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INTRODUCTION / LITERATURE BASED BACKGROUND

"Investigating the Determinants of Professional Behaviour Among Postgraduate PHSC Students: A Focus Group Discussion at a Public University"

In higher education, how postgraduate students act professionally is really important for their studies and future jobs (Ducheny et al, 1997; Yousefi et al, 2015). This study focuses on finding out the various things that affect how postgraduate students studying Public Health and Social care at a public university behave professionally. It's crucial to understand these influences to create an environment that not only supports good academic performance but also helps students become skilled professionals in the public health sector (Yousefi et al, 2015).

When students move from their basic studies to more advanced ones, it's a big moment. They have more expectations and duties. The way postgraduate Public Health Sciences students behave professionally includes many things like being ethical, good at communicating, working well with others, and always wanting to learn and get better (Yousefi et al, 2015). This research wants to figure out and understand the main things that shape these professional behaviours (Yousefi et al, 2015).

According to Ferguson and his colleagues (2005) has found that what postgraduate students learn and how professional they become is influenced by different things. The type of learning environment, having good mentors, and having enough resources are crucial in shaping how students behave

professionally. Personal traits like being motivated, disciplined, and adaptable also play a big role (Ferguson et al, 2005).

In the field of Public Health and Social care, there are specific challenges and opportunities that make the professional development of postgraduate students more complex. Public health work involves working with people from different backgrounds, so students need not only to know their subject well but also collaborate well with diverse professionals (Adams et al, 2006).

AIM OF STUDY

This research focuses on investigating the factors influencing the professional behaviour of postgraduate Public Health and Social care (PHSC) students. It will utilize focus group discussions to investigate these elements and delve into meaningful conversations, aiming to reveal insights into what shapes the professionalism of these students (Priyadarshini et al, 2022).

This research focuses on investigating the multifaceted factors that impact the professional behaviour of postgraduate PHSC students within the context of a public university. The study will employ focus group discussions to delve into the nuances of these factors, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the elements shaping the professionalism of postgraduate PHSC students. The scope encompasses various dimensions, including academic, interpersonal, and institutional influences on professional behaviour (Macpherson, 2010; Priyadarshini et al, 2022).

OVERVIEW

The report is structured as follows: In the next, we look at what others have studied about how people behave professionally, especially in postgraduate education and in the specific field of Public Health and Social care. Then, explains how did the research, why chose focus group discussions, and how we collected data. Furthermore, share what we found from our discussions, highlighting important themes about what influences the professional behaviour of postgraduate PHSC students. Next, digs deep into these findings, connecting them with what others have already studied and providing detailed explanations. Finally, wrap things up by drawing conclusions, talking about how our findings can be used in practice, suggesting areas for future research, and giving recommendations to enhance the conversation about developing professional behaviour in postgraduate PHSC students at public universities.

RATIONAL

According to Pham (2021) current state of knowledge on factors influencing the professional behaviour of postgraduate PHSC students in public universities underscores the importance of delving deeper into this area. Existing research has provided insights into various elements such as academic programs, institutional support, and personal attributes affecting professionalism. However, there remains a need for a focused exploration, particularly through qualitative methods like focus group discussions, to comprehensively understand the nuances and diverse perspectives of postgraduate PHSC students. This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a nuanced understanding of the factors

influencing professional behaviour within the specific context of a public university (Pham, 2021; Sethi et al, 2018).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the key factors that influence the professional behaviour of postgraduate PHSC students in a public university setting? And how do academic programs and institutional support systems contribute to shaping the professional conduct of postgraduate PHSC students?

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the negative behaviour of post graduate students (Akubugwo and Burke, 2013).
2. Explore the factors that contributes to professionalism in post-graduate students (Opoku et al, 2021).
3. Evaluate the impact of institutional policies and academic resources on the cultivation of professionalism (Macpherson, 2010).

