

Undergraduate experience of selection group interviews: a qualitative research study subjected to pedagogical reflection.

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Undergraduate experience of selection group interviews: a qualitative research study subjected to pedagogical reflection.

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This study explores stage 1 nursing students' experiences of group interviews as part of the selection process to inform the future of midwifery selection practice. Using hermeneutic phenomenology to interview students is valid as a tool of reflection but not transferable, due to sample size. Two major themes identified from the data – truth and justice – were subsequently subjected to 'pedagogical reflection' (Durkheim 1956). Considering constructivist pedagogies, three main issues identified were: the information given to candidates prior to the interview; the use of photographs in a values-based approach to selection; and interview environment. For midwifery practice, we could consider alternatives to photographs and ways to enhance the interview environment.

Introduction

The premise behind Higher Education Institutions (HEI) interviewing prospective students for selection onto nursing and midwifery courses, is to choose appropriate individuals to work in practice (The Scottish Government [SG] and NHS Education for Scotland [NES] 2010). The qualities that make a person appropriate are the six Cs, namely: care, compassion, competence, communication, courage and commitment (Department of Health [DH] 2012).

Entrance grades select students with academic ability to increase the probability of achievement on the course (Lancia et al 2013; Taylor et al 2014). However, academic grades do not assess a student's emotional intelligence and suitability for a career in the caring profession (Rankin 2013).

HEIs have the responsibility to structure their recruitment strategies to ensure academic success and to meet the demands of health and social care services. Interviews are part of the selection process in a values-based recruitment approach (Miller 2015).

Although important to recruit enough people onto nursing and midwifery courses to meet the future demands of the service, it would make sense to attempt to select people who will complete their studies and commit to a career in the profession (Taylor et al 2014). Research around the correlation between selection processes and student retention on the course is inconclusive (Callwood et al 2012).

Current undergraduate midwifery students at a Scottish east coast university were selected onto the programme through a process that involved an individual interview. However this process has been identified as time-consuming and requiring many

resources (Ehrenfeld and Tabak 2000). It is for these reasons that the individual interview has been replaced by group interviews. Importantly 'student satisfaction' as a projected outcome for selection interviews should not be minimised, particularly in comparison to retention and employability (Gale et al 2016).

Methodology

Employing hermeneutic phenomenology, I planned to use focus group methods to collect data on the students' perception and experience of being a participant in a group interview. The proposed research study was subsequently approved by the School's ethics review panel. Undergraduate nursing students were recruited via email and the university bulletin. Responders could self-select and consent to participate in the study. Therefore the participants would be a random sampling of individuals from stage 1 nursing. Such an approach minimised the time since they had experience of group interviews for selection onto their course.

One student nurse, Beth*, self-selected to participate. Although apprehensive about the validity of the data from interviewing one student nurse, phenomenology accentuates the essence of the individual experience (Mapp 2008). Hermeneutic phenomenology provided the opportunity to explore the relationship between researcher and participant as opposed to group dynamics between fellow participants (Parahoo 2014). Despite this being only one interview, it would be unjust to disregard her voice. Justice is a foible of utilitarianism (Rawls 1972).

In matters of truth and justice, there is no difference between large and small problems, for issues concerning the treatment of people are all the same. Albert Einstein

Findings

There were points in the interview that what was said and transcribed could not expose the tone or mood of how it had been said. Interesting because the actual narrative can be silent and unspoken: Parkes said (1992: 9) "It lies in the spaces in between the words uttered". Two themes: truth and justice developed through analysis of the interviews. Trying to determine the meaning of dialogue illuminated the importance of fairness in the selection process.

During the interview, I asked Beth what information she would have shared prior to the day of group interviews, had she organised the selection. Her response was:

I would maybe have given a little bit of information that:

*we were going to be given pictures to discuss; and **that we were going to be asked questions about our feelings. Just to have a little bit of insight into what sort of things we should prepare ourselves for.***

The sentences in bold were said with a 'rising intonation contour' (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Beth was not asking a question but making a statement. How the statement was produced was a direct request for my attention, which suggests it is worthy of my attention (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Beth was a mature student

whose background was in healthcare. She responded confidently and appeared self-deprecating. When asked what she thought were the aims of group interviews she responded:

I had no idea...I thought they were going to see how you interact with different people. That is what I thought the aim of it was: to see...if you were a team player.

Having both worked in healthcare, Beth and I shared a frame of reference when it came to communication which resulted in a basic ontology (Chandler 2017). I understood what it meant to be part of a good working team. It meant more than working together: it meant trusting each other.

Referring to the first quote from Beth, she displays care and compassion towards her fellow interviewees. As we can interpret from her second quote, Beth potentially was aware of the aims of group interviews. She has previous work experience and understands the importance of communication in healthcare. However, Beth felt that the information given to candidates prior to group interviews could have been improved to promote equity. She continued:

For somebody coming from school...if they gave you a little bit more information as to the fact that you'd be given scenarios and asked about them...that might have gone a long way.

