitive to sample size, χ^2 value is also reported.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Correlations between repeated measures and descriptive statistics of these variables are presented in Table 1.

The mean values of the empathic tendency construct ($MeanT_0 = 28.99$, $MeanT_1 = 30.01$, $MeanT_2 = 31.31$, and $MeanT_3 = 32.23$) show that empathic tendency tends to increase in four different time periods. It is seen that the relationships between the measurements of empathic tendency made at different times are significant ($p < .01$). It can be said that these relationships are stronger between consecutive years.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of self-esteem and empathic tendency across time

	Empathic Tendency				Self-Esteem			
	T_0	T_1	T_2	T_3	T_0	T_1	T_2	T_3
T_0	1.00				1.00			
T_1	0.48**	1.00			0.18	1.00		
T_2	0.28**	0.43**	1.00		−0.02	0.26**	1.00	
T_3	0.28**	0.42**	0.46**	1.00	−0.17	0.12	0.27**	1.00
Mean	28.99	30.01	31.31	32.23	26.79	26.89	27.70	28.23
Std. Dev.	4.53	3.72	3.57	3.41	4.48	4.20	3.66	4.46

Note. The values in the table are the Pearson correlation coefficients. ** $p < .01$, T_0, T_1, T_2 and T_3 represent the first, second, third and fourth time points, respectively

The mean values of the self-esteem construct ($MeanT_0 = 26.79$, $MeanT_1 = 26.89$, $MeanT_2 = 27.70$, and $MeanT_3 = 28.23$) show that self-esteem tends to increase at a low level within four different time periods. It is seen that the correlations of the measurements of the self-esteem variable at different times are not significant in general. The highest significant relationship is between the two most recent measurements ($r = 0.27$, $p < .01$).

In general, the correlations obtained for two constructs at different time points are different from each other. If individuals changed at the same rate at each time point, the correlation between all-time points would be expected to be 1. Therefore, this difference between the correlations indicates that the change over time is realized at different rates, and that there is inter-individual variance in the change.

Unconditional Growth Model

The results of the unconditional growth curve models for empathic tendency and self-esteem are presented in Table 2. The unconditional latent growth curve model of empathic tendency provided a very good model fit: $\chi^2(5) = 1.660$, $p = .894$, RMSEA [95% CI] = 0.000 [0.000, 0.063], CFI = 1.000. The fact that the sample mean and the mean estimated by the model for the empathic tendency variable for four different time periods are similar also supports this situation (see Fig. 1). According to the results obtained, it was concluded that the mean value of the intercept factor was 28.981 and showed a significant difference from 0 ($p < .001$). This value expresses the mean value of the students at the initial level in terms of empathic tendency. The mean change in students' empathic tendency is also significant (slope $M = 1.096$, $p < .001$) and this value indicates that the rate of increase in the empathic tendency of the students per unit time is 1.096. The variances found significant for intercept and slope (Intercept $\sigma^2 = 9.192$, $p < .001$; slope $\sigma^2 = 0.835$, $p < .05$) indicate that there are significant differences between individuals in initial empathic tendencies and rates of change for empathic tendency. This finding indicates that the empathic tendency levels of the students were not homogenous in the first grade where the first measurement was made. To summarize, the LGC for empathic tendency is $ET_{ij} = 28.981 + 1.096 * year_j$. ($i$: participant, j: time point). This means that the baseline score for empathic tendency was close to 28.981 in the first year, with a rate of increase of 1.096 each year. The significant and negative relationship between the intercept and slope of empathic tendency ($r = -0.613$, $p < .001$) suggests that students who have a higher empathic tendency in the first year of university experience a lower increase in empathic tendency throughout their university education than others.