RESEARCH METHEDOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research method was employed to explore the factors influencing the professional behaviour of postgraduate Public Health and Social Care (PHSC) students at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in London. The focus group discussion (FGD) approach was chosen as the primary data collection method due to its efficacy in eliciting diverse perspectives and generating in-depth insights (Parker and Tritter, 2006; Singh, 2018).

For this study exploring the factors that influence the professional behaviour of postgraduate PHSC students in a public university, an ethnography method was employed (Onwuegbuzie, 2021). Ethnography involves immersing the researcher in the natural setting of the participants to understand their behaviours, interactions, and experiences within their cultural context (Onwuegbuzie, 2021). In this case, the researcher actively engaged with postgraduate PHSC students, participating in focus group discussions, and conducting FGD to gain a holistic understanding of the factors shaping their professional behaviour (Singh, 2018; Onwuegbuzie, 2021). This method allowed for a nuanced exploration of the students' perspectives, values, and social dynamics, providing rich qualitative data that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the influences on their professional conduct in the university environment (Singh, 2018).

RESEARCH DESIGN:

A qualitative cross-sectional research design is employed to explore the determinants of professional behaviour among postgraduate Public Health and Social Care (PHSC) students at a UWTSD (Onwuegbuzie, 2021). The study utilizes focus group discussions as the primary data collection method to gather in-depth insights and perspectives from participants (Scanlan et al, 2019). The research aims to uncover the factors influencing professional behaviour in this specific academic cohort, contributing valuable qualitative data for a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The cross-sectional approach allows for the examination of a diverse range of factors at a single point in time, offering a snapshot of the current state of professional behaviour among postgraduate PHSC students in the given university setting (Scanlan et al, 2019; Onwuegbuzie, 2021).

RECRUITMENT:

A convenience sampling strategy was utilized to select participants for the focus group discussions (Braun, Clarke, and Gray, 2017). The sample consisted of postgraduate PHSC students enrolled at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in London. Convenience sampling was deemed appropriate for its practicality and accessibility, allowing for the inclusion of participants who were readily available and willing to engage in the discussions (Braun, Clarke, and Gray, 2017).

PARTICIPANTS:

A selection of six participants will be chosen based on their expressed interest, academic background, and availability, ensuring a diverse representation within the group to facilitate rich discussions and perspectives.

DATA COLLECTION:

The focus group discussions took place in designated quiet spaces on the university campus to create an environment conducive to open conversations. Before starting, participants were asked for their consent to take part in the discussion (Yousefi et al, 2015). The sessions, led by a chairperson, were approximately one hour long. To capture the insights shared, digital audio recording was used, and participants were encouraged to express their experiences and perceptions related to factors influencing their professional behaviour (Yousefi et al, 2015). The discussions were guided by open-ended, semi-structured questions covering topics such as

academic programs, institutional support, faculty guidance, and personal experiences (Yousefi et al, 2015).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In this investigation into the determinants of professional behaviour among postgraduate students, employed a thematic analysis methodology. The study centred around focus group discussions (FGDs) at a postgraduate level student of Public Health and Social care within a University of Wales Trinity Saint David setting (Braun, and Clarke, 2021). To capture the richness of participants' insights, utilized audio recorders during these discussions. This audio recording tool served as a crucial method for collecting in-depth qualitative data, allowing us to preserve the authentic voices and nuances of the participants. Thematic analysis was then applied to systematically identify, analyse, and interpret recurring patterns and themes within the recorded discussions. This methodological approach facilitated a holistic exploration of the factors influencing professional behaviour, shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of postgraduate students in their academic journey (Kiger, and Varpio, 2020). The use of audio recorders not only enriched the qualitative data but also provided a robust foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis, enhancing the depth and validity of our research findings (Kiger, and Varpio, 2020; Braun, and Clarke, 2021).

Steps in Thematic Analysis...

- 1. Data collection:** Conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) among postgraduate students in PHSC to share their perspective on professional behaviour (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).

