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Recommended Citation

Young-Brice, Amber and Dreifuerst, Kristina, "Exploration of Mindfulness Among Ethnic Minority Undergraduate Nursing Students" (2019). *College of Nursing Faculty Research and Publications*. 622.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/nursing_fac/622

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Exploration of Mindfulness Among Ethnic Minority Undergraduate Nursing Students

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Abstract

Background: Meeting projected needs for ethnically diverse nurses depends on a strong pipeline of diverse students within nursing programs. Colleges assume students readily navigate the university; however, this may not be the reality especially among ethnic minority students.

Purpose: The purpose was to explore the concept of mindfulness among ethnic minority nursing students. Exploring mindfulness, and a lack thereof, may provide strategies for overcoming challenges ethnic minority students experience in prelicensure nursing programs.

Methods: A qualitative study using thematic analysis of semistructured in-depth interviews was conducted with 20 ethnic minority undergraduate nursing students.

Results: Themes that emerged reveal positive associations of mindfulness and negative implications when there is a lack of mindfulness.

Conclusion: Based on the findings from this study, using consistent mindfulness techniques could positively influence coping skills for dealing with the stressors of college, resulting in overall success and retention of ethnic minority and first-generation students in a nursing program.

Keywords

diversity; ethnic minority nursing students; mindfulness; minority nursing students

The future supply and demand for nurses are contingent on many factors, including growth, aging, and diversification of the population; economic conditions; the political implications of health insurance coverage; and workforce availability.¹ Meeting projected needs for large numbers of diverse nurses depends on a strong pipeline of diverse students in nursing programs. Understanding experiences of ethnically diverse nursing students and the role colleges play in recruitment and retention is critical to building the robust pool of students to address these concerns.

Many students are faced with myriad of challenges while attending college. Lack of experience with navigational capital (eg, reading a syllabus, talking with professors) and other associated stressors such as stereotypes are amplified for ethnic minority students. This impacts their capacity to be focused, which adversely affects success.^{2,3} Furthermore, there is an assumption that students readily navigate college and understand the "rules of the game"; however, this may not be reality for all students, especially first-generation college attendees who tend to come from diverse backgrounds.² Thus, it is essential to explore the lived experiences of ethnic minority undergraduate nursing students as they navigate college. A research question guiding this study was: How do the concepts of mindfulness and mindlessness manifest in the participant's stories as they work toward completing their nursing program?

The concept of mindfulness within the context of academic environments is a factor that may influence retention of ethnic minority students in nursing programs.³ Articulating the impact of mindfulness and a lack thereof in the lived experiences of ethnic minority undergraduate nursing students may reveal the relevance of these concepts to faculty and administrators. Moreover, this understanding could foster the ability to capitalize on positive mindfulness behaviors within nursing classrooms and programs to enhance retention and successful matriculation of diverse students into the nursing profession. This article highlights findings from a larger study exploring barriers and facilitators to retention of ethnic minority undergraduate nursing students within a predominantly white undergraduate nursing program.³

Mindfulness

There has been a proliferation of mindfulness research within various disciplines, including nursing and education. Kabat-Zinn⁴ defines mindfulness as having an awareness of what emerges through purposeful attention to the present moment and remaining nonjudgmental to the flow of thoughts and experiences, moment by moment. Mindfulness stems from 2500-year-old Eastern Buddhist psychology and was taught to cultivate compassion and alleviate suffering.^{5,6} It involves being present in the moment, seeing clearly, and being open to all experiences.⁴ Mindfulness practice broadens one's attention and self-awareness, increasing perception and insight, and assists a person to have experiential openness and acceptance.^{7,8} Walker and Mann⁹ explored the viability of incorporating mindfulness techniques into nursing programs and curriculum and found that mindfulness provided a pathway for students to develop healthy coping behaviors to deal with pressures within modern health care systems.