The unconditional latent growth curve model of self-esteem provided a very good model fit: $\chi^2(5) = 3.484$, $p = .626$, RMSEA [95% CI] = 0.000 [0.000, 0.117], CFI = 1.000. The fact that the sample mean and the mean estimated by the model for the self-esteem variable for four different time periods are similar also supports this situation (see Fig. 1). According to the results obtained, it was concluded that the mean value of the intercept factor for the self-esteem was 26.642 and showed a significant difference from 0 ($p < .001$). This value expresses the mean value of students at the initial level in terms of self-esteem. It also shows that students have significantly different levels of self-esteem in the first year of university education (Inter-

Table 2 Unconditional growth curve models of self-esteem, empathic tendency, and social skills

	Intercept				Slope				Intercept and slope covariance	
	Unstandardised		Standardised		Unstandardised		Standardised		Unstandardised	Standardised
	M (SE)	σ^2(SE)	M (SE)	σ^2(SE)	M (SE)	σ^2(SE)	M (SE)	σ^2(SE)	σ (SE)	r (SE)
ET	28.981***	9.192***	9.559***	1.000	1.096***	0.835*	1.200**	1.000	−1.699*	−0.613***
	(0.401)	(2.423)	(1.267)	(0.000)	(0.154)	(0.415)	(0.345)	(0.000)	(0.845)	(0.133)
S-E	26.642***	6.724***	10.274***	1.000	0.513*	2.279**	0.340*	1.000	−3.084*	−0.788***
	(0.407)	(2.806)	(2.145)	(0.000)	(0.221)	(0.799)	(0.159)	(0.000)	(1.361)	(0.090)

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. ET = Empathic Tendency, S-E = Self-Esteem

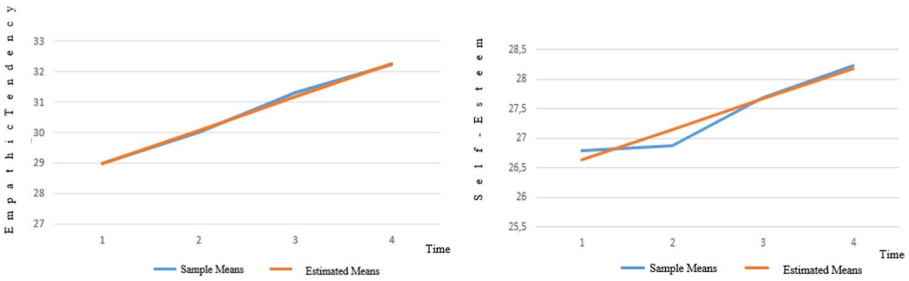


Fig. 1 Mean curve for empathic tendency and self-esteem

cept $\sigma^2 = 6.724$, $p < .001$). This finding shows that students' self-esteem levels are not homogenous, and that there are individual differences in self-esteem levels. The mean of the change in students' self-esteem is significant (slope $M = 0.513$, $p < .05$) and according to this value, the rate of increase in students' self-esteem per unit time can be expressed as 0.513. At the same time, there is a difference between the students in terms of the rate of change in self-esteem levels (slope $\sigma^2 = 2.279$, $p < .01$). To summarize, the LGC for self-esteem is $SE_{ij} = 26.642 + 0.513 * year_j$. This means that the baseline score for self-esteem was close to 26.642 in the first year, with a rate of increase of 0.513 each year. The significant and negative relationship between the intercept and slope of self-esteem ($r = -0.788$, $p < .001$) suggests that students with higher self-esteem in the first year of university experience a lower increase in self-esteem throughout their university education than others.

Discussion

In this study, latent growth curve models were applied to analyze empathic tendency and self-esteem measures of undergraduate students receiving counselor education over time. When unconditional LGCM was analyzed, it was determined that the average empathic tendency increased gradually every year. The negative and significant correlation between intercept and slope calculated from the LGCM indicates that students with a higher empathic tendency in the first year of university experience a lower increase in empathic tendency throughout their university education than others.

