

Empathy scores following an interactive 'experts by experience' session for sonography students: A pilot study

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1. Introduction

Aim: To assess medical ultrasound students' opinions of a new interactive session with 'experts by experience', and review empathy scores before and after the interaction with service users.

- Empathy is an ability to understand a person's 'emotional state'.¹
- It can lead to improved trust between health care provider and patient, compliance with instructions and treatment, patient satisfaction and outcomes.^{1,2}
- This increased level of trust is needed when sonographers have to deliver unexpected news, under challenging circumstances, without prior warning, and sometimes when the diagnosis is unclear.
- Often the sonographer and patient will not have met previously, which can compound the difficulties.³ Sonographers must deliver results compassionately, as patients are aware when health care professionals are not empathetic.⁴

2. Method

- Following ethical approval students were recruited from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts, during a new interactive service user session.
- 'Experts by experience' gave a short overview of their situation, followed by small group discussions with each expert.
- Students completed the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)⁵ at the start and end of the session.
- A short survey elicited their views and potential to impact on future practice.

Image 1: Students discussing a representative from ARC (Antenatal Results and Choices)



3. Results

- 2016 intake n=13 students participated (45%). 2017 intake n=10 (53%)
- Total n=20 completed TEQ⁵ (3 incomplete)
- Mean empathy scores show higher initial score for females (mean 50.4) than males (mean 47.6) (Figure 1)
- Females less overall increase (1.4) than males (3.4) (Figure 1)
- Final mean empathy scores female = 51.8, male = 51 (Figure 1)
- Empathy score increased or remained the same in 75% of students (Figure 2)

The feedback questionnaire suggested that all students found the session useful to some extent, with 85% saying moderately or very useful. All said it met or exceeded expectations.

Figure 1: Pre and post session mean empathy scores. Females n=15, males n=5

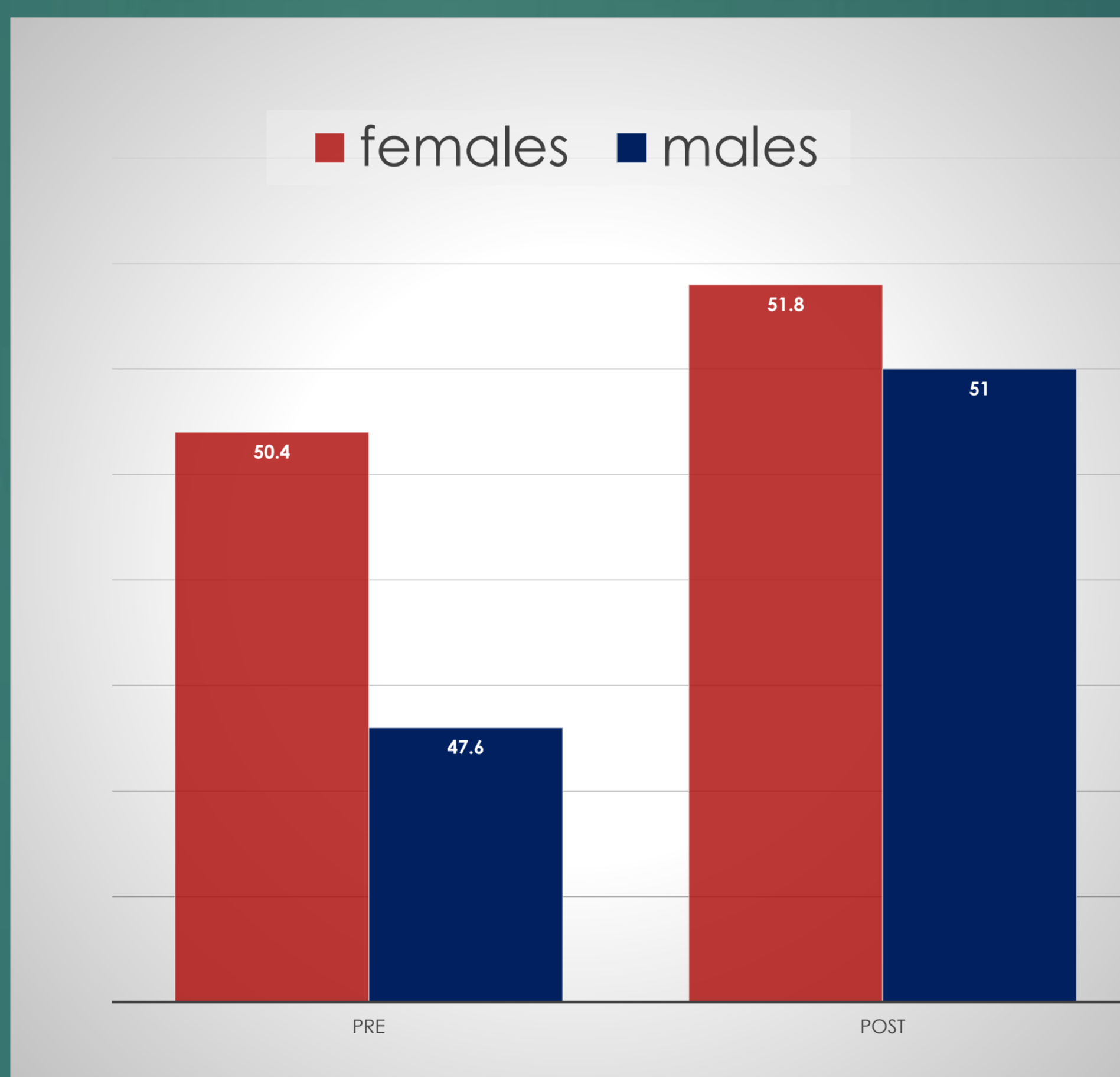


Figure 2: Pre and post session mean empathy scores. Females n=15, males n=5

Empathy score post session	2017		2016		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Reduce	0	4	1	0	5
Same	0	2	0	1	3
Increase	3	1	1	7	12

4. Discussion

- Educators play an important role in helping students to develop reflective skills, empathy and compassionate care.²
- Reflection and self awareness are important factors in developing empathy,² which this study attempted to address.
- Initial mean empathy scores were slightly higher (49.7) than the published norms (44.5 - 47)⁵, increasing to 51.6 following the session.
- Numbers were too small to gain accurate statistical data. Further cohorts are needed.

Student's comments demonstrated insight in many ways e.g. **"I realised I didn't know everything of how a patient can feel & to think more about their feelings & how they may not know much about what's going on"**

All agreed that their learning would impact on future practice. Comments included:

- **listen more and improve explanations**
- **see service users from the other side,**
- **more focus on communication and care**
- **spend more time listening to [the] patient & trying to answer any concerns they have**

Limitations of the study include the small sample size and the cross-sectional nature of the study. Long term effects cannot be assessed from this study.

5. Conclusion

- The study suggested that the sonography students had a slightly higher than average empathy score before meeting the experts.
- Although numbers were small, results demonstrated that 60% had higher empathy scores following the session.
- Students all reflected on the experience and suggested ways that could change their future practice in response to the session, highlighting the impact of hearing service users' experience and discussing them in a 'candid and frank' way (student response).
- The study will be repeated over the next cohort, to gain additional data.

References

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