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‘A Qualitative Exploration of Factors that Shape Professional Behaviour in postgraduate PHSC Students through Focus Group Discussions at Public University- University of Wales Trinity Saint David-London campus.’

Component 2: Written Report.

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Table of Contents:

Introduction:.....	3
Overview of the Report	3
Rationale:.....	4
Aim of study:.....	4
Formulated Research Question:.....	4
Objectives:.....	4
Research methodology:.....	5
Research Design:	5
Study population and sampling:	5
Recruitment:.....	6
Participants for the study:.....	6
Data collection procedures:.....	6
Ethical consideration:	6
Data transcribing method:	7
Data analysis:	7
Results:	7
Discussion:	10
Conclusion:	11
Recommendations:	12
Appendix 1:	16

Introduction:

Professionalism in postgraduate students encompasses a high standard of conduct aligned with expectations of their academic and future professional environments and it involves displaying integrity, accountability, and showing respect in interactions with peers, faculty, and professionals (Yermentaeyeva et al., 2014). Effective time management and adaptability, communication and collaboration skills which can contribute professional behaviour in postgraduate students because they must engage in continuous learning in their studies (Yermentaeyeva et al., 2014). One study showed that professionalization is viewed as the progression involving both the socialization and developmental aspects of an individual's professional journey (Yermentaeyeva et al., 2014).

This qualitative study delves into the complex factors influencing professional behavior in postgraduate PHSCiP students at the **University of Wales Trinity Saint David-London Campus**. Employing insightful focus group discussions, the research aims to uncover the intricate interplay of elements of education on shaping their professional trajectories, ranging from personal motivations to external pressures. In higher education, the multifaceted professional development of these students is influenced by academic programs (Sun and Richardson, 2016), mentorship (Johnson, 2015), institutional resources (Waldron, 2021), networking, financial considerations, personal values, and professional workshops (Ferman, 2002). Pursuing master's degrees, individuals navigate a path where academic pursuits intersect with professional expectations. The study explores the dynamic relationship between education and shaping the aspects of professionalism such as the cultivation of thinking, ethical awareness, and communication skills (Yermentaeyeva et al., 2014).

Overview of the Report:

The qualitative report follows a structured format. In Chapter 1, the study establishes the context, rationale, and significance. Chapter 2 provides a thorough literature review, identifying existing theories and research on professional behavior in postgraduate students, setting the theoretical framework, and highlighting knowledge gaps. Chapter 3 details the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 offers an overview of participants' diverse backgrounds, academic disciplines, and experiences. Chapter 5, the focal point of the study, presents findings from focus group discussions, analysing identified factors and displaying rich narratives. Chapter 6 compares these factors, uncovering patterns, variations, and commonalities contributing to professional behavior. In Chapter 7, implications for postgraduate education are discussed, and recommendations for academic institutions, faculty, and policymakers are suggested. Chapter 8 summarizes key findings, reaffirms the study's significance, discusses contributions to existing research, and outlines potential avenues for future research in postgraduate professional development.

Rationale:

The current state of research on factors influencing professional behavior in postgraduate students lacks a comprehensive understanding, with existing studies exploring isolated aspects such as mentorship dynamics, academic environments, and personal motivations (Yermentaeyeva et al., 2014). Some studies emphasize the significant role of professional identities (PIs) in improving employability and early occupational socialization, suggesting that postgraduate students may develop more well-formed PIs due to focused career development learning (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). However, much of this research relies on quantitative methods, neglecting the rich qualitative nuances inherent in postgraduate experiences. This leaves a significant gap in the literature regarding the contextual depth needed to comprehend the intricate influences shaping professional behavior (Van De Camp et al., 2004). The presented qualitative study, utilizing focused group discussions, aims to address this gap by offering a holistic examination of multifaceted influences on postgraduate professional behavior. By directly engaging with postgraduate students, the study seeks to unravel the complexities and interactions of these factors, contributing not only to academic scholarship but also providing practical insights for educators and policymakers aiming to enhance education and better prepare students for professional behavior.

