



Review Article

Soft skills the matchless traits and skills in nursing practice: An integrative review

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ABSTRACT

**Background & Aim:** While hard skills refer to the technical ability and factual knowledge needed to do a job, soft skills allow you to use your technical abilities and knowledge more effectively. These two skills are complementary, but soft skills are prerequisites in every profession where human interaction and teamwork are needed to succeed. This integrative review examined the research on soft skills in nursing and made recommendations based on its findings.

**Methods & Materials:** Whittemore and Knafel's five-step integrative review framework was carried out using four electronic databases. These databases are the Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PubMed, Medline on EBSCOhost, and Scopus. Searches were conducted using keywords: soft skills, non-technical skills, nursing skills, nursing art, and aesthetics. The literature search explored no date ranges, and only the English language was considered. Full texts of relevant studies in both qualitative and quantitative research were retrieved. Critical appraisal was undertaken, and the findings of the relevant studies were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** Seventeen studies were included, and the findings suggest an urgent need for soft skills in the nursing domain. Five themes emerged: the meaning of soft skills in nursing, the benefits of soft skills in nursing; the need for soft skills in nursing; the incorporation of soft skills into nursing practice; and the relationship between hard and soft skills. Findings show soft skills are the cognitive and social capabilities that complete the technical skills of the nurse.

**Conclusion:** Incorporating soft skills into the nursing curriculum should be a resuscitative call that requires immediate attention.

Introduction

Soft skills are intrapersonal traits and interpersonal skills (1) that one possesses that make one a preferred service provider. It is essential for personal development, social participation, and workplace success (2). Soft skills, also known as non-technical skills, are gradually becoming desirable in today's job market. While soft skills are self-developed, interactive, communication, human, and transferable skills, hard skills are individual academic skills, experience, and level of expertise. According to Wats and Wats (2009), hard skills account for only 15% of

job retention success, with soft skills accounting for the remaining 85% (3).

Many societies' attitudes toward soft skills have shifted dramatically in recent decades. Previously, hard mastering skills were ranked first, with soft skills regarded as "nice to have," but this is no longer the case (4). Soft skills have become important in nursing because, even though educating nurses takes years, the client who completes the nurses' job cycle is still concerned about the nurse's soft skills. According to Laari and Dube (5), the quality of nursing care and the amount of time spent with patients listening



to and explaining their conditions are declining significantly. They argued that the therapeutic touch and the listening ear of the nurse are no longer accessible to the patient. Their point of view is the same as Barbara Carper's (6), which is that nurses should worry about the decline of the therapeutic touch if they still believe that nursing is both scientific and artistic.

With the advent of globalization and technological upheaval in the health care industry, the future nurse will need fundamental training in multiple fields. This will include the development of soft skills necessary for therapeutic nurse-patient relationships (7, 8). Consideration of soft skills in nursing is necessary because patient and client complaints about the responses they receive from healthcare providers, particularly nurses, in the healthcare setting are deafening (9). As argued by Carper (6) and Peplau (10), nursing appears to be losing its grasp on quality nursing care as aesthetics give way to only empirics.

From patients' own perspective of quality, open communication and information flow are seen to prominently feature in their definition of quality care. Patients prefer individuals with good interpersonal communication skills, such as listening carefully and attentively and explaining complex technical information clearly (11). Patients also insist that nice health care workers are necessary to lessen vulnerability and worry. Patients like courtesy and emotional support, as well as seeing healthcare personnel demonstrate sensitivity and kindness, including expressions of compassion and concern (11). A review by Vogus and McClelland (12) showed that patients are both more fulfilled and rate their care more highly when they encounter care providers and support staff treating them with politeness and addressing their problems seriously. The findings show that caring for the whole person needs caregivers to focus on

physical problems and provide emotional support (12). Even though these characteristics can be inculcated through instruction, friendliness, courtesy, and providing emotional support are certainly somewhat natural, there appears to be a gap in healthcare education, which must be addressed to satisfy clients and patients in the healthcare setting.