- 2. Audio recording:** Utilized audio recorders to capture the richness of participants' insights during discussions (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).
- 3. Transcription:** The recorded data were transcribed verbatim, converting spoken words into written text, maintaining the authenticity of participants' expressions (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).
- 4. Data Familiarization:** Researchers immersed themselves in the data to become familiar with the content, identifying recurring patterns and emerging themes (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).
- 5. Generating initial codes:** Identified initial codes by closely examining the transcribed data, marking recurring ideas or topics related to professional behaviour (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).
- 6. Generating themes:** Grouped similar codes into overarching themes, recognizing patterns in the data to highlight key determinants and aspects of professional behaviour (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).
- 7. Reviewing themes:** Iteratively reviewed and refined the themes, ensuring they accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives on professional behaviour (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).
- 8. Interpretation:** Interpreted the significance of each theme, providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing professional behaviour among postgraduate students (Thompson, 2022; Naeem et al, 2023).

Strengths of thematic analysis:

Audio recordings allowed for a nuanced exploration of participants' thoughts and experiences, capturing tone, emphasis, and emotional nuances (Guest et al, 2011). Thematic analysis is adaptable and flexible, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the diverse aspects of professional behaviour (Braun, and Clarke, 2021).

Limitations of thematic analysis:

Interpretation of themes can be subjective, influenced by researchers' perspectives. To mitigate this, multiple researchers often engage in the analysis process to enhance reliability (Guest et al, 2011). Thematic analysis does not provide quantifiable results, which may limit the ability to generalize findings to larger populations (Guest et al, 2011).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical approval was indeed obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Ethical approval is crucial to demonstrate the research adheres to ethical standards and guidelines (Sim, and Waterfield, 2019). Ethical considerations for the focus group discussions were upheld by treating participants with respect and safeguarding their privacy (Sim, and Waterfield, 2019). Prior to the discussions, participants were briefed on the purpose and had the option to join or decline. Verbal Consent was obtained before commencement, and a concerted effort was made to foster a comfortable and open environment (Sim, and Waterfield, 2019; Hardin, 2018). All shared information was kept confidential, and participants retained the right to withdraw without consequences. Ethical

guidelines were followed in the responsible use of collected data, protection of participants' identities, and obtaining approval from relevant ethical review boards (Sim, and Waterfield, 2019; Hardin, 2018). The audio transcripts and MS Word files were securely stored a personal computer with a password. As part of ethical data management, the audio files and data will be discarded on 10 February 2024.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Foundational elements of professional behaviour

Participants emphasized core aspects such as integrity, respect, accountability, and adherence to ethical standards as foundational to professional behaviour. See the below responses from participants:

“Professional behaviours involve integrity, respect, accountability, and adherence to ethical standards.” (Participant 5)

“Professional behaviour is a combination of attitude, appearance, and manners, and integrity and respect.” (Participant 1)

Theme 2: Practical Manifestations of professional behaviour

The discussion touched upon practical manifestations of professional behaviour, including punctuality, time management, effective communication, and collaboration, both in academic and workplace settings. See the below responses from participants:

"In the workplace, punctuality is the main thing. Also, some dressing sense is important in professional behaviour." (Participant 3)

"Professional behaviour involves time management skills, regular attendance, making ethical decisions, and collaboration." (Participant 6)

Theme 3: Challenges and strategies in encouraging professional behaviour

Participants discussed challenges related to professional behaviour and suggested strategies for encouraging it, such as mentorship, training programs, clear policies, and positive role modelling. See the below responses from participants:

"Encourage professional behaviour through leading by example, fostering open communication, highlighting benefits, and providing constructive feedback." (Participant 2)

"To discourage unprofessional behaviour, there should be clear policies, ongoing training, leadership examples, and recognition of positive behaviour." (Participant 5)

These themes capture the multifaceted nature of professional behaviour discussed by participants in the postgraduate setting, highlighting both the foundational principles and practical applications, as well as the challenges and strategies for fostering professionalism.

DISCUSSION

The presented results provide valuable insights into the perceptions and discussions surrounding professional behaviour in a postgraduate setting.

