



Clinical education

Examination of a therapeutic-recreation based clinical placement for undergraduate nursing students: A self-determined perspective



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ABSTRACT

Nursing students across the globe are expected to undertake clinical placements. To date, there have been no studies that have examined the potential educational benefits for undergraduate nursing students engaged in a mental health clinical placement grounded in self-determination theory. The present study examined the experiences of undergraduate students engaged in a mental health clinical placement termed *Recovery Camp*. An ethnographic methodology within a case study approach was used. The researchers were immersed in the clinical placement, which took place at a YMCA camp facility. Participants were 20 3rd year undergraduate nursing students. To gain insight and understanding, the researchers used interviews, observations, and reflective journals. The constant-comparative method was used to analyse the data. Emergent themes identified from systematic analysis were: (a) social connection and (b) experiential learning. *Recovery Camp* facilitated a sense of inclusion and positive/supportive behaviour. It also enhanced student learning and understanding of symptoms of mental illness. Findings from this study support and extend findings for the use of therapeutic-recreation based work placement experiences in the clinical education of future nurses. Findings demonstrated a link between this type of placement and undergraduate student's development of deeper knowledge of symptoms and experiences associated with mental illness.

1. Introduction

A systematic review has provided support that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a widely used theory within the field of healthcare (Ng et al., 2012). Framing research within SDT provides a useful lens to assist in understanding the diverse elements of an educational setting that facilitates learning (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2015). SDT-based research in the healthcare field has been primarily focused on consumer and patient outcomes (Ng et al., 2012) with limited inquiry on experiences that facilitate the development of future healthcare professionals. A key element in the development of future nursing practice is engagement in clinical placements (Adams, 2002). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine how engagement in a clinical placement influenced the development of future healthcare professionals using a SDT lens.

1.1. Theoretical framework using self-determination theory

This study was grounded in SDT, which was originally proposed and developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985. SDT is a multi-faceted theory used to explain human behavior (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and has been applied within a variety of teaching and learning settings (Reeve and Lee, 2014; Van de Berghe, Vansteenkiste, Cardon, Kirk and Haerens, 2014). SDT posits that people have an innate desire to improve oneself through engagement in actions and behaviors that are deemed important to their overall development (Deci and Ryan, 2000). From a nurse education perspective, SDT can provide a useful lens to assist in understanding how experiences, such as clinical placements, can influence the professional development of future nursing professionals (Callaghan et al., 2007).

According to Deci and Ryan (1985, 2004), SDT posits that engagement within different social settings, such as within a clinical placement, can influence the motivational responses, experiences and

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elements of learning for students. A social setting is primarily influenced by people(s) who are in a leadership or decision-making position (Turner and Patrick, 2004). Depending on how an experience is developed and implemented, this will in turn create what is known as the social context that can be viewed in two ways: autonomy-supportive or controlling (Deci and Ryan, 2004). An autonomy-supportive setting is focused on providing choice, control and/or volition over behaviors (Deci and Ryan, 2004). On the contrary, control focused settings are perceived as not allowing choice and are extremely restrictive (Deci and Ryan, 2004). For instance, contexts that are highly controlling will use restrictive language (e.g. “you have to do this”), guilt, deadlines, and ignoring people who demonstrate negative feelings within a situation (Reeve et al., 2004). Autonomy-supportive settings provide people with language that is flexible (e.g. “you might try”), allow time and patience to complete a task, and demonstrate genuine empathy when someone is struggling (Reeve et al., 2004). Depending on the level of autonomy-support and control demonstrated and delivered in a particular setting, this will in turn influence the motivational responses, behaviors and learning of individuals (Vallerand and Losier, 1999; Vallerand, 2001).

Motivational responses housed under SDT are: (a) self-determined motivation and (b) psychological needs. Deci and Ryan (1985) stated that self-determined motivation is the degree to which an individual will or will not engage in a behavior based on the level of internalization. For instance, people who are internally motivated will engage in behaviors based on reasons such as enjoyment and an increased desire to know or learn. People with low levels of internalization will need some form of external prompt or reward to engage in behaviors. Research illustrates a strong association between higher levels of self-determined motivation and a variety of positive outcomes such as academic achievement (Black and Deci, 2000) and quality of professional practice (Perlman, 2014).

