

Ethical behaviour in clinical practice: a multidimensional Rasch analysis from a survey of primary health care professionals of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain)

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Accepted: 13 May 2014
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Abstract

Purpose Normative ethics includes ethical behaviour health care professionals should uphold in daily practice. This study assessed the degree to which primary health care (PHC) professionals endorse a set of ethical standards from these norms.

Methods Health care professionals from an urban area participated in a cross-sectional study. Data were collected using an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire. We examined the level of ethical endorsement of the items and the ethical performance of health care professionals using a Rasch multidimensional model. We analysed differences in ethical performance between groups according to sex, profession and knowledge of ethical norms.

Results A total of 452 Professionals from 56 PHC centres participated. The level of ethical performance was lower in items related to patient autonomy and respecting patient

choices. The item estimate across all dimensions showed that professionals found it most difficult to endorse avoiding interruptions when seeing patients. We found significant differences in two groups: nurses had greater ethical performance than family physicians ($p < 0.05$), and professionals who reported having effective knowledge of ethical norms had a higher level of ethical performance ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusions Paternalistic behaviour persists in PHC. Lesser endorsement of items suggests that patient-centred care and patient autonomy are not fully considered by professionals. Ethical sensitivity could improve if patients are cared for by multidisciplinary teams.

Keywords Primary health care · Professional ethics · Codes of ethics · Rasch analysis

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Introduction

Normative ethics in health care attempts to describe how professionals ought to behave when treating patients [1, 2]. In health care professions, the source of ethical norms has historically been enshrined in codes of ethics [3]. While the ethical norms of the various health care professions refer to almost the same values and commitments to patients, they also characterize the ethical sensitivity of each profession [4].

Since the 1950s, health care normative ethics has progressively incorporated the principle of autonomy to avoid paternalistic and unethical authoritarian behaviour among health care professionals. The patients' will became crucial when the first charter of patients' rights was approved [5], and subsequent ethical statements strengthened the importance of respecting patients' decision-making. These

ethical precepts also affected health care policies, directives and professionals' behaviour. Research into professional behaviour has distinguished between primary outpatient care and secondary or acute hospital care [6–8]. In many countries, the primary health care (PHC) is characterized by the multidisciplinary involvement of health care teams, including family physicians, nurses and social workers. PHC is often the first place at which patients present with an illness, and without referral from another physician [9, 10]. The PHC centres provide an easily accessible route to care. PHC professionals deal with a wide range of physical, psychological and social problems, rather than specialists in any particular disease area. This commitment to patient-centred care has meant that studies of behaviour have focused on issues such as communication with patients or dealing with social inequalities [6, 11]. Despite the theoretical importance of ethical norms, some studies have reported that their relevance to professional behaviour is minimal, and other sources of morality, such as social, individual and organizational values, have a greater influence on professionals' attitudes [12, 13].

Self-reported questionnaires are the most widely used quantitative method of studying ethical behaviour. The sum of each individual item is normally used to provide an aggregate score [14–16]. However, this means that information from a specific item may be lost and ordinal variables from the items are transformed into a continuous variable [17, 18].

The aim of this study was to examine PHC professionals' ethical behaviour in daily practice using a reliable set of items [19]. We used a robust method [20] that allowed rigorous measurements to examine differences between groups of health care professionals to be assessed.

Methods

Design

We carried out a cross-sectional study using a set of items from a questionnaire which was previously studied and internally validated [19].

Participants and data collection

The study was carried out in 56 PHC centres located in the urban area of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain), with an assigned population of 1,377,352 in 2012 [21]. Family physicians, MD residents, nurses and social workers were invited to participate. The questionnaire was designed to be completed online. Briefly, the data collection method was that website forms were generated for each PHC centre

included in the study. The supervisors of each PHC centre sent an email to PHC professionals with the study information sheet and a web link to the questionnaire attached. Professionals who agreed to participate accessed the web form and completed the questionnaire. Incomplete responses were not accepted by the web form system, ensuring that no missing data were found during the analysis.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on the charter of citizens' rights and obligations in relation to health and health care services [22], which is similar to patient charters in other countries, and has become a reference for health care institutions throughout Catalonia. It had 24 general items, each addressing a specific particular ethical action within the professional–patient relationship. The structure of the construction of this set of items was studied and reported previously [19]; it comprised five dimensions: “commitment to users according to their health care needs” (1), “communication between professionals and users and professional protection” (2), “use of information technology tools, continuing training and use of computerized health care records” (3), “self-identification of health care professionals to users” (4) and “patients' decisions after professional communication” (5). Participants were asked to score each item on a five-point scale (*never, rarely, sometimes, very often and always*). The set of items is shown in Table 1.