Globally, nurses are criticized the way they care for patients. Although nurses have been the most trusted professionals in the United States for more than a decade (13), there are pockets of research indicating that most nurses describe themselves as being more authoritative in their interpersonal style and less facilitative in performing their jobs (7, 14). This highlights the necessity for training future nurses in intrapersonal reorientation skills regarding how to interact with patients, as interpersonal skills are fundamental to the nurse-patient relationship. Even if the question of whether soft skills can be measured has a central place in many healthcare education programs (2), it is unquestionable that training in soft skills would assist the introduction of a new era in nursing practice worldwide (5). Soft skills can be described as the aesthetics, the art of nursing, the innately creative aspect that elevates nursing to a noble, caring vocation (6).

With the changing educational trends, versatility in educational courses, and availability of qualified nursing personnel globally, job acquisition and job sustainability competition is becoming tougher (3). Students have no choice but to supplement their hard skills with soft skills to demonstrate their genuine potential and make them the preferred candidates to gain a competitive advantage. There is also increasing consumer demand for quality healthcare in the health industry globally (3, 15). As such, nurse educators have a special responsibility regarding soft skills because

they have a major role in imparting the development of soft skills to students (4); however, the current state of the literature on soft skills in nursing is unknown. This review, therefore, wishes to answer the question: what are soft skills, and of what value are soft skills in nursing practice to the nurse in the literature?

## **Methods**

This integrative literature review design summarises past empirical literature to comprehensively understand soft skills (16). Integrative literature reviews have the potential to advance nursing science by informing future research, clinical practice, and policy initiatives and allowing for the inclusion of diverse methodologies with direct applicability to practice and policy. The methods employed are based on the five stages of Whittemore and Knafl (17), which are problem identification, literature search, data evaluation, data analysis, and presentation.

### ***Problem identification***

The research problem originated from a study by Laari and Dube (5). In their article, Nursing students' perceptions of soft skills training in Ghana, they identified that most of their respondents agreed that training nurses in soft skills would facilitate how they care for their patients. As such, the authors perused the nursing literature with this guiding question: what are soft skills, and of what value are soft skills in nursing practice to the nurse?

### ***Literature search***

The search was conducted using the Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PubMed, Medline on EBSCOhost, and Scopus. Keywords used included: soft skills, non-technical skills, nursing skills, nursing art,

and aesthetics. The review used both qualitative and quantitative research, with no date ranges for the literature to capture enough data from the databases. We included (1) soft skills in nursing articles published entirely in English and (2) articles that provided an in-depth discussion of soft skills in nursing rather than simply mentioning soft skills. These articles were primary sources and peer-reviewed reports on soft skills. We exclude (1) soft skills articles published in English but not in nursing and (2) all soft skills articles that were not written in English. Peer-reviewed research was targeted to ensure integrity of the findings because this already has a level of scrutiny. However, the review also added a search of grey literature and extended consultation with experts to identify relevant sources essential for this review. The process of the integrative review is presented in figure 1.

### ***Data evaluation***

Records were evaluated for their authenticity, methodological quality, and informational value. Structured data extraction and a quality appraisal checklist were utilized on each record for information extraction based on the Critical Appraisal Skills Program Checklist using google forms. Initially, records were selected based on their titles, and abstracts of the selected titles were analyzed to assess their importance to the study question. Only abstracts relevant to soft skills training in nursing were used for a full-text review. Full-text records that did not meet the appraisal process were excluded from the review. Relevant bibliographies from the identified records were also reviewed.

### ***Data analysis***

Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (18) was inductively conducted. This means that the authors allowed the data to develop themes, as will be detailed shortly.