Aim of study:

This qualitative study through focused group discussion aims to explore and elucidate the intricate factors that significantly influence the professional behaviour of postgraduate students in a public university setting. By delving into the lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions of these PHSC students, the study seeks to unravel the complex web of influences shaping their professional choices (Adams et al., 2006). Ultimately, this research aspires to enhance comprehension of the dynamic interplay of these factors.

Formulated Research Question:

How do educational factors, encompassing academic environments, mentorship dynamics, and institutional resources, influence the development of professional behaviour in postgraduate PHSC students?

Objectives:

1. To evaluate the how age group and other personal characteristic in education affect the professional behaviour in postgraduate PHSC students.
2. To investigate the impact of education on growth of professional behaviour in postgraduate students.
3. To identify the role of university's resources on shaping the professional behaviour in postgraduate students.

Research methodology:

The study utilized a qualitative method approach, specifically through focus group discussions (FGDs). Qualitative methods, exemplified by FGDs, involve assembling a small and diverse group of participants to explore a specific subject (AKYILDIZ and Ahmed, 2021). FGDs bring together participants in a structured yet open-ended manner, facilitating guided conversations on the topic of postgraduate students' professional behavior. Participants express thoughts, share experiences, and discuss opinions, promoting interactive engagement. The qualitative nature of FGDs allows for a comprehensive exploration of insights and diverse perspectives (Hennink, 2014). However, limitations include potential sampling bias, limited generalizability, social desirability bias affecting truthfulness, and the potential dominance of certain voices restricting the diversity of perspectives within the discussion (Guest, Namey, and McKenna, 2017).

Research Design:

The qualitative research through ethnography research design through focus group discussion was employed for this research. Ethnography is qualitative research approach that aims to understand and describe the social and cultural dynamics of a specific group, community, or setting (Pink et al., 2022). Ethnography seeks to capture the interconnectedness of social phenomena within a cultural context. There are three core principles of ethnography research design such as immersion, holism, and participant observation (Harrison, 2018). Ethnography research design provides holistic understanding, however, there have some limitations such as subjectivity, bias, generalizability, time-intensive, resource demands and interpretive challenges (Simmons and Smith, 2019). Applying ethnography in this research, conduct comprehensive engagement with the postgraduate community, and approach FGD with cultural sensitivity, acknowledging the unique academic culture and norms within the public university setting.

Study population and sampling:

The study targeted postgraduate students from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, enrolled at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK, specifically those pursuing an MSc in Public Health and Social Care. A non-probability sampling method was employed, aiming for 6 to 8 postgraduate students, deemed sufficient for the research. Convenience sampling, a non-probability technique, was chosen for its practicality and quick data collection, selecting participants based on ease of availability and accessibility. While offering timely insights, this sampling method has limitations, including lack of representativeness, selection bias, and limited external validity. The focus was on obtaining a varied range of information through an adequate number of participants in the focus group discussions.

Recruitment:

Participants for the study were recruited from postgraduate students at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, based in Owal, UK, through their usual place of study. The research proposal, submitted by the chair, received approval from the university ethics committee. Invitations and information about the research were presented during a Practice-based research lecture on December 7th, Thursday. Interested participants, who met the inclusion criteria of being enrolled in the university and understanding English, were approached face-to-face by the chair. Detailed explanations and study requirements were provided, and informed consent was obtained. Those unable to provide consent were excluded. Included participants received the research guide template and consent information on December 8th, Friday.

Participants for the study:

A total of 25 students was identified for the FGD, from which 15 confirmed their interest in participating. These 18 students divided in two groups, in first group: 9 members and in second group: 6 members. However, the first group was reduced to 7 members because two members had to reach home for some personal problems. There were no defined any requirements criteria for dividing groups except availability of students and rooms. Once, the first group was allocated in SH3 room and seats were given to participants, the other group was automatically allocated in different room at same time. So, the focus group discussion topic was remained same at the same time in all groups, but locations were different.