Including mindfulness in prelicensure nursing programs and culture also has potential to impact ethnic minority student retention because of effects on the affective domain.¹⁰ Mindfulness is an essential aspect for student well-being and can influence the experiences of emotions and positively alter behaviors.^{11,12} Mindfulness contributes to emotional resilience and has potential to reverse the impact of stereotype threat.¹³ Stereotype threat is a disruptive psychological experience caused when people feel at risk of confirming or being identified by a negative association of their demographic.¹⁴ Effects of stereotype threat include feelings of self-doubt, hypervigilance, impaired memory, and gaps in academic achievement.¹⁴ Although ethnic minorities, especially African Americans, have increased awareness of racism,

trait mindfulness was found to be positively associated with active coping strategies and planning.¹⁵ Practicing mindfulness can promote adaptive coping strategies to buffer the negative consequences of stereotype threat.^{14,15}

Mindlessness

Being mindless involves acting without deliberate thinking and can be characterized by rigid states of thought, unquestioning, and routine responding, which is the opposite of mindfulness.^{16,17} There is a growing body of research regarding automaticity and habits, including positive mindless situations.¹⁶ Of interest to nursing education is the fact that being in a mindless state could lead to unconscious expectations, overanticipation or even underanticipation, and avoidance, and could be a direct cause of errors in complex situations.^{13,17} Less mindful states allow emotions to occur outside awareness and drive behaviors before a person can acknowledge what he/she is experiencing.¹⁸ Being mindless can potentiate the automatic negative reactions ethnic minority students experience in their day-to-day lives while in college. This constant automatic reactionary state of mind increases the student's cognitive load, therefore causing poor academic performance.¹⁵

Nursing programs, challenged with matriculating successful candidates within their programs, may use strategies such as early identification of at-risk students, development of a relevant curriculum, and preparation for a smooth entry into practice.¹⁹ These strategies are important for all students entering nursing programs and in particular ethnic minority students who continue to be underrepresented in the nursing profession. Exploring the concept of mindfulness in the context of ethnic minority nursing student retention may provide additional strategies for overcoming challenges these students can experience in prelicensure nursing programs.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted within a traditional baccalaureate nursing program at an urban university located in the Midwestern United States. Thematic analyses of semistructured in-depth interviews were completed to explore the experiences of prelicensure ethnic minority nursing students. Ethnic minority participants were recruited using purposive convenient sampling strategies. In this study, ethnic minority refers to nonwhite segments of the racial groups within the United States.²⁰ Recruitment efforts yielded 20 ethnic minority undergraduate nursing students. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 years old (mean, 20.95 [SD, 1.9] years); 45% (n = 9) identified themselves as Latino(a)/Hispanic, 25% (n = 5) as African/African American/black, 25% (n = 5) as Asian/Asian American/Southeast Asian, and 1 student as Arab. Among the sample, 80% (n = 16) identified as female.

Following Institutional Review Board approval, data were collected via 1-time in-depth interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was completed using an open coding process with constant comparison after each interview and use of NVivo 11.0 for Mac (QRS International, Melbourne, Australia). To establish trustworthiness, an audit trail was implemented through written field notes and reflective journaling. Credibility was established by member-checking interviewees and involving review of study findings with participants to ensure authenticity and accuracy of data interpretation.

Results

Exploring the academic experiences of the participants aided in understanding the essence of mindfulness. Themes that emerged from data analysis revealed positive associations with mindfulness as well as negative implications of lacking mindfulness. Examples of mindfulness were illustrated when participants described self-awareness, having perspective to overcome challenges, and accepting the moment. Being mindless was manifested in the participants' stories when they described self-doubt, feeling like a robot, and struggling to focus.

Mindfulness: Purposeful Self-awareness

Participants described times of being purposefully self-aware and ways they used that awareness to positively deal with stress. Most participants reflected on how they felt during these moments and having an awareness of acceptance of those feelings associated with experiences as they arose. One participant acknowledged how she managed her stress and found balance in life with "me-time" when she was aware she was becoming stressed: "Don't let everything stress you out. Because I try not to let anything stress me out, so with me-time, I'm able to calm down, breathe lightly."

