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The Lived Experience of Nursing Students With Mental Health Concerns: Recovering Not Condemned

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Purpose:

Canadians value education and regard it as essential for employment and to sustain the comfortable standard of living. Statistics Canada (2013) report sixty four percent of the population complete post secondary formation. This rate of the population seeking higher education is unprecedented in Canadian history (Picot and Hou, 2012). Simultaneously, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) reports that one in five Canadians is affected by mental illness (CMHA, 2018) and this number is higher among post-secondary students and feared to be increasing. The ACHA NCHA II Spring 2016 report revealed that over 60% of the Canadian College and University student experience overwhelming anxiety where as 56% did three years earlier (ACHA NCHA II Spring 2013). Leaders in post-secondary institutions are asking why it is that these young individuals feel fearful, hopeless, depressed and suicidal. If, to quote Silverman, Underhile and Keeling (2008), “minds are what higher education is about”, then resources would wisely be allocated to promote and sustain healthy minds. However, an understanding of what students find to be beneficial resources is lacking, as is an appreciation of how corporate post secondary education policy fosters or threatens student mental well-being. As a faculty member, I have seen the struggles faced by students with mental health concerns and I question the nature of this struggle. Is it something innate to the student or rather a response to the problematic environment, be it academia or beyond?

Methods:

To respond to this question a research project explored the experience of nursing student with a mental health concern using a Heideggerian phenomenological approach. Human beings are relational historical beings whose fundamental nature is an everyday life construction, were life includes culture, relationship and social influence. To understand a person’s experience requires an appreciation of the person as *‘being in the world’*. By listening to nursing students’ accounts of their experience of what it is like *to be* a nursing student with a mental health concern I have learned that their being *in the world,* is complex and influenced by numerous social, political and economic forces. Some forces are obvious to the nursing student, others so subtle they required deeper analysis to understand. The application of Critical theory, permitted with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), gave a fuller understanding of the nursing students ’lived experience, particularly in relation to the *psy* complex, the corporate university, and what is understood as *being* a member of the nursing profession.

Results:

In this oral presentation, you will hear the voice of nursing students with mental health concerns, and gain an understanding of their lived experience as a Concerned-Self, Psychiatrized –Self and Recovering Self. In this interactive presentation, together we will give voice to the lived experience of nursing students with mental health concerns. Their quotes will elucidate that stigma in academia and in the professional arena, threaten student mental as well as institutional policy seeped in the corporate agenda. By giving voice to students with mental health concerns we will hear that despite set backs experienced whilst pursuing post –secondary education, students with mental health concerns are recovering, and they see their lived experience with mental health concerns as part of their “becoming” who they are, as a professional nurse.

Conclusion:

The results of this study expands the question from that of what services do we provide on campus for students with mental health concerns to what praxes, policies and procedures threaten the recovery of our students? Peake and Mullings (2016) claim that although the literature speaks to the rising number of students with mental health concerns, almost no studies explore the relationship between the changing post–secondary environment and the increasing number of student experiencing emotional distress. In the rich data obtain from this IPA methodology; it became apparent that the context in which faculty, administrators and students find themselves contributes to how nursing student live their experience with mental health concerns. Universities are becoming increasingly commercial, business oriented, profit-making entities (Polster and Newson, 2015). The corporate university ethos of individuality, competition and measurements of norms and standards of productivity result in overwhelming feeling of inadequacy and isolation experienced by students. Implications of this study finding underscore the importance of developing the nursing students' sense of belonging to counter the loneliness inherent in the corporate university. This study reveals that the message that students with mental health concerns recover is not heard on campuses nor does nursing curricula speak to recovery as evidenced in the absence of recovery or related issues in the most current texts used to support nursing baccalaureate education in Canada. Unless faculty bring these concepts to the forefront early in the university program, students with mental health concerns will continue to experience their lived experience as invalid. In addition, according to this research project, nurses who have lived experience with mental illness and are in recovery, yet they seldom disclose their experience for fear of stigmatization Administrators and educators must address stigma as it relates to mental health concerns and professional formation. Encouraging discussions about the stigmatization of nurses with mental health concerns, and sharing the stories of nurses who are recovering is the first step. Be critical of their behavior and the policies and praxes in their institutions that stigmatize and threaten mental well-being and recovery is the second. Research that has an appreciation of the stresses inherent to student life and how the university, rife with socio-political and economic realities, influences mental well-*being,* continues to be rare and thus a true understanding of what good services entail remains elusive. More often than not mental health services on campuses are seen as a need for more *psy* interventions on campuses however, this research substantiates the need for fostering connectedness and belonging.

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Abstract Summary:
This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study explored the lived experience of baccalaureate nursing students with mental health concerns within the corporate post secondary institution. Study findings have implications for institutional policy be it university or regulatory body, student resources on campus and curricula.

Content Outline:

I. Introduction

Research Problem: Increasing number of mental health concerns among post secondary students

Research Objectives: Explore the lived experience of Nursing students with mental health concerns

1. **Body**

Main Point #1: Current research

Supporting #1

1. Epidemiological trends in the university student population
2. Critical reflections on Psychiatric diagnosis among university students

Supporting #2

1. University staff and students attitudes regrading mental health concerns
2. What supports and hinders mental health on campus

Main Point #2: Theoretical and Methodological Consideration

Supporting #1

1. Phenomenology
2. Critical theory
3. Heidegger and Foucault : Critical Encounters

Supporting #2

1. Research design
2. Data collection
3. Analysis

Main Point #3: Results

Supporting #1

1. Concerned Self
2. Psychiatrized Self
3. Recovering Self

Supporting #2

1. Methodological Strengths
2. Methodological Limitations

III. Conclusion

1. Implications for education of Nursing Students
2. Implications for Professional Nursing Practice
3. Implications for Future Research

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Author Summary: Carmen is a full-time nursing professor at Algonquin College. She obtained her BScN at the Université de Montréal , her MScN at Villanova University in Pennsylvania and PhD from the University of Ottawa.. Her most recent focus of research has been the lived experience of nursing students with mental health concerns... Carmen is committed to giving voice to the student experience and developing curricula that foster mental wellbeing of nursing students.