Data collection procedures:

The FGD was organized in a large room (SH3), which have quiet ambiance and capacity for 6 to 9 participants within the Salisbury house building of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. This location was convenient and safe for the participants, close to their usual place of study and easily accessible by walking or transportation (Van Eeuwijk and Angehrn, 2017). Before the discussion, a brief questionnaire collected for basic introduction of the participants such as study background and their interest in their study fields except their personal details. Participant confirmed their consent and sessions were lasting approximately 50 minutes. The chair facilitated the sessions, with a brief supervisor introduction. Data were recorded using a recorder feature in smart phone. A discussion guide with open-ended questions (Appendix 1) focused on research queries and supplemented by additional question for clarification by the chair member if required to maintain focus on the main topic.

Ethical consideration:

The research adhered to data protection standards, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act (2018), to ensure the secure collection, processing, and storage of data, safeguarding individuals' privacy rights. Ethical considerations were prioritized

through informed consent, clearly detailing the study's purpose. Privacy was further protected by utilizing codes instead of personal identifiers. The study emphasized voluntary participation, ensuring participants joined without pressure and had the freedom to withdraw at any stage (Parker, and Tritter, 2006). Ethical issues such as cultural sensitivity, participants' well-being, transparency, confidentiality, and data security (Sim, and Waterfield, 2019) were comprehensively addressed throughout the research process. The data will be discarded after the research.

Data transcribing method:

The audio recordings from the focus group discussions were transferred to password protected personal laptop with antivirus software via a USB stick. Subsequently, the data were uploaded onto Otter.ai (2023)-AI Meeting Note Taker and Real-Time AI Transcription software for analysis. Using Otter.ai, verbatim transcriptions were generated for focus group session, ensuring detailed and accurate representation. To validate accuracy, the transcripts were cross-checked against the original audio-recordings. The compiled transcribed data amounted to 6,686 words.

Data analysis:

Thematic analysis, following the methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was applied to the focus group data. This approach is widely utilized in similar qualitative research and is highly valuable for delving into participants' perspectives on the raised issue. It serves to highlight both differences and similarities in participants' views on a given topic, as well as uncover unexpected insights arising from the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Known for its accessibility and quick comprehensibility, this thematic analysis allows for the generation and concise summarization of key features within large data sets (Nowell et al., 2017).

The thematic analysis employed for scrutinizing the focus group data related to growth of professional behaviour in postgraduate students and its connection to personal perceptions comprises six steps, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps encompass becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the analysis report.

Results:

The following (Four) broad themes have emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: Definition and Characteristics of Professional Behavior:

This theme reveals the definition and core characteristics of professional behaviour, includes following three subthemes.

Subtheme 1.1: Alignment with Ethical Standards:

Participants emphasize aligning actions with ethical standards, focusing on effective communication, teamwork, and regular attendance.

See the below report from a participant.

"The word professional itself should be very professional and should encompass actions and attitudes aligned with ethical standards." (P5)

Subtheme 1.2: Interactions:

Various participants expressed Various perspectives on professional behavior, including punctuality, appropriate dressing, adaptability, ownership, teamwork, and communication.

See the below report from different participant.

"Professional behaviour means acting properly whenever, wherever you work or wherever you study." (P2)

"Professional behaviour means striving for excellence in all you do." (P7)

Subtheme 1.3: Expertise and Confidence:

Professionalism involves demonstrating expertise, excelling at work, and maintaining positive confidence.

See the below report from a participant.

"Professional behaviour encompasses the conduct, attitude, and ethical standards expected in a particular workplace." (P6)

Theme 2: Professional Behavior in Different Settings:

This theme reflects on professionalism at different area such as workplace, university and in different age groups. This includes following 2 subthemes.

Subtheme 2.1: University vs. Workplace:

This theme reflects Different aspects of professionalism in university (teamwork and communication) and workplace (additional responsibility and accuracy).

See the below report from different participant.

One participant argued that, "In universities, teamwork should be important, and as well as communication will be important, and as well as professionals, they should respect each other and they should have teamwork as well." (P1)

Subtheme 2.2: Older and Younger Generations:

Younger generations lean towards digital communication, while older generations prioritize traditional methods based on experience and cultural differences.

See the below report from different participant.