These findings suggest that students with lower levels of empathic tendency at the start of the program displayed greater improvement than those with higher levels of empathic tendency. The guidance and counseling education process enhanced the empathy levels of students who initially exhibited lower levels of empathy. This change may pertain to the curriculum of four-year education program, as from the first semester onwards, nearly every semester includes courses that cover subjects related to empathy. Bell (2018) argued that counselor educators and supervisors must cultivate empathic tendency and develop skills that convey empathy to clients. While skills can be taught to enhance empathy, it is more challenging to teach empathic tendency directly. In this sense, our findings indicate that empathic tendency could potentially be enhanced during undergraduate counseling education. Consistent with these results, previous research has also shown the effect of education and training

programs on students' empathy levels. For example, DePue and Lambie (2014) found that individual counseling practicum was effective in increasing counseling students' levels of empathic concern, which included being emotionally present with clients and not overanalyzing situations. Further, Teding van Berkhout and Malouff (2016) found that empathy training programs are effective for diverse populations. Thus, our results might provide additional support for the possible impact of educational programs on empathy, contributing to the growing body of literature on this topic aligning with and extending prior research. Another possible explanation may be related to the relationship between cognitive complexity and empathy. As reported by Castillo (2018), cognitive complexity positively impacts counseling skills, particularly empathy, and clinical interventions. Research indicates that individuals with higher cognitive complexity consistently exhibit more empathic responses towards clients than those with lower cognitive complexity, as demonstrated in ten separate studies. In Castillo's review (2018), the relationship between the number of years of education in counseling and higher cognitive complexity was emphasized. Sias et al. (2006) also found that counselors are likely to experience a rise in cognitive complexity as they acquire more education. Therefore, the observed increase in empathic tendency might be associated with the potential contribution of undergraduate education to cognitive flexibility, a relationship that warrants further investigation. Furthermore, knowledge gained in different theoretical courses and practicums may enhance empathy and cognitive complexity. Knowledge comprises essential information pertinent to the counseling context, including counseling theories and theories related to different client problems. Relevant theoretical concepts, empirical studies, and observations guide counselors in inferring a client's unspoken communication, which enables them to discern the crux of the client's narrative (Ho, 2024). This is regarded as objective empathy, which involves utilizing information beyond a client's perspective to conceptualize them theoretically, as suggested by Clark (2010). Shifting from multiplistic thinking to relativistic thinking can effectively incorporate clients identified traits into their case conceptualization. Therefore, their empathic tendencies may increase with an increase in knowledge throughout their education. These results provide evidence that empathy appears to be influenced by trait capacities and state influences (Cuff et al., 2016).

According to the unconditional LGCM results, the average self-esteem value also increased gradually every year. The negative and significant correlation between the intercept and slope calculated from the LGCM shows that students with higher self-esteem in the first year of university experience a lower increase in self-esteem throughout their university education than others. The results suggested that students' self-esteem levels tended to show a continuous linear increase throughout the undergraduate counseling program. It also appeared that those who initially reported lower self-esteem demonstrated relatively greater gains over time. In other words, regardless of their initial self-esteem levels, students seemed to converge toward a more similar level by the end of their education. In a similar longitudinal study, Goreczny et al. (2015) examined how counselor self-efficacy, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and general happiness varied across different stages of academic training. Their study involved 97 participants, including 21 undergraduate students enrolled in an abnormal behavior course and 76 graduate students enrolled in a master's-level counseling psychology program. Graduate students were divided into three groups: first-semes-

ter students, those in their first field placement, and those in their second and final field placements. In contrast to the findings of the present study, the researchers found no statistically significant differences between the four groups in any of the global measures of self-esteem, happiness, or life satisfaction that were not related to education. However, it should be noted that the undergraduate students in this study were not the students attending undergraduate counseling psychology program, but they were enrolled in abnormal behavior course in a liberal arts college.