Possessing self-awareness was also apparent in another participant's experiences when she described how she reflects and then writes down what is bothering her. She feels as though she cannot always talk to her parents but needs to express her feelings to deal with them. She described "bottling up" her feelings because her parents do not always understand the amount of work involved in attending college.

Mindfulness: Using Perspective to Overcome Challenges

Many participants explained that accepting challenges was part of being a nursing student. They also described engaging in the strategy of not reacting automatically to those challenges. These participants discussed possessing a mindful approach to potential challenging situations. A freshman participant who overcame significant struggles in her life talked about trying to stay positive and optimistic about the possibilities of the future even when feeling bad about the past: "The future: we obviously don't know what's going to happen, but the idea that there is the possibility for me to be whom I want to be, I can still believe that something good is going to happen."

Another participant discussed her perspectives about trying not to react negatively to what occurs in her daily life. She fosters a mindful, compassionate approach to being a nursing student: "I think we need more positivity because nowadays people are very negative, and it doesn't do anything but bring down the mood."

Mindfulness: Recognizing and Accepting Being in the Moment

Participants also shared the importance of being adaptable, flexible, and able to accept what happens moment-to-moment to be successful. One participant reflected on recognizing when she was being in the present moment, a mindset that aligns with mindfulness. She strives to focus on being present to improve herself for future experiences and tries not to ruminate on the past: "You might as well just deal with it today, and then tomorrow where is it? I try to focus on the day, what I didn't do well that I need to do now to help me improve in the future." Another participant shared her perspectives about knowing how to be flexible and adapt to change. She described having the ability to accept whatever happens day-to-day and use that to cope effectively with the unpredictability of change. She commented: "If something changes in my life, then I'll get used to it. And then if something else changes, then I'll get used to that."

Each of these exemplars demonstrates techniques of mindfulness that these students used to foster success in their nursing program. During the interviews, evidence of a lack of mindfulness, which deterred success, was also apparent.

Self-doubt

Participants discussed their struggles with self-confidence and doubt, exemplars of lacking mindfulness. This was revealed through their stories about struggles in the nursing program, particularly when they talked about self-doubt. One participant experienced inner turmoil regarding comparing herself to others, which she noted was a habitual way of thinking for her: "You're always doubting yourself. I'm always comparing myself to other people, and that's a problem. The program is so competitive." Another participant also discussed feelings of self-doubt and how it negatively impacts her academic performance. She is working on developing optimism to help overcome the adverse effects of her self-doubt: "I know the material, but sometimes I just doubt myself, and I get the wrong answer. If I study, and just concentrate on it, in general I think I'll pass everything."

Feeling Like Robot

Another aspect of being less mindful is going through the motions without being actively engaged. Participants described being stuck in routines and feeling as though they were a robot. A participant who was about to enter her senior year at the time of the study mentioned stress caused her to feel like she was a

robot. Another participant also found himself in a daily rigid structure and following routines. He discussed how having a routine, though, helps him feel less stress, but he also alluded to knowing he is not living life fully or being engaged in the moment.

Struggle to Focus

Struggling to focus, another aspect of mindlessness, was a common theme in the participants' stories. Moreover, technology was a common cause of distraction. One participant discussed how technology impacted her focus in the nursing program: "I can lose focus easily, especially with all the technology. I try to isolate myself and put everything over to the side. I know if I have my phone, I'm going to be tempted to look at it, and then once I start looking at it, I've noticed that 15 to 20 minutes passed [without studying]."

Another participant further epitomized lacking mindfulness in 1 sentence. During her interview, she increasingly became concerned with her awareness of her mindless nature. She struggled to be present in the moment and could not quiet her mind. She found herself unable to focus: "I'm always thinking about something. Never-it's never like nothing is going on up in here. That's the problem."