"Because of age gap, the younger follow the innovations and adaptability of technology while the older people have more experience and they follow their culture." (P4)

While other participant argued that, "In my point of view, professional behaviour should be similar for the younger and older because its characteristics are all grounded to the same." (P3).

Theme 3: Developing Professional Behavior:

This theme gives the ground knowledge on developing professionalism among postgraduates, which cover following two subthemes.

Subtheme 3.1: At Workplace:

Emphasis on the importance of teamwork, effective communication, and respecting colleagues to promote professionalism.

See the below report from a participant.

"To discourage unprofessional behavior, we should be on time first of all, and functionality is most important. Also, teamwork is important, and to respect each other is much important." (P1)

Subtheme 3.2: At University:

Promotion of professionalism in university through real-world experiences, mentorship, and engagement in extracurricular activities.

See the below report from a participant.

"Mentorship programs are the main things to promote professional behavior among the students, as well as we can also encourage extracurricular activities so students can be more attentive to the university." (P2)

Theme 4: Unprofessional Behavior:

This theme emphasizes the overview of unprofessional behaviour among postgraduate students. It has three subthemes.

Subtheme 4.1: Definition and Characteristics:

Unprofessional behavior involves actions deviating from norms, including lack of respect, poor communication, and failure to meet standards.

See the below report from a participant.

"Unprofessional behaviour involves actions or conduct that deviate from established norms and expectations in a given context." (P1)

Subtheme 4.2: Reasons for Unprofessional Behavior:

Reasons include stress, burnout, personal issues, cultural differences, lack of education, and mismatched values.

See the below report from a participant.

"Behind unprofessional behaviour, it's like stress and burnout and also personal issues and cultural differences also." (P4)

Subtheme 4.3: Discouraging Unprofessional Behavior:

Participants suggested addressing unprofessional behavior promptly, reporting incidents, and implementing strict rules and consequences.

See the below report from different participant.

"We have to address the issues promptly. So that we will get a solution for the issues and also, we can report the things which are not professional." (P1)

"We can make strict rules they should follow, and they should have punishment for showing unprofessional behavior in the university." (P3)

Discussion:

The study's findings support previous research, highlighting the importance of aligning professional behavior and emphasizing the prompt addressing of unprofessional conduct.

Alignment with Ethical Standards:

The participants consistently emphasized the importance of aligning actions with ethical standards, highlighting effective communication, teamwork, and regular attendance as key components of professional behavior. This suggests a shared understanding among participants regarding the ethical dimensions of professionalism. The one study revealed responsible factor for students' attitudes such as gender, age, mother's educational status, father's educational status, institution, and active educational status (UĞURLU, and Hakan, 2020).

Interactions:

Diverse perspectives on professional behavior emerged, encompassing aspects such as punctuality, appropriate dressing, adaptability, ownership, teamwork, and communication. This diversity implies that professionalism is a multifaceted concept, incorporating various behavioural aspects that individuals perceive differently. Though, one study found that universities are increasingly teaching teamwork skills, they noticed that girls tend to do better in teamwork (except for leading (De Prada, Mareque, and Pino-Juste, 2022).

Developing Professional Behavior:

The impact on work effectiveness and career success was highlighted as a strong motivator for engaging in professional behavior. Similarly, teamwork, effective communication, and respect at the workplace and mentorship programs, extracurricular activities were identified as avenues for promoting professionalism in university settings. However, the one study found the significance of independent work in developing professional competencies (Kabyлтаevna et al., 2022). The generational gap in approaches to professional behavior, particularly regarding communication methods, was evident.

Unprofessional Behavior:

Unprofessional behavior in postgraduate settings is attributed to factors like stress, burnout, personal issues, cultural differences, lack of education, and mismatched values. Participants recommend addressing such behavior promptly through reporting and enforcing strict rules. The recognition of its potential long-term impact on personal and professional development underscores the need for proactive intervention. Additionally, a study reveals the identification of medical students with poor professional behavior using standardized narratives, categorizing them into profiles based on reliability, insight, and adaptability (Mak-van der Vossen et al., 2019).