Variables

Sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age) and professional category (family physician, nurse or social worker) were collected. A question to choose one of four options to describe knowledge of the charter of citizens' rights was added: *No knowledge, Know the charter but not its contents, Know the contents partially, Know the contents totally*. In the analysis, this variable was dichotomized to show whether participants knew the contents of the charter or not: categories one and two were represented as “*no effective knowledge*” and categories three and four as “*effective knowledge*”.

Analysis

Rasch analysis

The family of Rasch models transforms the ordinal data from each item into continuous units (logits) [18]. In this study, Rasch analysis provided two values: an estimate of the endorsement of each item of all professionals and an

Table 1 Ethical attitudes questionnaire for PHC professionals

Ethical attitudes items
1. Provide more time to patients who need more health care
2. Record social issues that may relate to diseases in the medical record
3. Avoid prejudices in professional practice (particularly with minority or ethnic groups)
4. Ensure that the patient understands the health information given
5. Listen and be attentive to patients' emotional expressions
6. Provide an environment for children that lets them express themselves freely in a relaxed way
7. Provide holistic health care and not only medical care to patients at the end of their lives
8. Provide clinical information in such a way that lets the patient choose as freely as possible
9. Whenever there are two valid options, explain them to the patient and let them express their opinion
10. Be careful about the clinical information given to patients' relatives
11. When seeing patients, use the features designed to protect patient privacy (e.g. curtains, door latches or red lights)
12. Avoid interruptions when seeing patients. (phone calls or unplanned interruptions from other professionals)
13. Collect the reasons that lead patients to reject recommended preventive measures (e.g. stopping smoking, recommended vaccinations) in the medical record
14. Encourage patients to express all their worries about the disease process (proactive communication)
15. Ask patients whether they require more information about their disease
16. Inform patients of the possible consequences when choosing therapy
17. When doubts arise, support patients' request for a second opinion
18. Determine whether patients can access prescribed or recommended treatments
19. Make sure you are correctly identified in the workplace
20. Encourage patients to make suggestions or complaints in writing
21. Offer patients the possibility of making contact using different media (e-mail, internet...)
22. Explain to patients who their reference professionals are (family physician and nurse)
23. Carry out regular continuing education and training programs
24. Use the shared databases of medical health records when necessary

estimate of the self-reported ethical performance of each professional—how well each participant adheres to ethical behaviour. Rasch analysis first requires choosing the appropriate Rasch model and secondly testing the data goodness-of-fit to the model by assessment of: category ordering, item fit, reliability and differential item functioning (DIF) between groups. We used ConQuest[®] version

Table 2 Characteristics of participants

Characteristics of participants	<i>N</i> = 452
Age (years)	
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	44.98 (9.80)
Range	22–65
Length of health care work (years)	
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	21.21 (13.63)
Gender	
Male	92 (20.36 %)
Female	360 (79.64 %)
Professional category	
Nurse	200 (44.25 %)
Family physician	237 (52.43 %)
Social worker	15 (3.32 %)
Degree of knowledge of the charter of citizens' rights and obligations in relation to health and health care services	
No knowledge	58 (12.83 %)
Know but not its contents	125 (27.66 %)
Know its contents partially	212 (46.90 %)
Know its contents totally	57 (12.61 %)

3 software [23] to compute the Rasch analysis, and R version 3.0.1 software [24] for the subsequent statistical analysis.

The Rasch models

As we used a questionnaire with items with a five-point scale, we tested the data fit to Rasch models for polytomous responses. We used the multidimensional random coefficients multinomial logit model (MRCML) [25, 26], which is considered more appropriate if the questionnaires comprise more than one dimension, the number of items in each dimension is small, and the expected correlations between the dimension are high [27]. A detailed description of the Rasch models is in “Appendix 1”.

Model fit

The data fit to a Rasch model can be tested against other Rasch models because they are hierarchically related [27]. We assessed our hypothesized five-dimensional structure versus the alternative of a one-dimensional structure. Data fit was assessed by examining the difference between the deviance (G^2) [28], which follows a chi-square distribution with degrees of freedom equal to the difference in the number of parameters estimated. We also examined indexes of goodness-of-fit, Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) [29], with smaller numbers indicating better adjustment.