A key factor for influencing self-determined motivation is through the support of three key psychological needs: relatedness, competence and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 1991, 2000). Relatedness is an individual need that is defined as possessing a feeling of connectedness with others (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Ryan, 1995). Support for relatedness can be viewed as acceptance from peers or work colleagues. Competence is a perception of being successful or competent in a specific setting (Deci and Ryan, 2000), while autonomy is being provided control and/or choice over an individuals’ behavior (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). SDT grounded research provides convincing evidence that students benefit educationally when engaged in a social context that is autonomy-supportive and supports all three psychological needs (Black and Deci, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2013; Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2015). As such, research examining educational experiences using a SDT perspective (i.e. clinical placements in nursing) may provide insight into some of the applied benefits for future professionals.

1.2. Clinical placement and self-determination theory

Clinical placements within nurse education play an important role in the development of future professionals (Adams, 2002; Henderson et al., 2012). Specifically, undergraduate programs are required to have students engage in a certain number of real world or clinical hours (Australian Nursing & Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2012). The intent of clinical placements are that they allow students to engage in authentic settings that enhance their learning drawing from material taught within the university and their specific setting (Tanner, 2006). There has been a wealth of research within the nurse education field illustrating the benefits of a clinical placement (Happell et al., 2014). While clinical placements have been deemed an important mode for the education of students, there are some concerns that have been identified. There is an emergence of research that illustrates student learning within a clinical placement can be difficult to achieve due to factors such as the learning setting, interpersonal relationships and a lack of understanding of student learning principles (Algoos and Peters, 2012;

Happell et al., 2014). As evidence of the potential negative influence of clinical placements, Moxham et al. (2016a,b) reported that students engaged in a mental health clinical placement became more stigmatizing at the end of their placement. As such, more research may be needed with a particular examination into understanding the pedagogical principles that may facilitate a positive learning experience within a clinical placement. Drawing from the broad education literature, Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 1985) may be a useful lens to examine future practice.

From a SDT perspective, previous inquiry in nursing and nurse education has primarily examined the motivational responses of patients and clients. As one example, Valimaki et al. (2008) examined nursing students’ perceptions of self-determined motivation of elderly patients before and after a clinical placement. Results indicated that positive changes occurred as a result of being immersed within the clinical placement. A second area of SDT grounded inquiry has been aligned with work motivation. Gagne and Deci (2005) describe how SDT is relevant to organizational behavior. Further, Edward and Hecelinskyj (2007) contend that contemporary nursing ought to be defined by several key characteristics, including autonomy, advocacy, human potential and self-determination. They suggest that these characteristics may be built through reflection, management approaches and education.

While the aforementioned papers illustrate the importance and relevance of examining nursing and nurse education from a SDT lens, there seems to be an area of inquiry unexplored at the moment. To date, there have been no studies that have examined the potential educational benefits for undergraduate nursing students engaged in a SDT-grounded clinical placement. Thus, examining an educational experience through a SDT lens may provide an enhanced understanding of the potential professional development or learning of future professionals, which is a topic of international interest and concern.

2. Aim

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine undergraduate students engaged in an approved university clinical placement from a self-determined perspective.

3. Methods

This study utilized an ethnographic methodology (Tedlock, 2000) within a case study approach (Merriam, 1998). The aim of an ethnographic methodology is to explore the meanings and interactions between individuals (Barbour, 2010) and exploring the relationships that occur within a dynamic and organic setting (Fields and Kafai, 2009). Angrosino (2007) suggest that ethnographic approaches require the immersion of the researcher within the setting, possibly as a participant observer/researcher, to gain insight and data to address the aforementioned information housed under ethnography. In addition, a case study approach was used to better inform the research. Specifically, case study research are (a) bound by time and space and (b) are framed within some form of theory or conceptual framework (Merriam, 1998). As such, the lead researcher was immersed within the experience called *Recovery Camp* as a participant observer. The immersive nature of a participant observer would allow for gaining insight and understanding of the undergraduate students and their experiences and perceptions within this specific clinical placement. In addition, the case was grounded in the SDT of human behavior (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000) and bound within the experience called *Recovery Camp*. *Recovery Camp* is a five day immersive experience that took place within the Australian bush (More detail is provided in the *Clinical Placement – Recovery Camp* section of this paper). Data were collected throughout the study to examine and understand the perceptions and experiences of the participants throughout the entire clinical placement.

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