The functions of an academic institution must include one of pure procedural justice if the principle of fair opportunity is to be upheld (Rawls 1972). Although not necessary for Beth, it could have benefited somebody else, had they been given more details of what to expect from group interviews.

Utilising constructivist pedagogies would encourage candidates to elaborate on their admission statements. Providing clear information about what to expect on the day would empower candidates to link their experiences to the experiential group activity of discussing the scenarios in the photographs. In this sense it would mirror the environment of a 'flipped classroom' (Foon and Kwan 2018).

The group interviews process of selection for nurses is similar to that of midwifery, in that it involves photographs of people and situations. Candidates are given time to look at an image, then asked to discuss the situation they see. The ability to relate one human being to another through visual form demonstrates the main concepts in their educational journey, of care and compassion (Davies 2007). People can have difficulty sharing their feelings about situations, but the photographs act as 'emotional touchpoints' to highlight emotion in relation to service users' patient experiences, and to enable the candidates to express empathy towards the people portrayed in the image (Dewar et al 2009). Candidates should express their values and beliefs through the image, and continue conversations within the group.

Discussion around images should bridge the gap between individual perspectives and shared awareness (Ingold 2000). Through the dialogue of situated learning, candidates demonstrate their professional understandings and emotional intelligence (Freshwater and Stickley 2003). Acting as an interpretation of work-based learning,

the photographs provide a window into the role of the midwife, maternity services in the NHS and the student experience on practice placement (Fry et al 2009).

Discussion

Although the sample size of the research study prevents transferability of data, I would argue that the data are still valid as a reflective observation (Kolb 1984). Applying constructive alignment to recruitment enables the facilitators to reflect, plan, apply and evaluate the group interviews (Biggs and Tang 2011).

By submitting the photographic activity to pedagogical reflection we could adapt the process to express equitable conditions that match our principles of fairness of opportunity (Durkheim 1956). This reflective equilibrium is subject to continuous modification and thereby enhancement (Rawls 1972).

However, it is only fair to subject myself to the same scrutiny. While listening to the interview recording, I can hear in my questioning what I was hoping to receive in an answer. Potentially the narrative was led down a particular path that, were it in a focus group, it might never have ventured (Kingdon 2005). I have to appreciate that, due to my position as a midwifery lecturer, I was familiar with terminology that provided me with authority and could have influenced Beth (Bourdieu 1991).

Implications for midwifery practice

One should question whether we have focused on the visual representations of midwifery to the detriment of other learning styles (Bates 2016). Considering Fleming's VARK (Fleming 2018) model of learning, it would be worth contemplating other methods to encourage group discussion in conjunction with photographs. It could be beneficial to hear an audio recording from a woman sharing a story from a point in her journey along the childbirth continuum, and use that to instigate a discussion.

Another issue to reflect on is whether our method of group interviews has successfully considered reasonable adjustments (Race 2007). The photographs that we use were digitally processed so, although matt finished, they still look shiny. This could prove visually problematic for candidates with dyslexia (British Dyslexia Association [BDA] no date). Alternatively, supplying paper and pens for the candidates to use would acknowledge reasonable adjustments (Race 2007). Applying constructive alignment to the group interviews enables transformative reflection on how to plan the selection process (Biggs and Tang 2011). Providing the candidates with information prior to the interview, as in the flipped classroom approach, sets the tone in the same way as learning outcomes provide structure for teaching sessions (Reidsema et al 2017). This potentially empowers the candidates to link prior knowledge, as portrayed in their admission statements, to the photographic experiential activity of a group discussion. Expectations can affect performance, so providing more information could promote greater active participation in the group interviews (Gibb 2014).

Creating a relaxed atmosphere could encourage an interactive and dynamic conversation among the undergraduate candidates (Smith et al 2014). Employing a

world café style format could enhance the atmosphere, and facilitate conversation (Race 2007).

Conclusion

Exploration of students' experiences of participation in group interviews as a process of selection, and the subsequent development of the midwifery selection process was the aim of this study. In so doing there are areas to consider for development: namely, the information sent to undergraduate candidates prior to selection day and the interview environment. Reflecting upon the midwifery group interviews I have recently facilitated and individual interviews from last year, I think of a description from Ingold and Vergunst's book (2008: 1): "Every step faces both ways: it is both the ending, or tip, of a trail that leads back through our past life, and a new beginning that moves us forward towards future destinations unknown."

How the group interview grows and develops will involve continuous reflection, participant evaluation and evidence-based research, to prove the method of selection successful. Ultimately the measure of that success will be evidenced by undergraduate candidates who complete the course, prosper in the clinical environment and populate the midwifery workforce of the future. **TPM**

*Name changed for confidentiality

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