Table 3 Fit comparison between different Rasch models

Number of dimensions	Rasch model	G^2	Change in the deviance	p value	Parameters estimated	AIC	BIC
1	Rating Scale model	25,454.66		<0.001	28	25,510.66	25,625.85
	Partial Credit model	24,705.59	749.07	<0.001	92	24,889.59	25,268.05
5	Rating Scale model	25,077.73	376.94	<0.001	42	25,161.73	25,334.50
	Partial Credit model	24,284.33	1,170.33	<0.001	106	24,496.33	24,932.38

Table 4 Item category frequencies (%)

Dimension	Item	Never	Sometimes	Normally	Often	Always
1 Commitment to patients according to their health care needs	1	1 (0.22 %)	4 (0.88 %)	74 (16.37 %)	239 (52.88 %)	134 (29.65 %)
	2	3 (0.66 %)	43 (9.51 %)	122 (26.99 %)	188 (41.59 %)	96 (21.24 %)
	3	12 (2.65 %)	9 (1.99 %)	76 (16.81 %)	203 (44.91 %)	152 (33.63 %)
	7	1 (0.22 %)	21 (4.65 %)	85 (18.81 %)	212 (46.9 %)	133 (29.42 %)
	8	0 (0 %)	7 (1.55 %)	101 (22.35 %)	214 (47.35 %)	130 (28.76 %)
	9	1 (0.22 %)	32 (7.08 %)	113 (25 %)	202 (44.69 %)	104 (23.01 %)
2 Communication between professionals and patients and professional protection	16	5 (1.11 %)	35 (7.74 %)	124 (27.43 %)	189 (41.81 %)	99 (21.9 %)
	4	0 (0 %)	5 (1.11 %)	67 (14.82 %)	223 (49.34 %)	157 (34.73 %)
	5	0 (0 %)	2 (0.44 %)	66 (14.6 %)	220 (48.67 %)	164 (36.28 %)
	6	2 (0.44 %)	13 (2.88 %)	102 (22.57 %)	205 (45.35 %)	130 (28.76 %)
	10	0 (0 %)	6 (1.33 %)	97 (21.46 %)	208 (46.02 %)	141 (31.19 %)
	11	1 (0.22 %)	8 (1.77 %)	67 (14.86 %)	168 (37.25 %)	207 (45.9 %)
3 Use of information technology tools, continuing training and use of computerized health care records	12	27 (5.97 %)	126 (27.88 %)	170 (37.61 %)	116 (25.66 %)	13 (2.88 %)
	14	0 (0 %)	10 (2.21 %)	116 (25.66 %)	227 (50.22 %)	99 (21.9 %)
	13	4 (0.88 %)	20 (4.42 %)	85 (18.81 %)	177 (39.16 %)	166 (36.73 %)
	21	26 (5.75 %)	98 (21.68 %)	116 (25.66 %)	140 (30.97 %)	72 (15.93 %)
	22	3 (0.66 %)	20 (4.42 %)	89 (19.69 %)	159 (35.18 %)	181 (40.04 %)
4 Self-identification of health care professional to patients	23	2 (0.44 %)	34 (7.52 %)	128 (28.32 %)	167 (36.95 %)	121 (26.77 %)
	24	6 (1.33 %)	19 (4.2 %)	65 (14.38 %)	177 (39.16 %)	185 (40.93 %)
	19	43 (9.51 %)	60 (13.27 %)	56 (12.39 %)	70 (15.49 %)	223 (49.34 %)
5 Patient decisions after professional communication	20	56 (12.39 %)	117 (25.88 %)	111 (24.56 %)	101 (22.35 %)	67 (14.82 %)
	15	19 (4.2 %)	131 (28.98 %)	144 (31.86 %)	127 (28.1 %)	31 (6.86 %)
	17	35 (7.74 %)	153 (33.85 %)	128 (28.32 %)	102 (22.57 %)	34 (7.52 %)
	18	24 (5.31 %)	89 (19.69 %)	178 (39.38 %)	114 (25.22 %)	47 (10.4 %)

Category ordering

We studied the number of responses in each category and the order of thresholds for each item [30] to assess the effectiveness of the rating scale. If necessary, categories were recoded according to the following criteria: (1) each category of each item must be observed, (2) thresholds of the categories—the point at which there is a probability of 50 % of a response being in one or another adjacent category—should be ordered and advance monotonically by category.

Evaluation of item fit

In Rasch models, analysis of the item fit shows the discrepancies between the data and the model [20] and serves to detect measurement disturbances. We assessed the item fit using the *infit* and *outfit* mean-square-error statistics outside a range of 0.6–1.4 [31]. *Infit* gives more importance to discrepancies when professionals had an ethical performance closer to the parameter of item endorsement. *Outfit* provides data on unexpected responses of professionals with high ethical performance, but low endorsement of easy-to-endorse items, or vice versa.