The results hold significance as they offer valuable insights into professional behavior, providing a basis for strategies to improve conduct in diverse settings. Practical implications suggest a focus on promoting ethical standards, effective communication, and teamwork in organizations and educational institutions. Implementing mentorship programs, real-world experiences, and extracurricular activities emerges as practical approaches to instill professionalism.

While the study gives us helpful insights into how people behave professionally, however, the findings may lack generalizability due to a small sample size and a specific study context, potentially limiting their applicability across different industries, cultural backgrounds, and organizational structures. Additionally, the study might not have explored individual personality traits, industry-specific factors, or global variations, indicating a need for further research to provide a more nuanced understanding of the determinants of professional conduct.

Conclusion:

This study successfully met its aim by providing comprehensive insights into the various dimensions of professional behavior and the factors shaping it in (PHSC) postgraduate students. The alignment with existing theories and previous studies supports the credibility of the findings. The emphasis on practical implications, such as targeted interventions, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities, offers actionable recommendations for fostering professional behavior in postgraduate students.

However, acknowledging the limitations is crucial, as the generalizability of the results may be limited by the specific sample and context. Future research should consider exploring additional variables, such as individual personality traits, to enhance the understanding of professional behavior in postgraduate students.

Recommendations:

Professional Training Programs:

From research findings, university should Implement targeted training on ethical standards, communication, teamwork, and additional responsibilities and also organize workshops and Career Guidance Programs (Wang, and Zhou, 2023). Integrate programs into academic and workplace settings for a comprehensive approach.

Continous mentorship programs:

Expand mentorship programs to provide guidance on professional behavior and to manage stress and burnout provide mentorship and some counselling services (Paquette, Murphy, and Duffy, 2023).

Collaboration:

Promote collaboration between universities and industry partners to enhance real-world insights, facilitate internships, and align academic programs with professional field expectations (Jackson, Riebe, and Macau, 2022).

This research lays the groundwork for continuous discussions and initiatives aimed at refining and strengthening the culture of professionalism in postgraduate settings. The comprehensive knowledge derived from the study serves as a foundation for ongoing dialogue and actions in this regard.

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Appendix 1:

Greet the study participants and introduce the study that it is aimed to explore and understand the factors that influence professional behaviour among postgraduate students in a public university. Please ensure you obtain informed consent from the study participants to interview them and to record the interview before starting the interview.

Make sure there is a chair selected to guide the focus group.

(a) Introduction and Welcome :

Chair (in real life often the researcher) Outline the meeting will be recorded (individually) anonymity will be followed with the analysis and publication of the data. Ask for consent of participants. Inform participants about the time scheduled for the focus group (between 45-60 minutes).

(b) Instructions regarding the focus group:

At the beginning you will introduce yourself. You will each tell your name and describe which programme you are studying, the amount of time you have been studying. You can also tell what you enjoy the most of your studies.

(c) Questioning:

Chair reads each question separately out loud and clearly, if needed repeat it. Allow participants the time to respond to each question. Also allow participants to respond to each other and/or ask each other questions. Make sure all participants take part in the focus group discussion. Ensure to manage time and balanced contributions. Guide participants back to the listed question.

(d) Open the focus group by asking the first question.

- How would you define professional behaviour?
- What does professional behaviour look and feels like in practice?
- When you think about professional behaviour, which core characteristics you think about?
- Which ones are represented at university? Which ones are represented in working practice?
- Do you think professional behaviour is displayed similarly or differently between younger and older workers and why (not)?
- Would you classify yourself as behaving professionally at the university or the workplace?
- How would you encourage classmates/peers to engage in professional behaviour?

- How do you define unprofessional behaviour and what can be reasons for this behaviour?
- Do you engage in unprofessional behaviour and why yes or no?
- How can you discourage unprofessional behaviour in the university?
- How can you discourage unprofessional behaviour in the workplace?
- How can PHSCiP students acquire professional behaviour?
- What kind of information do you need to learn more about professional behaviour?
- Where would you look for information about acquiring professional behaviour?
- What can your university do to promote professional behaviour?

(e) Chair: Close the focus group by thanking the participants for their contributions and inform them what time the research findings will be ready and published. Answer all other queries participants might have.