**Table 1.** Summary of records reviewed

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study title	Study design	Main idea of the literature
<b>Elmohmady, Abo Gad (19)</b>	2020	Egypt	Contribution of Non-Technical Skills on Nurses' Performance Efficiency of Nursing Care Process in Intensive Care Units	Descriptive correlation research	Soft skills are the cognitive social capability that completes the technical skills of the nurse.
<b>Hariti and Rejeki (20)</b>	2020	Indonesia	Strengthening soft skills as the character of student nurses through the preceptorship management model	Action research	Experience improves and strengthens the soft skills of the nurse
<b>Kusmiran and Tohri (21)</b>	2016	Indonesia	Effect of Soft Skills Caring Training on Carative Factors of Nurses in Nursing Service	A quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest design without a control group	Soft skills improve nurses caring abilities
<b>Laari and Dube (5)</b>	2017	Ghana	Nursing students' perceptions of soft skills training in Ghana	Quantitative descriptive design	Soft skills would improve nursing care and performance
<b>Large and Aldridge (22)</b>	2018	United Kingdom	Non-technical skills required to recognise and escalate patient deterioration in acute hospital settings	Systematic review	Soft skills provide multiple data source opportunity for the nurse to care
<b>Lewis, Strachan (23)</b>	2012	United Kingdom	Is high fidelity simulation the most effective method for the development of non-technical skills in nursing? A review of the current evidence	Systematic review	Nurses who lack soft skills lack effective communication abilities
<b>Maria and Rania (24)</b>	2017	Cyprus	Nursing (self) assessment of soft skills in Cyprus: Training and educational issues	Survey design	Both nurses and nurse managers understand the contribution and the necessity of soft skills
<b>Morrell, Eukel (25)</b>	2020	USA	Soft skills and implications for future professional practice: Qualitative findings of a nursing education escape room	Basic interpretive qualitative methodology design	Soft skills are important but challenging to impart to students
<b>Ng (26)</b>	2020	Singapore	The perceived importance of soft (service) skills in nursing care: A research study	Quantitative explorative design	Patients rate soft skills as more important than hard skills
<b>Pathiratne (27)</b>	2015	Sri Lanka	Emotional Intelligence, Soft Skills and Nursing Performance: A Study of Nursing in Medical and Surgical Wards of a Private Tertiary Care Hospital in Sri Lanka	Cross-sectional survey design, using qualitative and quantitative approaches	Soft skills and emotional intelligence are related
<b>Peddle, Bearman (28)</b>	2019	Australia	Exploring undergraduate nursing student interactions with virtual patients to develop 'non-technical skills' through case study methodology	Case study design, with focus groups and individual interviews	Soft skills improve the confidence of the nurse
<b>Peddle, Mckenna (29)</b>	2019	Australia	Development of non-technical skills through virtual patients for undergraduate nursing students: an exploratory study	Case study design	Communication is the most important among the soft skills
<b>Peltonen, Peltonen (30)</b>	2020	Finland	An observational study of technical and non-technical skills in advanced life support in the clinical setting	prospective observational study design	Good soft skills show good technical performance
<b>Pires, Monteiro (31)</b>	2017	Portugal	Non-technical skills assessment for prelicensure nursing students: An integrative review	An integrative review design	Assessing soft skills is important
<b>Pires, Monteiro (32)</b>	2018	Portugal	Non-technical skills assessment scale in nursing: construction, development and validation	Multiphase research design	Incorporate soft skills into graduate curricula for all health professionals
<b>Piresa, Monteiroa (33)</b>	2016	Portugal	Non-technical Skills in undergraduate nursing education: Consideration for a Training Course Development	Literature review	Poor soft skills contribute to 80% of health care errors
<b>Sills (34)</b>	2015	USA	Meaningful recognition: Recognizing the "soft skills" of nursing	Discussion	Soft skills are the arts of nursing the element of the soul, mind and the imagination of the very foundation of nursing care



nursing is not only a series of skills and techniques but a process that assimilates elements of the soul, mind, and imagination. And soft skills lie in the sensitive spirit and creative imagination, the very foundation of nursing care (34).

Soft skills are also reported as the ability of a nurse to work in a team successfully. Successful teamwork was reported as the link between the internal environment of the nurse and the professional world (27). Effective teams were seen as social entities that use shared knowledge, skills, attitudes, goals, and monitoring of their own and others' performance to achieve high-quality teamwork (23). Morrell and Eukel (25) reported that healthcare teams are often unpredictable, such that a group of competent individual professionals can combine to create an incompetent team. Teamwork in healthcare is further complicated by the fact that some individuals who have probably not previously worked with each other and might not even be familiar with each other have to collaborate. This is for the patient's benefit in this complex and dynamic clinical environment; working together as a team, being open to others' ideas and thoughts, and using them as resources call for soft skills (25). The development of soft skills facilitated efficient performance and a high level of harmonious human interactions in the workplace (27).

### ***Benefits of soft skills in nursing***

Several benefits were reported from soft skills. The review findings reported that soft skills are needed for success because they are important tools for performing at work and people with strong non-technical skills were mostly successful in their careers (19). It was also noted that it enhances career progression. Laari and Dube (5) reported that 89% of their respondents strongly agreed that the acquisition of soft skills could make a career, while the absence of soft skills can

break a career. These authors also reported the students interviewed contend that soft skills were necessary skills which the nursing profession needs.