Table 5 Item location and fit statistics values for all 24 items

Dimension	Average ethical performance per dimension (SD)	Item Num	Ethical endorsement of items	Professionals who attained ethical endorsement	Error	Outfit	Infit	τ_1	τ_2	τ_3
1 Commitment to patients according to their health care needs	0.998 (0.06)	1	-0.671	421 (93.14 %)	0.05	1.1	1.09	-3.25	-0.75	1.99
		2	0.544	283 (62.61 %)	0.05	1.17	1.15	-1.18	0.4	2.42
		3	-0.155	384 (84.96 %)	0.05	1.15	1.09	-1.81	-0.39	1.73
		7	-0.042	364 (80.53 %)	0.06	1.01	1.01	-1.81	-0.28	1.96
		8	-0.47	410 (90.71 %)	0.06	0.78	0.8	-3.1	-0.31	2
		9	0.325	312 (69.03 %)	0.05	0.97	0.96	-1.51	0.16	2.32
2 Communication between professionals and patients and professional protection	1.143 (0.06)	16	<i>0.469</i>	289 (63.94 %)	0.05	0.92	0.93	-1.35	0.36	2.39
		4	-0.635	419 (92.70 %)	0.05	0.86	0.87	-3.04	-0.74	1.87
		5	-0.886	425 (94.03 %)	0.05	0.83	0.84	-3.63	-0.81	1.79
		6	-0.025	373 (82.52 %)	0.06	0.92	0.92	-2.19	-0.05	2.17
		10	-0.415	408 (90.27 %)	0.06	0.96	0.98	-3.03	-0.25	2.04
		11	-0.587	417 (92.26 %)	0.05	1.24	1.11	-2.46	-0.56	1.26
3 Use of information technology tools, continuing training and use of computerized health care records	0.642 (0.04)	12	2.517	57 (12.61 %)	0.05	1.37	1.31	0.39	2.14	5.02
		14	<i>0.03</i>	367 (81.19 %)	0.14	0.88	0.89	-2.57	0.03	2.63
		13	-0.287	388 (85.84 %)	0.05	0.91	0.93	-1.63	-0.36	1.12
		21	0.897	166 (36.73 %)	0.12	1.07	1.08	-0.17	0.72	2.11
		22	-0.343	393 (86.95 %)	0.05	0.9	0.92	-1.69	-0.3	0.96
		23	0.079	323 (71.46 %)	0.06	1.05	1.03	-1.44	0.14	1.55
4 Self-identification of health care professional to patients	-0.001 (0.04)	24	-0.345	393 (86.95 %)	0.04	1.07	1.06	-1.49	-0.52	0.96
		19	-0.446	327 (72.35 %)	0.04	1.3	1.15	-0.83	-0.45	-0.06
		20	<i>0.446</i>	132 (29.20 %)	0.04	0.92	0.92	-0.37	0.38	1.31
5 Patient decisions after professional communication	-0.762 (0.05)	15	0.053	103 (22.79 %)	0.04	1.01	1.01	-1.46	-0.18	1.79
		17	0.202	77 (17.04 %)	0.04	1.18	1.09	-1.06	0.03	1.63
		18	-0.255	152 (33.63 %)	0.09	0.87	0.86	-1.91	-0.17	1.31

A parameter estimate in italics indicates that it is constrained for model identification

Differential item functioning

DIF occurs when respondents from different groups have different probabilities of rating an item. If there is DIF, the probability of a between-group response differs and the overall estimate might be biased [32]. We assessed DIF in groups according to: sex, type of profession and level of knowledge of the charter of rights. An item was considered to exhibit DIF if there was a difference of ≥ 0.5 logits (equal to an odds ratio of 1.65) between groups [33].

Reliability/correlations/discrepancies

Reliability was viewed as an index of the accuracy of the measures produced by the Rasch model [34]. Values with a minimum of 0.7 in each of the dimensions were expected to consider reliability as sufficient.

The degree of the relationships between the dimensions was verified using the correlations-covariance matrix [27]. To illustrate the extent of variation of ethical performance

across all dimensions, we applied a discrepancy index (DI) to the ethical performance values of each participant. The threshold for a discrepant case was set at $DI = 0.5$ [27]. A detail of the formula is shown in “Appendix 1”.

Ethical performance of professionals and ethical endorsement of items

Once the data were shown to fit the Rasch model, professionals’ ethical performance was assessed using a Wright map [20]. The left side of the map shows professionals’ self-reported ethical performance level, from less, at the bottom to more, at the top. The right side displays the items from the least difficult to endorse, at the bottom, to the most difficult, at the top. If professionals and items have the same position, we expect that they would achieve the behaviour of the item. Finally, we examined the mean ethical endorsement per each dimension with the percentage of professionals who attained it.