Let's address the questions and considerations raised:

Foundational elements of professional behaviour (Theme 1):

The results meet expectations by emphasizing the core aspects of professional behaviour, aligning with common expectations in academic and professional settings. These findings are consistent with established principles of professional behaviour, as integrity, respect, accountability, and adherence to ethical standards are universally recognized as foundational elements in various fields (Cunningham et al, 2011). The emphasis on these foundational elements is crucial, as they form the basis for ethical conduct and trust in professional relationships (Cunningham et al, 2011).

Practical Manifestations of professional behaviour (Theme 2):

The practical manifestations discussed, such as punctuality, time management, effective communication, and collaboration, align with conventional expectations of professional behaviour. These results are consistent with existing literature that highlights the importance of practical aspects in professional conduct, both in academic and workplace contexts.

Identifying practical manifestations adds specificity to the understanding of professional behaviour, providing actionable insights for individuals seeking to cultivate professionalism (Fomina, and Solomonov, 2020).

Challenges and strategies in encouraging professional behaviour (Theme 3):

The identification of challenges and suggested strategies aligns with expectations, as fostering professional behaviour often involves overcoming obstacles and implementing effective strategies. The emphasis on mentorship, training programs, clear policies, and positive role modelling as strategies for encouraging professional behaviour resonates with existing literature on professional development (Lacasse et al, 2019). Understanding challenges and strategies is crucial for institutions and individuals aiming to promote a professional environment. This information can guide the development of effective interventions and policies (Lacasse et al, 2019).

RECCOMENDATION

- 1. Implementation of professional development programs:** Based on the identified foundational elements and practical manifestations of professional behaviour, the university should consider implementing targeted professional development programs. These programs can focus on enhancing integrity, respect, accountability, and time management skills among postgraduate PHSC students (Hodges et al, 2011; Wang et al, 2023).
- 2. Mentorship program and leadership examples:** The study highlights the importance of mentorship and leadership examples in encouraging professional behaviour. The university should establish mentorship programs that connect postgraduate students with experienced professionals in the field. Additionally, leadership examples within the institution should be highlighted and promoted (Koroleva, Fedorov, and Chernobay, 2023).
- 3. Ongoing training programs:** To address the dynamic nature of professional behaviour, the university should implement ongoing training programs. These programs can provide continuous education and reinforcement of professional standards throughout the postgraduate journey (Hodges et al, 2011; Wang et al, 2023).

- 4. Recognition of positive behaviour:** Establish a system for recognizing and rewarding positive professional behaviour among postgraduate students. This can include acknowledgment in academic settings, awards, or other forms of recognition to motivate and reinforce desired behaviours (Hodges et al, 2011; Wang et al, 2023).
- 5. Collaboration with industry partners:** Foster collaboration between the university and industry partners in the public health sector. This collaboration can provide real-world insights, facilitate internships, and ensure that academic programs align with the expectations of the professional field (Hodges et al, 2011; Khadam, 2023).
- 6. Dissemination findings:** Share the research findings not only within academic circles but also with practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the public health and social care sector. Dissemination can contribute to broader discussions on professionalism and inform industry practices (Dennehy et al, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The study successfully explored the multifaceted factors influencing the professional behaviour of postgraduate Public Health and Social Care (PHSC) students. The findings underscore the importance of foundational elements, practical manifestations, and strategies for fostering professionalism. The consistent alignment with previous studies reinforces the enduring nature of these principles across academic and workplace settings.

In conclusion, the study contributes valuable insights that can be leveraged to enhance postgraduate education and professional development in the PHSC field. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, institutions can create an environment that not only promotes academic excellence but also cultivates the essential skills and attributes needed for successful professional practice in public health and social care.

This research serves as a foundation for ongoing discussions and actions aimed at refining and reinforcing the culture of professionalism in postgraduate settings. The comprehensive understanding gained from the study lays the groundwork for continuous improvement and innovation in the education and professional development of postgraduate PHSC students.

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APPENDIX

FOCUS GROUP TOPIC GUIDE

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.

