

Nursing Students' Attitudes to Mental Health Nursing: Psychometric Properties of a Self-report Scale

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Negative attitudes toward people experiencing mental illness and mental health nursing as a career option have been recognized as a major barrier to sustaining an adequate psychiatric nursing workforce. This article presents the findings from a prospective observational study that explored the relationship between undergraduate nursing students' ($n = 688$) attitudes relevant to the mental health field, preparedness, and career preferences after they had completed a mental health placement. A comparison was also made between the self-reported attitudes, beliefs, and preferences of two groups of students, one with and one without relevant clinical experience. Finally, the psychometric properties of the clinical evaluation component of the survey were explored because the structure and composition of this component have not been assessed or reported previously. The findings have direct implications for psychiatric mental health education. They show a strong association between educational preparation, placement experiences, and students' attitudes toward psychiatric nursing and consumers of mental health services. Findings also indicated that students with clinical experience felt significantly more prepared for employment in the mental health field and significantly less anxiety surrounding mental illness than did students without clinical experience.

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UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' NEGATIVE attitudes toward persons experiencing mental illnesses and the profession of psychiatric-mental health nursing (herein described as mental health nursing) are well documented in the literature (Davidson & Connery, 2003; Emrich,

Thompson, & Moore, 2003; Happell, 2001; Hayman-White & Happell, 2005; Stevens & Dulhunty, 1992, 1997; Tsang, Tam, Chan, & Chang, 2003; Wynaden, Orb, McGowan, & Downie, 2000). It has been suggested that nursing students' attitudes reflect the prevailing stigmatizing views of the general population toward people experiencing mental illness.

However, research has demonstrated that these attitudes can be positively influenced by nursing education (Bell, Horsfall, & Goodin, 1998; Happell, 2001; Stevens & Dulhunty, 1997; Wynaden et al., 2000). Despite this, research into aspects of nursing education associated with more positive attitudes has been limited. Most researchers have highlighted clinical experience as a primary factor, suggesting that interactions with people experiencing a mental illness reduce fear

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and apprehension (Bell et al., 1998; Happell, 2001; Happell & Rushworth, 2000; Rushworth & Happell, 2000; Stevens & Dulhunty, 1997). However, the aim of these studies was to investigate nursing students' attitudes toward mental health nursing as a potential career destination rather than specifically assess their attitudes toward people experiencing a mental illness. Although there may be some relationship between the two, available findings do not provide a clear description of nursing students' attitudes toward mental illness or consumers of mental health services.

Although there is evidence of more positive attitudes toward people experiencing a mental illness after exposure to the study of mental health nursing, the extent to which undergraduate nursing students were interested in pursuing a future career in mental health nursing (FC) did not increase substantially (Bell et al., 1998; Happell, 2001; Happell & Rushworth, 2000; Rushworth & Happell, 2000; Stevens & Dulhunty, 1997). This would suggest that positive attitudes alone are insufficient to portray mental health nursing in a more favorable light. The work of Wynaden et al. (2000) suggested that nursing students perceived themselves as significantly less prepared for work in a mental health setting than they do in the medical-surgical field. This perceived lack of preparation may provide some explanation for why mental health nursing tends to be less appealing than are some other nursing specialties.

Although the existing literature describes (a) undergraduate nursing students' attitudes toward people experiencing a mental illness and to mental health nursing at the commencement and conclusion of their nursing education, (b) the popularity of mental health nursing as a career choice, and (c) the perceived degree of preparedness for employment in mental health settings, the relationship between these three factors has not been systematically explored. These relationships (if any) may hold information which could be used to positively influence nursing students' attitudes to mental health nursing.

To explore the relationships, if any, between these factors, it is necessary to have an instrument with sound psychometric properties capable of doing so. One aim of the study described in this article was to produce an instrument with sufficient validity and reliability to serve this purpose. This

article presents an overview of the psychometric properties of a questionnaire developed by the authors, with the aim of exploring the relationships between preparedness, attitudes toward mental health nursing and consumers of mental health services, and interest in mental health nursing as a career, as well as the impact of clinical experience on these relationships.

METHOD

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Victoria, Australia. The total population of undergraduate nursing students undertaking a mental health clinical placement was invited to participate in this study. A total of 802 participants completed a self-report survey on the first day of their clinical placement, and 703 completed the questionnaire on the last day of their clinical placement; however, once surveys were excluded due to incomplete data, the first day of placement analyses was based on survey data from 784 participants, and the last day of placement, from 687 participants.

Design

A before-and-after survey design was used for this study. Students were invited to complete two brief self-report surveys: one on the first day and one on the last day of their mental health clinical placement. Mental health services where clinical placements were undertaken were composed of a combination of inpatient and community-based services primarily oriented toward individuals diagnosed with low prevalence disorders, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Students only completed the self-report survey on the last day of their placement if they had completed the self-report survey on the first day of their placement. The mean time interval between students' first and last day of placement was 12.4 days ($SD = 3.9$ days). Students' responses were not matched for pragmatic reasons primarily because the absence of anonymity may have influenced participants' responses.

Procedure

Clinical nurse educators and/or clinical nurse consultants at each service distributed self-report surveys to nursing students on the first and the last day of their clinical placement. At this time, nurse

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