Differences between groups

Differences between ethical performance across all dimensions and groups of participants according to sex, age (we categorized four groups according to quartiles), professional category (*family physician* or *nurse*) and knowledge of the charter of rights (“no effective knowledge” and “effective knowledge”) were examined with a MANOVA test for comparing the averages of each dimension using a set of plausible values of professionals’ ethical performance [35].

Ethical considerations

The appropriate ethics committees of the study centres reviewed the study protocol (Reference numbers: 6263 and P11/21). Ethical directives of the Helsinki Statement and local laws were respected. Data collection was anonymous. Voluntary completion and submission of the questionnaire was guaranteed and implied consent to participate in the study.

Results

Participants

Of the 1,941 potential participants from 56 PHC centres, we received a total of 452 (23.28 %) completed questionnaires. The results of the descriptive analysis are shown in Table 2: 183 (40.49 %) professionals reported having no effective knowledge of the charter of rights and 269 (59.51 %) reported having effective knowledge. Of the participants, 360 (79.64 %) were females, 200 (44.25 %) were nurses, and 237 (52.43 %) PHC physicians.

Model selection and category ordering

Table 3 shows the data-to-model fit. On the basis of a comparison of G^2 , AIC and BIC, the data best fitted into the five-dimension PCM than other models, and therefore, this model was selected.

The frequency distribution of the responses (Table 4) showed that the lowest category (*never*) was not observed in five items, and seven items of the adjacent category (*sometimes*) had <10 observations. To avoid imprecision in the step calibrations, we collapsed the lower categories (*never/sometimes*) into one in all items, without affecting the meaning of the original rating scale.

Table 6 Conditional covariance/correlation matrix

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5
1. Commitment to patients according to their health care needs		1.360	0.771	0.501	1.019
2. Communication between professionals and patients and professional protection	0.900		0.883	0.649	1.181
3. Use of information technology tools, continuing training and use of computerized health care records	0.747	0.808		0.524	0.717
4. Self-identification of health care professional to patients	0.525	0.642	0.757		0.565
5. Patient decisions after professional communication	0.767	0.840	0.746	0.635	
Variance	1.428	1.599	0.747	0.640	1.235
Reliability	0.857	0.872	0.774	0.652	0.788

Values below the diagonal are correlations and values above are covariances

Item fit and DIF analysis

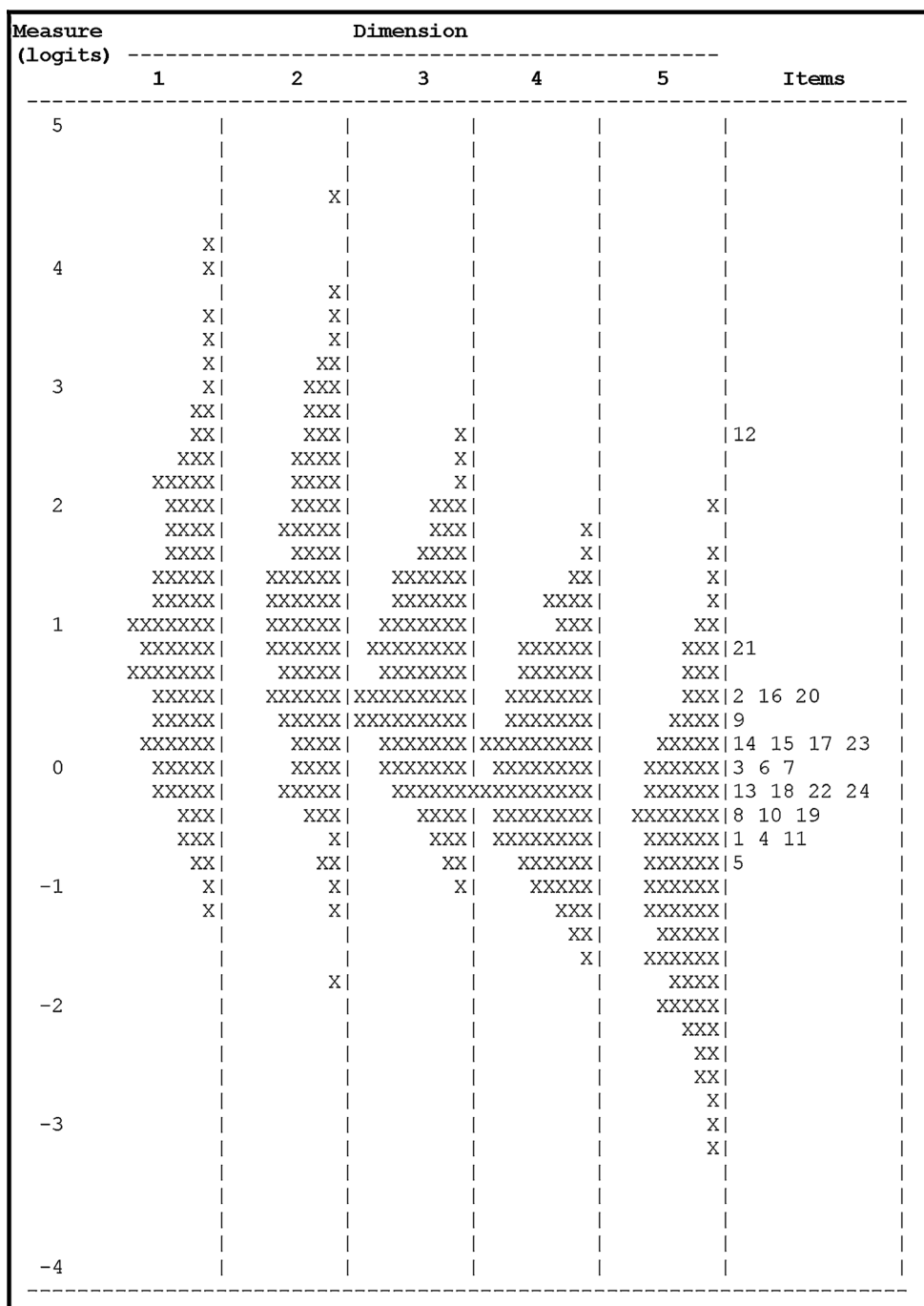
Table 5 shows the ethical endorsement of each item and fit indices. Item 12 was the most difficult to endorse (2.517 logits), and all other items were close to zero logits. The range of *infit* and *outfit* indices was between 0.78 and 1.37, indicating that there were no unexpected deviations from the model. The threshold values (represented by letter τ in Table 5) were ordered and increased monotonically by category. In the DIF study, the subgroup of social workers was not considered due to the low sample size ($n = 15$). There were no significant differences between groups (>0.5 logits) and therefore no significant DIF for any item. These indicators showed that the data fitted the selected Rasch model well.