Soft skills are beneficial in the workplace as they facilitate communication, create enthusiasm, enhance attitude, teamwork, networking, problem-solving, and critical thinking, and promote professionalism (25). Since soft skills and emotional intelligence are not innate abilities and could be developed, employers who achieved a higher level of productivity in organizations were those who ensured the development of soft skills of their employees (27). Another benefit of soft skills reported was its ability to enhance the development of self-confidence. Students interacting with virtual patients to inculcate soft skills reportedly developed confidence in their abilities to respond and manage practice situations. As one of the students noted, 'I feel more confident in how to handle situations now. I feel a lot more prepared to handle a patient (28).

Additionally, soft skills improve the performance and confidence of students. Pires and Monteiro (32) reported a significant improvement in performance, confidence, and self-efficacy of nursing students, and that soft skill was an added value, as it helped students to better adjust to the complex clinical context and ultimately contributed to the safety and well-being of patients (32). Similarly, improving these skills is becoming a strategic priority within healthcare institutions at the international level (33).

### ***Need for soft skills in nursing***

As soft skills are important tools for performing at work and people with strong soft skills are those who are successful in their careers (19), teaching soft skills in the classroom will help enhance the care rendered to clients. Laari and Dube (5) reported that their participants perceived soft skills training as an impetus for nursing staff





incorporation into the curriculum ought to be prioritized (33).

### ***Relationship between hard and soft skills***

Some authors reported a relationship between hard and soft skills (19, 29, 30, 32). Elmohmady, Abo Gad (19) findings revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between nurses' soft skills and all other nurse characteristics. This relationship had the highest mean score for decision-making skills, followed by communication competence skills, and dynamic team skills, while the lowest mean score was for leadership behavior skills. Peddle and Mckenna (29) reported that some students identified how hard and soft skills complement each other and the important role each plays in professional practice and patient safety (29). An association between hard and soft skills performance in real-life in-hospital ALS situations suggested that the resuscitation teams that showed good soft skills performance also performed better in the hard skills aspects of ALS. In a similar direction, the resuscitation teams with poorer soft skills showed inferior hard skills performance during ALS (30). Similarly, Pires, and Monteiro (32), reported a significant and positive relationship, which suggests that the higher their soft skills competency in one dimension, the higher it will also be in the other dimension, and vice-versa (32).

### **Discussion**

This analysis was driven by the inquiry, "What are soft skills?" Moreover, "what value do soft skills have in nursing practice?" Soft skills were described as intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies that distinguish people as desirable service providers (1). Literature highlights soft skills as being vital to nursing practice, although they appear neglected in nurse education.

Current research has identified "pediatric attention" as nursing scholars sacrificing art for science. Many professionals have not focused on addressing this problem, and this, among others, has had a significant detrimental impact on care skills, communication skills, the leadership aspect of nursing, and the art of nursing.

This review identified that soft skills are essential to the professional tasks of nurses. The meaning of soft skills in nursing reveals this. The relevance of soft skills in nursing is indicated by the variety of terms used to describe them. As some authors regarded soft skills as the caring in nursing and the cognitive brain of nursing, others saw it as the key to effective communication skills, the hinge to essential leadership traits, and abilities required for interpersonal teamwork in the health care setting. Sills (34) argues that despite these substantial contributions, the scientific community has viewed soft skills, which Florence Nightingale called "the pinnacle of art," as having less significance in the workplace. The notion that soft skills are of lesser value appears to contribute to the poor development of communication skills, a subset of soft skills. As a result, the research found that some nurses had difficulty conveying small patient changes to their professional colleagues (22, 35). Rani and Mangala (36) posit that, apart from developing attitudes and attributes, fine-tuning communication skills to express attitudes, ideas, and thoughts is key to soft skills. Moreover, soft skills play an important role in the development of the individual's overall personality, thereby enhancing their career prospects. It gives a strong focus on the real world and helps build and improve relationships (36-38).

The benefits and need for soft skills in nursing are flawless from the findings. Patients in rating procedures and services that nurses render to them, out of 56 items, only two were included, classified as hard skills



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