Since there are few direct studies on the development of self-esteem during counseling education in literature, the findings related to self-esteem will also be discussed along with studies in which some related concepts (self-efficacy and self-confidence) are investigated. The relationship between training and work experience related to counseling and self-efficacy among counseling trainees has been extensively studied, and most of these studies support the findings of our study, stating that increased training and experience related to counseling improves self-efficacy. For instance, in an earlier longitudinal study, Johnson et al. (1989) found that self-efficacy significantly increased over the course of a training program, with practical experiences and supervision being the key contributing factors. Likewise, Mullen et al. (2015) found that students' experiences in their graduate counseling preparation program resulted in higher levels of self-efficacy in their longitudinal investigation. Kozina et al. (2010) examined the changes in self-efficacy beliefs that occur during the training of novice practitioners (20 first-year MA students in counseling psychology) at two-time intervals eight weeks apart. The results showed significant changes in self-efficacy over time, indicating that counselor training and supervision positively impacted self-efficacy levels. The students showed increased self-efficacy as they progressed through their training programs. These conclusions from the literature on self-efficacy make it abundantly evident that longitudinal research conducted at various phases of the counseling education process contributes to the development of self-efficacy, which is parallel to self-esteem development.

Other studies investigated the changes in self-confidence and self-efficacy in relation to specific courses or experiences (client contact, prepracticum service-learning, clinical supervision, and school experience) during counselor education. The findings of this study can also be discussed by considering the findings of these studies. For instance, Bischoff et al. (2002) investigated specific events and experiences that impact the development of clinical self-confidence in counselors during their first year of client contact. Several types of events were identified as critical for the development of clinical self-confidence, including successful client interactions, supervision and feedback, challenging cases, and hands-on experience with clients, which were found to be more impactful than theoretical learning alone in developing clinical self-confidence. Support from peers, supervisors, and professional networks is crucial in helping novice counselors navigate challenges and build confidence. Likewise, Barbee et al. (2003) investigated how prepracticum service-learning experiences affect counselor self-efficacy and anxiety levels among counseling students. The findings of the study revealed that the prepracticum service-learning experience was associated with a significant increase in counselor self-efficacy. Students reported greater confidence in their ability to perform counseling tasks after participating in service-learning activities. The service-learning experience also resulted in

a significant reduction in anxiety levels. There was a positive relationship between increases in self-efficacy and decreases in anxiety. Students who experienced greater gains in self-efficacy also tended to report greater reductions in anxiety. Furthermore, Cashwell and Dooley (2001) examined the effects of clinical supervision versus no clinical supervision on counselors' counseling self-efficacy in practice. There were 33 participants in the sample: 22 received clinical supervision and 11 did not receive any supervision. These findings are consistent with the idea that professional counselors' skills can be improved through ongoing supervision. The counseling self-efficacy of counselors under clinical supervision was higher than that of those who were not under supervision. In a Turkish study, Fırıncı-Kodaz and Vural Batık (2018) investigated the effect of school experience on school counseling self-efficacy of counselor candidates. The study included students in their fourth year of the Guidance and Counseling program ($n=155$). The findings showed that candidates' perceptions of school counseling self-efficacy increased significantly after their institutional experience. These findings are quite consistent with the current study; self-esteem increased gradually towards the senior years in our study, and it is possible that this is related to the increase in the number of practicum courses each year towards graduation, which offers a considerable amount of experiential learning opportunities.

Similar studies have examined the relationships between different approaches and different counselor training programs, and self-efficacy. Barnes (2004) applied self-efficacy theory to counselor training and supervision by comparing the effectiveness of two different training approaches in enhancing counselor self-efficacy. Two training and supervision methods were compared. The Traditional Approach involves lectures, readings, and supervised practices. The Experiential Approach emphasizes hands-on activities such as role-playing, simulated counseling sessions, and reflective practice. Both training approaches led to significant increases in counselor self-efficacy, demonstrating that training and supervision positively impacted self-efficacy. The experiential approach resulted in a significantly greater increase in self-efficacy than the traditional approach. Trainees who participated in experiential learning activities reported higher levels of confidence in their counseling abilities. Tang et al. (2004) investigated whether counseling self-efficacy would differ among students enrolled in counselor training programs that were accredited by CACREP and those that weren't. Specifically, the authors examined the potential beneficial relationships between counseling self-efficacy and age, previous work experience, number of courses taken, and number of internship hours. The findings showed that coursework, internship hours, and clinical teaching had the strongest correlations with self-efficacy. As years of education progressed, participants' self-esteem also increased in this study. When undergraduate guidance and counseling education in Türkiye are examined, it is seen that the number of applied courses increases with the years of education progress. Students take many applied courses, do internships at different school levels and provide individual and group counselling and career counselling under supervision. Considering the reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and self-efficacy, an increase in self-esteem may be related to an increase in direct practice experience in the field of counselling, as well as an increase in self-efficacy. The literature mentioned above emphasizes the importance of practice expe-