Reliability/correlations/discrepancies

The reliability of each dimension ranged from 0.652 to 0.872 (Table 6) and was considered sufficient for effective measurement. The correlation values were moderate-to-strong (0.52–0.90) and showed that the five-dimension model gave more precise estimates than a one-dimension model. The correlations were higher between dimension one and two (0.90), which shared 81 % of the variance.

The percentage of discrepant cases between dimensions (DI) was 67.03 %. This indicated that each dimension was providing slightly different information and therefore applying a model with only one dimension would lead to a loss of information.

Fig. 1 Multidimensional Wright map. Each “X” represents 4.6 cases. Dimensions: 1 commitment to patients according to their health care needs. 2 communication between professionals and patients and professional protection. 3 use of information technology tools, continuing training and use of computerized health care records. 4 self-identification of health care professional to patients. 5 patient decisions after professional communication



Professionals’ ethical performance and endorsement of items

The Wright map (Fig. 1) showed a relatively higher position of the first three dimensions compared to the fourth and fifth, suggesting that professionals had a different level of ethical performance according to the dimension. Endorsement to items across all dimensions was relatively

concentrated around the zero logits mark, except for a few items, indicating that most items had a similar level of endorsement. The most difficult to endorse item was item 12 (“Avoid interruptions when seeing patients ...”), where <20 % of professionals had sufficient endorsement (12.61 %). In addition, items 15, 17, 18, 20 and 21 had a low level of ethical performance compared to the mean endorsement for each dimension.

Table 7 Mean ethical performance differences by sub-group of professionals across the multivariate distribution of all five dimensions

