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Original Article

Working experiences of nursing aides in nursing homes: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine how nursing aides in nursing homes perceived their caring work.
Methods: Twenty-four nursing aides from one public and one private nursing home in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, China were selected and interviewed in focus groups. Phenomenological analysis was performed.
Results: Two themes (positive and negative working experiences) and six sub-themes were drawn: companionship, happiness, trust, achievement, hard work, and grievance.
Conclusion: A reasonable work arrangement, positive psychological intervention, and the strengthening of professional, medical and social supports are recommended to improve the work quality and satisfaction of nursing aides in elderly homes.

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1. Introduction

Populations are rapidly growing worldwide. China will also face a dramatic transition from a young to an ageing society in the next 30–40 years. In 2000, there were 88,110,000 people 65 years and older living in China, which represented 7% of the population, but has been predicted to increase to 23% by 2050 [1]. Nursing homes play a key role in providing health and long-term care for older adults in most developed countries [2]. In Taiwan, the percentage of the elderly population expected to move into a long-term care facility upon becoming frail increased from 28% in 2005 to 42% in 2009 [3]. Nursing home care has become a popular care option for older frail adults in mainland China.

A recent online survey showed that for the first time, care of older people ranked first among issues raised by citizens [4].

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Nursing aides are the largest elderly care workforce that provides care to older people in residential elderly care facilities [5]. Although the education, training and qualifications required for nursing aides vary across countries, they generally possess basic vocational qualifications and require little training [6]. Nursing aides in China are primarily workers laid off from previously state-run factories and migrant workers from rural villages. They often do not have any training in elderly care or nursing home care before they begin working in nursing homes. For most working adults in urban cities, frontline jobs in nursing homes are associated with low pay, social status and prestige [1].

Nursing home care can be divided into four main categories in accordance with the health, rehabilitation, nursing, feeding, and activities of the daily living needs of older residents [1]. For example, a median of 58% of nursing home residents suffer from dementia, and among those, 78% show behavioural and psychological symptoms [7]. Nursing home care workers are increasingly challenged to provide high-quality care, as their residents have different and often simultaneous needs, in addition to their dementia-related symptoms. There are many challenges in the day-to-day work of nursing aides, as the work has been described as emotionally and physically draining [8] due to heavy physical and psychological workloads [9]. These challenges can affect patient care [10]. In contrast to many currently available studies on the residents' perspectives of care, few have considered the nursing aides' experiences from their point of view.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is an approach to qualitative experiential research that has become increasingly popular over the past 10–15 years. This approach is rooted in psychology and recognizes the central role of the analyst in understanding participants' experiences [11]. These phenomena usually relate to experiences with personal significance, such as a major life event or the development of an important relationship. Such a qualitative approach can help improve our understanding of the phenomena being studied as individual experiences are captured, which we can analyse to understand the emotions and perceptions of nursing aides working in nursing homes.

2. Methods

This study was explorative and descriptive and used focus-group interviews for data collection. Focus groups are useful in capturing the interaction between participants who share experiences and perspectives, and in exploring beliefs and attitudes. It is thought that when people with something in common are in a group, they are more willing to share their feelings, thoughts and perceptions about the issue at hand [12].

2.1. *Participants*

A total of 24 nursing aide participants from one public and one private nursing home in Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, China (22 women and 2 men, aged 29–56 years old) who had been nursing aides for 2–8 years were selected through a purposeful sampling method. The participants were from different departments of the nursing homes, and each gave informed consent.

2.2. *Data collection*

Participants were informed in advance, and 90-min interviews were held in July 2014 in the public nursing home's meeting room. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and note taking. Participants received empathy and a gift from our research group in exchange for their participation. The 24 participants were interviewed in one focus group session, and the first author of the study functioned as moderator and facilitated discussion. The participants were encouraged to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings of being an elderly care nursing aide using the broad open-ended question: "How would you like to describe your experience and feelings in elderly care?" The discussion was allowed to evolve by listening carefully without expressing personal views or opinions, but interactions among the nursing aides were highly encouraged. After each expression, the first author asked for clarification and elaboration and guided follow-up discussions. At the same time, the expressions and attitudes of the interviewees were observed. The process was concluded when the last interview did not add any substantially new perspectives to the collected data.

2.3. *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. A phenomenological hermeneutic interpretation was performed to extract meanings from the work experiences of the nursing home nursing aides. The analysis was performed in several steps, as follows: 1. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and read through several times to understand and interpret the responses; 2. The text was divided into condensed meaning units; 3. The condensed meaning units were extracted and labelled with codes; 4. The codes were sorted into subcategories and categories by comparing their similarities and differences; 5. Themes were formulated as an expression of the latent text content; 6. The transcripts were given to the participants for comment or correction.

2.4. *Validity and reliability/rigor*

To illuminate how elderly care nursing aides perceived their work, purposeful sampling was conducted from two different types of nursing homes, one public and one private. The managers were excluded from the interviews, and the first author first expressed his own experiences as a nurse to arouse empathy, to encourage the participants to talk about their true feelings. Initial themes were carefully reviewed by the study team. Credibility was validated through confirmation and validation of the emerging codes and categories in subsequent discussion, and through analysis by three different researchers until an agreement was reached. Furthermore, the transcripts were returned to the participants for comment.

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