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The Perceived Impact on Nursing Students of Their Trust in Faculty

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Background:

Limited research has examined the impact on higher education students of their trust in faculty. Studies have shown that higher education students' trust in faculty is associated with (1) student motivation and empowerment (Corrigan & Chapman, 2008), (2) increased class participation (Demirtas, 2016), (3) increased out-of-class communication with faculty (Faranda, 2015), and (4) more favorable student views of their academic abilities compared to their peers (McClain & Cokley, 2017).

Even fewer studies can be found that have identified the impact on nursing students of their trust – or lack of trust – in faculty. Scarbrough (2013) found that nursing student trust in faculty increased students' honesty, ethical behavior, and professionalism. In contrast, when nursing students' trust in faculty decreased over time, students experienced anger and confusion (Scarbrough, 2013). Scarbrough (2013) concluded that these emotions likely had a negative impact on nursing students' cognition and critical thinking. More research is needed to explore nursing student-faculty relationships and their impact on student learning (Chan, Tong, & Henderson, 2017).

Theory:

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory's description of how personal, environmental, and behavioral influences impact human functioning (Bandura, 1986). Personal factors, or influences, refer to an individual's internal psychological factors such as cognition, affect, and attitudes (Cooper, 2000). Environmental influences include the social or interpersonal context, observed outcomes of others' actions, consequences of one's actions, and characteristics of the environment such as noise (Bandura, 1978; Wood & Bandura, 1989; Zimmerman, 1989; 1990). Behavioral elements refer to personal interactions and personal choices (Bandura, 1986). The three complex sources of influences on human functioning are not equally aligned, occurring in no particular order with varying strength over time (Bandura, 1984; Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 1991).

Purpose:

The purpose of this longitudinal study was to explore nursing students' perceived impact of their trust in faculty on the students' emotions, thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance.

Methods:

Design

This qualitative study was part of a larger exploratory, longitudinal study using focus groups to generate data. Semi-structured focus group questions were developed from the trust literature and Social Cognitive Theory. A demographic questionnaire was given to each student to complete prior to the commencement of the focus groups yet after informed consents were obtained.

Sample and Setting

At a large university located in the southeastern United States, purposeful sampling was used to recruit baccalaureate nursing students. Two cohorts of students were invited to participate in focus groups held during the first, second and third semester of the nursing program. Two weeks before the scheduled focus groups, announcements were made during a required nursing course lecture. A brief overture of the study was provided and students were given an opportunity to ask questions. During a two-year period, eleven focus groups were conducted as each cohort progressed through the nursing curriculum.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the method for identifying and analyzing patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers worked independently to read transcripts of the focus groups and generate codes. Joining forces, the researchers reviewed and reduced the codes to form main themes. Three themes reflective of the data were identified at the conclusion of the analysis. To guarantee rigor, the researchers: read the transcripts independently several times comparing them to the audio; analyzed the data independently before corroborating findings; and created rich descriptions by leaving the surrounding data of each code intact to preserve context enabling an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences.

Results:

In all, 78 baccalaureate nursing students participated in the study including 66 females and 12 males. The mean age was 28 years with a range from 20 to 42. Most students were Caucasian (n=62), followed by African Americans (n=8), Asians (n=5), and Hispanics (n=3). Three major themes were identified focusing on the impact of faculty trust on the nursing student: *Evoking Strong Feelings*, *Developing Self Assurance*, and *Attainment of Academic Goals*.

Evoking Strong Feelings

The theme *Evoking Strong Feelings* revealed that trust or the lack of trust in faculty members evoked strong emotions in the nursing students. When students viewed faculty as trustworthy, they expressed positive feelings such as: *"It makes me excited to come to your class"; "I was more positive and happy"* and *"My feelings went [from] intimidated and unsure to feeling accepted and it's okay."* On the other hand, when faculty members were not perceived as trustworthy, students' sentiments focused on the negative. *"I felt extremely defensive"; "We're afraid of this person" and "I felt really uncomfortable."*

Developing Self-Assurance

Participants developed a sense of self-confidence when they viewed faculty members as trustworthy compared to those students who stagnated in their ability to create self-assurance when trust was absent. Students whose confidence was boosted when faculty gained and maintained their trust stated: *"When you feel like the professor believes in you and you have a chance, it helps you believe in yourself as well"* and *"And definitely I feel less insecure and more confident with more trust"*. These statements are contrasted with students who became skeptical of their abilities. *"I don't feel as confident in that material that she covered... Going into my own practice, I might not feel comfortable in material that I don't feel was covered as well"*.

Attainment of Academic Goals

Faculty perceived as trustworthy helped students to achieve their academic goals. Participants stated that they took more initiative when trust was present: *"It's like you have this adrenaline that you really do not want to disappoint. You want to do better. You apply yourself more, you know. You will study more and try to understand the material a little bit more, and that leads you to understand better in the class."* In contrast, the following is the response from a student who did not see the faculty member as trustworthy:

"It's just negative energy and it affects the next step, like, motivation, you know, for what you're trying to do and then you don't want to go to class."

In addition, creating trust influenced the learning environment, making it more conducive to academic success as interviewees voiced their comfort in asking questions and participating in class discussions when faculty trustworthiness was positively perceived. *"Personally I feel like if I trust a professor and I'm able to go up to them and ask them questions I feel like I understand the material better..."*

Discussion:

The findings of this study addressed the faculty – student trust relationship's impact on the nursing students' feelings and emotions, confidence levels, and ability to attain their academic goals. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is useful to discuss the findings of this study. Thus, the personal, environmental, and behavioral influences on human behavior are correlated with the findings.

Personal: Feelings and Emotions

This study revealed that nursing students' emotions and feelings were strongly influenced by the faculty-student trust relationship. Students either had positive emotions when trust was present and negative in its absence. These findings support the limited faculty student trust research. Scarbrough (2013) found that nursing students' trust in faculty impacted the students' emotions which in turn influenced their cognition and critical thinking.

Environment: Open Communication

Teachers can positively alter the learning environment and create conditions in which student's trust is increased through ongoing communication and personal interaction (Brown, 2009). In this study, a positive learning environment was influenced by students who perceived faculty as trustworthy. Nursing students were more likely to engage in open communication in the classroom and individually with faculty members.

Behavior: Taking Initiative toward Success

Nursing students stated that they felt more motivated to do their best and take initiative in their studies when trusting instructors. They also had confidence that they were capable of successfully completing the program as teachers believed in them. This finding is corroborated by Corrigan and Chapman (2018) who found that trust was associated with well-motivated and empowered students.

Contributions to the Literature

This study contributes to the literature by identifying nursing students perceived impact of their trust in faculty on the students' emotions, thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the use of one research location which limited the data set.

Recommendations

The study should be replicated at other types of nursing programs, in other areas of the US, and in other parts of the world.

Conclusion:

This study offers some information on faculty-student trust relationships and its influence on the students' feelings and emotions, behaviors, and academic success. Nursing education will benefit from further exploring the impact on nursing students of perceived faculty trustworthiness. The study findings can provide guidance to nursing faculty regarding the need to create student relationships built on trust. Doing so may contribute to advantageous student outcomes including engagement in learning, academic success, and decreased stress.

Title:

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Keywords:

Impact of Trust, Nursing student-faculty relationships and Thematic Analysis

References:

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Abstract Summary:

In 11 focus groups conducted over a two-year period, 78 nursing students described the perceived impact of their trust in faculty on their emotions, thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is used as the theoretical framework to discuss the findings.

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