

PERCEIVED STRESS AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN DOCTOR OF NURSING PRACTICE STUDENTS

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There is little research among doctor of nursing practice (DNP) students, a fast-growing population of nurses engaged in doctoral study. In this descriptive correlational study, levels of perceived stress, sense of belonging, and the relationship between these variables were examined. The sample included 89 female, predominantly White, post-master's DNP students from a Midwest university. A statistically significant inverse relationship ($r = -.49$, $P < .01$) between perceived stress and sense of belonging was found. Recommendations for future research include additional studies of perceived stress and sense of belonging in diverse DNP student populations and in various DNP education models. (Index words: doctor of nursing practice (DNP); DNP students; Perceived stress; Sense of belonging) *J Prof Nurs 25:81–86, 2009. © 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.*

STRESS HAS BEEN identified in research to impede concentration, problem solving, decision making, completion of work, and other abilities necessary for student learning (Byars, 2005). Although students experience affirmation and optimism toward future opportunities, completing doctoral education undoubtedly gives rise to individual ambiguity in self-efficacy, emotions, and behaviors (Byars, 2005; Golden et al., 2005; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2004; McDermott, 2002; Piercy et al., 2005). Many nurses are unaware and unprepared for the roller coaster of affect, behavior, and attitude changes experienced along with the stress of doctoral education.

Defined as the psychological experience of fit and valued personal involvement in a system (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Colier, 1992), sense of belonging is another critical factor in students' achievement and behavior. Sense of belonging has been identified as a foundation for a variety of emotional and behavioral responses (Zielinski, 2004). Sense of belonging affects students' feelings about themselves, their engagement with other students and coursework, and their academic achievement (Osterman, 2000).

Previously unknown and unexplored in the literature, this study was to describe the levels of perceived stress and sense of belonging and the relationship between these variables among nurses enrolled in a post-master's doctor of nursing practice (DNP) program. Analysis of perceived stress and sense of belonging in DNP students is important because many nurses have a tendency to take care of others but ignore their own needs (Zerwekh & Claborn, 2006). This topic is also timely because DNP programs and the number of DNP students have grown over fivefold in recent years. Nine DNP programs were listed by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) in 2005; the number had increased to 60 DNP programs by early 2008 (AACN, 2005; AACN, 2008).

How do the educational strategies in the newly developed DNP programs affect students? The cohort model, for example, has been found to encourage sense of belonging and enhance student learning by providing an essential, effective and supportive environment for learning challenging and unfamiliar material (Ross, Stafford, Church-Pupke, and Bondy, 2006; Wall, Novak, & Wilkerson, 2005). Whether or not the cohort model affected DNP students' perceived stress and sense of belonging was also explored in this study.

Background

There were only two studies in the literature that involved students, perceived stress, and sense of belonging. Researchers in these two studies found that, when

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perceived stress levels were lowered, there was an increase in coping skills, sense of belonging, written test scores, and perceived cohesion scores (Williams et al., 2004; Rohe et al., 2006). There is no previous research linking the variables of perceived stress and sense of belonging among nursing students at any level.

With no literature available on DNP students, studies on doctoral students from related disciplines were explored. Perceived stress levels were found to be 2 standard deviations (SD) above the norm in graduate counseling students (Byars, 2005). In a qualitative study among medical students in the United Kingdom, every student identified stress and its ominous effects related to the pressures of providing health care, professional socialization, lack of guidance, and transitional periods between years of study with increased clinical responsibilities (Radcliffe & Lester, 2003). Other researchers reported that doctoral students described vacillating satisfaction, wavering personal relationships, vicissitudes of thought and emotion, and ambiguity in self-confidence (Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Kirby et al., 2004; McDermott, 2002; Piercy et al., 2005). However, not all of the effects of perceived stress were viewed as negative as medical students attributed increased motivation, better performance, and an increased focus on studies to stress (Radcliffe & Lester, 2003). Older student age, being married, and working long hours were also identified as doctoral students' characteristics that impacted academic performance and perceived stress level (Shields, 2002).

Based on organizational and motivational research from the workplace, sense of belonging was first addressed in the education literature in the 1980s (Osterman, 2000). The influence of the sense of belonging on psychosocial student factors, persistence, and academic stress was described by Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salmone (2002). Kember and Leung (2004) sampled adult college students (21% in post-graduate study) and found positive statistically significant relationships between sense of belonging, social support, self-determination, family negotiation, and self-negotiation. Radcliffe and Lester (2003) reported that fifth-year medical students felt that peer support (a similar construct to both sense of belonging and social support) was an important and valuable coping strategy for perceived stress. Rohe et al. (2006) confirmed a relationship between decreased perceived stress levels and increased perceived cohesion, another concept related to sense of belonging.

Using the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI), nursing research defined levels of sense of belonging to be lower in: (a) women than that in men, (b) those with incomes below \$40,000, and (c) those lacking spousal support (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). The same study also indicated improved psychosocial functioning occurred with a higher sense of belonging. There was a gap in the literature regarding sense of belonging and nursing student populations.

Methods

Design, Sample, and Setting

A descriptive correlational research design was used with a convenience sample of post-master's DNP students enrolled in a private Midwestern university. Inclusion criteria were: (a) current enrollment in the post-master's DNP program, (b) female gender (to secure deidentified data within the small pool of enrolled post-master's DNP male students), and (c) completed at least one class.

The sample of post-master's DNP students lived across the nation and attended DNP courses in an intensive format over four to six consecutive 8-hour days, with 2 to 4 months of subsequent online work and faculty feedback. Classes were held on campus or at remote cohort locations across the United States. Cohorts with a minimum of 10 post-master's DNP students typically completed four courses at the remote cohort site, taking the remaining DNP courses on campus. Students had the flexibility of enrolling in courses on campus or in remote cohort locations at various times during the year, without prescribed sequence, creating a unique course learning environment and an eclectic post-master's DNP student body in each course.

Procedure and Instruments

After the university's internal review board's approval was received, data were collected using three instruments: (a) personal characteristics questionnaire, (b) the SOBI-Psychological (SOBI-P) subscale, and (c) the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), using Qualtrics, an online survey software program. According to Dillman (2007), online surveying allowed for ease in administration and distribution to participants in diverse geographic locations, facilitated survey completion, and achieved a fast turn around response time.

Participants in this study were directed to limit their responses to each of the questions in light of their experiences as post-master's DNP students rather than to respond related to the overall stress in their lives. To accurately describe the sample, determine those who met inclusion criteria, and ascertain any variable effect of factors enumerated in the literature, 17 personal characteristics questions were asked. Factors indicative in the literature to perceived stress (age, marital status, number of children and/or aging relatives in the home, full- or part-time employment and school status, and life stressors) and to sense of belonging (socioeconomic status, gender, religious and community activity participation, and family support) were queried (Hagerty et al., 1996; Selye, 1974; Shields, 2002). Whether students enrolled in DNP courses as an individual or a cohort member or with a colleague or friend was determined in an effort to examine any effect the cohort model may have had on the variables of study.

The PSS is a self-report 14-item questionnaire that measures the degree that individuals perceive their life as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloading, with responses scored on a 5-point scale from *never* (0) to *very often* (4) for a possible perceived stress score range

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