Group and sub-group	MANOVA test					<i>p</i> value
	Mean level and standard deviation of ethical performance on each dimension					
	<i>D1</i> (SD)	<i>D2</i> (SD)	<i>D3</i> (SD)	<i>D4</i> (SD)	<i>D5</i> (SD)	
Gender						
Female (<i>n</i> = 360)	0.974 (<i>1.18</i>)	1.123 (<i>1.25</i>)	0.645 (<i>0.84</i>)	0.038 (<i>0.76</i>)	−0.782 (<i>1.08</i>)	0.287
Male (<i>n</i> = 92)	0.975 (<i>1.09</i>)	1.043 (<i>1.23</i>)	0.548 (<i>0.87</i>)	−0.072 (<i>0.80</i>)	−0.736 (<i>1.03</i>)	
Age						
22–36 (<i>n</i> = 112)	0.905 (<i>1.21</i>)	1.056 (<i>1.26</i>)	0.603 (<i>0.89</i>)	0.024 (<i>0.78</i>)	−0.804 (<i>1.05</i>)	0.623
37–43 (<i>n</i> = 109)	1.115 (<i>1.14</i>)	1.217 (<i>1.22</i>)	0.705 (<i>0.82</i>)	0.024 (<i>0.77</i>)	−0.683 (<i>1.02</i>)	
44–52 (<i>n</i> = 106)	0.942 (<i>1.11</i>)	0.985 (<i>1.21</i>)	0.593 (<i>0.84</i>)	−0.051 (<i>0.74</i>)	−0.901 (<i>1.08</i>)	
53–65 (<i>n</i> = 125)	0.942 (<i>1.19</i>)	1.159 (<i>1.28</i>)	0.604 (<i>0.85</i>)	0.057 (<i>0.78</i>)	−0.715 (<i>1.11</i>)	
Profession						
Family physician (<i>n</i> = 237)	0.764 (<i>1.06</i>)	0.846 (<i>1.17</i>)	0.500 (<i>0.83</i>)	−0.075 (<i>0.77</i>)	−0.950 (<i>1.03</i>)	0.004
Nurse (<i>n</i> = 200)	1.177 (<i>1.25</i>)	1.364 (<i>1.28</i>)	0.748 (<i>0.86</i>)	0.108 (<i>0.78</i>)	−0.607 (<i>1.09</i>)	
Level of knowledge						
No knowledge (<i>n</i> = 183)	0.804 (<i>1.16</i>)	0.885 (<i>1.21</i>)	0.462 (<i>0.79</i>)	−0.114 (<i>0.77</i>)	−0.987 (<i>1.02</i>)	0.014
Knowledge (<i>n</i> = 269)	1.090 (<i>1.16</i>)	1.257 (<i>1.25</i>)	0.736 (<i>0.87</i>)	0.104 (<i>0.75</i>)	−0.627 (<i>1.08</i>)	

Significant values of the Wilk's test statistic are shown in italics

Differences between groups

The subgroup of social workers (*n* = 15) was excluded due to the small sample size. According to our results on Table 7, self-reported ethical performance of PHC nurses was higher than that of PHC physicians ($p < 0.01$), and professionals who reported knowing the norms of The charter had greater endorsement than those who did not ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Our results showed that professionals had less ethical endorsement of behaviours related to adopting new strategies in clinical management and to patients' wishes, providing a viewpoint of professionals' understanding of the principle of autonomy. Likewise, we found that knowledge of The charter of citizens influenced the self-reports of ethical performance of professionals and that there were differences in ethical endorsement between professions: nurses and family physicians. The results provided evidence of the substantive and structural validity of the self-administered questionnaire used [36].

Ethical endorsement was acceptable in items related to more socially accepted and historically established behaviours. Professionals reported that they respected behaviours related to commitment to the patients' health care needs: listening, providing holistic care from the

clinical point of view and comforting patients did not present major moral conflicts. In contrast, ethical endorsement was lower in dimensions with items reflecting non-traditional health care relationships. Our results showed that PHC professionals viewed themselves as low performers of behaviours such as facilitating a second opinion or allowing patients making suggestions and complaints. This finding suggests that paternalism persists in PHC professionals and therefore contradicts the evidence that reports the opposite [6, 37, 38]. In PHC, empowering, moving towards professional–patient partnerships and rejecting paternalistic, old-fashioned behaviours are essential to adequate patient health care [39–42]. We believe that these results show the real status of the professionals' level of practice with respect to act according the ethical norms and patients' wishes.

The item most difficult to endorse, with more responses at lower categories of the scale, was related to interruptions when seeing patients. As professionals who participated were not working in emergency departments, ordinarily these interruptions in PHC are caused by interference in consultations, such as inter-professional consultations or phone calls. These interruptions dramatically hinder the professional–patient relationship and cause ethical distress, mistakes and loss of patient adherence to treatment [43]. Specific policies to reduce this interference and ensure the patient consultation is put before other professional tasks would require more self-ethical instruction and follow-up at the institutional level [44, 45].

The higher level of ethical performance of professionals who reported effective knowledge of the charter of rights is in line with previous findings [19, 46, 47]. As the prestige of the health care professions is grounded in the commitment to their normative ethics [48], the lack of methods to assess respect for these standards in everyday clinical practice is somewhat paradoxical.

The differences found between nurses and PHC physicians in this study might constitute empirical evidence of the theoretical differences between the two professions. According to Weaver [4], the ethical sensitivity of nurses is focused mainly on patient relationships, and therefore, the nurses would have felt more comfortable with these items than family physicians. The greater ethical performance of nurses compared to physicians might support the idea that multidisciplinary PHC teams provide effective, integrated health care with greater ethical sensitivity towards patients [49–52].