Discussion

Faculty and administrators in nursing programs can use mindfulness to foster student retention and success. Insights derived from the participants' stories portray the successes and struggles relative to mindfulness or a lack thereof. Being mindful may enhance learning and could assist students on the pathway to retention and completion of the nursing program, whereas being mindless may result in difficulty learning and completing the program. Behaviors that represent as mindful or mindless are important to understand, particularly how they bear on each other and overall student success.

When a nursing student responds passively to a negative environment and is influenced by stress and disruption, they may get stuck in a less mindful state. These students focus on routines, functioning on automatic pilot; display a lack of attention, low self-esteem, and self-concept; and are generally discouraged.²¹ In this study, a lack of being mindful emerged when participants described automatic behaviors, low self-esteem, and self-doubt. However, positive emotions and behaviors described by these students demonstrated that they can be nurtured out of a negative cycle and aspired back into mindfulness behaviors, which foster positive attributes that may lead to success.

Evidence of mindfulness was discovered within the interviews in examples of positive self-esteem, self-awareness or self-regulation, attention, intention, being present, nonjudging, self-efficacy, and well-being.¹² Being mindful involves the ability to be aware and attend to what is occurring in the present moment and can be fostered through purposeful attention, redirection, and positive feedback.¹⁸

Implications and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore mindfulness within the context of ethnic minority nursing student struggles and successes in their undergraduate program. This was effective in eliciting positive factors such as acknowledging the ability to have awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and ability to adapt in college. College environments are challenging, which is compounded by the rigor of nursing programs. Faculty and administrators within nursing programs can capitalize on these findings and stay committed to understanding the state of mindfulness, or a lack of being mindful, to actively support ethnic minority student success.

This is important for the unique stressors associated with being an ethnic minority nursing student. Providing support that develops students' practical skills to manage stress, gain perspective, and overcome challenges, such as oppression or marginalization, is critical for ethnically diverse and first-generation college students. Using this mindfulness perspective could support academic buoyancy, which refers to a student's capacity to overcome academic setbacks such as failures and challenges such as anxiety of everyday college life to reach their goals.^{22,23} Furthermore, mindfulness-based interventions can effectively reduce stress and improve overall well-being.²⁴

This study purposely focused on a younger demographic of ethnic minority college students as to attempt to control varying degrees of life experiences, such as being married or having children. Incorporating

mindfulness interventions with younger college students can be difficult because of the critical developmental stage of emerging adulthood, which involves frequent changes and stressors that are amplified for ethnic minority students because of stereotype threat.¹⁴ With student maturational development and racial implications that affect ethnic minority students in mind, faculty can incorporate mindful activities into classrooms and clinical practice, which are geared toward assisting students to be aware of their negative thoughts and how to let go of them without ruminating or letting them dictate behavior.¹⁵ Furthermore, mindfulness strategies may provide a buffer for the negative consequences of being an ethnic minority student.¹⁵ Remaining vigilant to the different experience of ethnic minority students requires faculty to be mindful of and identify messages that may demean or exclude the thoughts and feelings unique to this population of student. Mindfulness techniques may assist in providing culturally appropriate adaptive coping styles.

Koru, a training program in mindfulness, specifically targets emerging adults.²⁵ The Koru program makes mindfulness accessible in the context of college students' everyday lives and emphasizes typical mindfulness activities such as breathing, guided imagery, and meditation but also cultivates positive emotions. Greeson et al²⁴ conducted a randomized controlled trial of Koru and discovered the effectiveness of Koru in reducing stress and enhancing psychological well-being among emerging adults in a university setting.

Incorporating mindfulness into nursing programs might also involve using techniques such as a Koru program or specifically focused meditation, breathing exercises at the beginning of class or clinical practice, and reflection or yoga after an examination or trying patient encounter.^{5,9} Purposeful, repetitive mindfulness techniques can positively influence the experience of emotions, alter behavior, and maximize the positive state of mind in students.²⁶ Based on the findings from this study, using consistent mindfulness techniques could positively influence coping skills for dealing with the invariable stressors of college, resulting in overall success and retention of ethnic minority and first-generation nursing students in a nursing program.

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