rience in strengthening one's belief that one can effectively counsel clients. These findings also support Bandura's (1977, 1986) theory of self-efficacy development.

In this study, it was observed that empathic tendency and self-esteem levels of counseling students appeared to gradually increase during their four-year undergraduate education. Moreover, the findings suggested that students with lower initial levels of empathic tendency and self-esteem may have displayed relatively greater improvement compared to those who began with higher levels. The counseling education process might have contributed to the development of empathy and self-esteem, particularly among students who initially reported lower levels. Nonetheless, this increase cannot be solely attributed to counseling undergraduate education; rather, this finding may offer preliminary insight into the personal development of counselor candidates.

Over the course of four years, the noted improvements in self-esteem and empathy imply that counselor education might significantly contribute to students' personal and interpersonal development. Nonetheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that these changes might not be entirely due to the formal curriculum. Various external factors, such as students' participation in internships, part-time jobs in helping fields, personal therapy, or other life experiences, could have played a role in enhancing empathy and self-esteem. Furthermore, the natural psychological growth that typically occurs during emerging adulthood (ages 18–25) might have also impacted these results. Although longitudinal study design enhances the understanding of developmental trends, future research should aim to control for or measure these factors to more accurately determine the specific effects of counselor education.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. First, we used self-reported data as there were no objective assessments of the variables. Furthermore, we focused solely on two aspects of counselors' personal development. Third, all participants in our study group were undergraduates from the same university, and our sample size was rather small. This places serious restrictions on the generalizability of our findings. In addition, since the sample was quite similar in terms of categorical variables, such as gender and socioeconomic level, such variables could not be added to the LGCM. Therefore, conditional LGCM tests could not be performed.

As indicated above, this study also did not consider possible confounding variables that could have influenced changes in self-esteem and empathy. Factors outside of formal education (i.e., internships, significant life events) might have impacted the outcomes observed. The inability to control these elements limits the capacity to assert definitive causal relationships regarding the impact of counselor education alone. Despite these limitations, our findings provide evidence of the positive effect of undergraduate guidance and counseling education on the levels of empathic tendency and self-esteem of counselor candidates. Future research may design studies that include more personality variables or dispositions in order to evaluate the empathy and self-confidence levels of students during counselor education in a more comprehensive manner.

Implications for Counselors, Counselor Educators and Counseling Programs

The observed increases in self-esteem and empathy highlight the value of personal development within counselor training, emphasizing the importance of fostering self-awareness and empathic understanding as core qualities for future counselors. Counselor educators may consider incorporating more experiential and reflective learning opportunities into the curriculum to nurture these attributes, and both curricular and extracurricular activities can be developed to enhance students' empathy and self-esteem. Moreover, counselor education programs can leverage these findings to support the inclusion of personal development objectives alongside academic and clinical training, fostering a more comprehensive approach to professional preparation. Assessing the personality characteristics of counselor trainees may be beneficial for cultivating counselors with advanced knowledge, skills, and self-awareness, while also providing program administrators and educators with insights into how counselor candidates' personality traits evolve throughout counselor education. Observing these competencies over a prolonged period can enable programs to evaluate and refine their developmental influence over time and future research could further explore how self-esteem, empathy, and personality traits interact throughout counselor education, offering deeper insight into the processes of professional growth.

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Data Availability The datasets are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request for research purposes.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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