Limitations

As we assessed the opinion of the ethical behaviour in a sample of professionals of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain), additional social, cultural and legal factors might influence the professional's opinion. Therefore, part of the conclusions of this study may not be generalizable; results suggest further studies with an international population sample using reliable questionnaires in different languages using similar methods. As the study was voluntary, we cannot determine why professionals declined to participate. However, while the low response rate was important, the size of the sample suggests the results are reliable. Ethical performance was self-reported, and the clinical reality could only be provided by third party observers, which would not be feasible given the issues we examined. We did not assess the data fit to a within-item multidimensional model—where items would share more than one dimension, which was the case of items from the first and second dimensions where items shared a high amount of variance. This analysis would require further studies. We believe that the estimates obtained in the analysis are robust and present a reliable picture of ethical behaviour in practice.

Conclusions

Professionals showed a high level of ethical performance with respect to issues such as listening, compassion and protecting the patient. However, other issues, such as promoting patients' wishes and patient self-management, suggest that paternalism persists in health care

professionals. Ethical performance could improve if professionals acknowledge ethical norms and if care were provided by a multidisciplinary team. The methods used in the study were effective and consistent. Future studies to assess specific interventions and clarify how ethical behaviour might be improved in daily practice are warranted.

Acknowledgments We thank all professionals who participated in the study. We would like to express our appreciation to Dr. Everett Smith, Jr., professor at Department of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA. We acknowledge Dr. Pilar Solans Deputy director, Primary Health Care of Barcelona, Catalan Institute of Health; Dr. Laura Sebastián and Dr. Jaume Benavent, Consorci d'Atenció Primària de Salut l'Eixample (CAPSE), Dr. Jaume Sellarés and Dr. Albert Casasa, General Manager and Teaching Coordinator, Sardanya Primary Health care Center, Barcelona, Miquel Barbany, Gloria Jodar, Dr. Carmen Prieto, Dr. Sebastian Vignoli and all PHC clinical supervisors and teaching coordinators for hosting this research. We thank David Buss and Juan González for their technical assistance.

Appendix 1: Rasch models formulae

The Rating Scale Model (RSM)

$$\pi_{nix} = \frac{\exp \sum_{j=0}^x [\theta_n - \delta_i - \tau_j]}{\sum_{k=0}^m \exp \sum_{j=0}^k [\theta_n - \delta_i - \tau_j]}$$

On ethical behaviour latent trait continuum, π_{nix} is the probability of professional n to score category x of item i ; θ_n is professionals ethicality, and δ_i represents the extent of professional's ethical endorsement for item i . Categories are ordered from 0 to m , and the τ_j are the rating scale structure parameters (e.g. thresholds) and represent the points on the continuum of behaviour in clinical practice, where adjacent categories are equally probable [23].

The Partial Credit Model (PCM)

$$\pi_{nix} = \frac{\exp \sum_{j=0}^x [\theta_n - \delta_{ij}]}{\sum_{k=0}^m \exp \sum_{j=0}^k [\theta_n - \delta_{ij}]}$$

π_{nix} is the probability of professional n to score category x of item i ; θ_n is ethicality of professional n , and δ_{ij} represents the extent of professional's ethical endorsement for item i with a j particular thresholds from item categories. Thus, the PCM allows each item to vary its number of categories an estimate the probability of the threshold for each item instead that all entirely [28].

Multidimensional Random Coefficients Multinomial Logit Model (MRCML)

$$P(X_n; \delta | \theta_n) = \frac{\exp[x'_n(B\theta_n - A\delta)]}{\sum_{z \in \Omega} \exp[z'_n(B\theta_n - A\delta)]}$$

The MRCML assumes that a set of dimensions determines ethical endorsement. In the formula, the position of the professionals n in each dimension is described by the $D \times 1$ column vector $\theta_n = (\theta_{n1}, \theta_{n2}, \dots, \theta_{nD})$, δ is the vector of ethical endorsement corresponding to each dimension, and Ω is the set of all possible response vectors. Z denotes a vector coming from the full set of response vectors, while x_n denotes the vector of interest. Matrices A and B are known as the design and scoring matrices, respectively. Scoring matrix B allows the description of the score that is assigned to each response category k on each of the D component ethical behaviour latent traits. Design matrix A is used to specify the linear combinations of the D component parameters δ to describe the ethical performance to each item [27].

The discrepancy index (DI) formulation

$$DI_n = \sum_{d=1}^D (\bar{\theta} - \theta_d)^2$$

where D is the number of dimensions, n the number of professionals, $\bar{\theta}$ the endorsement of each item in a given dimension and θ the mean estimate of endorsement across all dimensions. The percentage of PHC professionals showing discrepant measures between dimensions would show how each dimension was providing differing information on ethical performance [27].

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