



## Original research

## Japanese nursing students' sense of belonging: A story of Uchi (insider) and Soto (outsider)

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## ABSTRACT

Clinical placement experiences are the cornerstone of nursing education and a body of literature indicates that belongingness is fundamental to students' learning when undertaking placements. However, little is known about Japanese nursing students' sense of belonging and how it is influenced by their cultural values.

The aim of this paper is to profile a study that: measured the extent to which Japanese nursing students' experience a sense of belonging in clinical placements, and explored the factors that impact on and are consequences of that experience.

A mixed methods design was used with quantitative data collected using the Belongingness Scale-Clinical Placement Experience and qualitative data collected using semi-structured interviews.

Ninety-two third and fourth year students from a large regional university in Japan completed the questionnaire; of these six also participated in interviews.

The results identified similarities and differences between this and other studies of belongingness. Supportive and welcoming clinical environments facilitated participants' belongingness and motivation to learn. However, the belongingness scores of this sample were lower than those in all other studies. This may be explained, in part, by the Japanese cultural values of "Uchi (insider) and Soto" (outsider), which pervaded the participants' placement experiences and led to feelings of exclusion and alienation.

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## 1. Introduction

Clinical placement experiences are the foundation of contemporary nursing education for undergraduate nursing students. Clinical placements provide opportunities for authentic and experiential learning (Kim and Jung, 2012; Ashktorab et al., 2015), provide students with the opportunity to apply theory to practice (Kern et al., 2014; Sedgwick and Kellett, 2015; Walker et al., 2014), and facilitate their professional socialisation (Levett-Jones et al., 2009; Vinales, 2015). A number of studies confirm the importance of nurturing, supportive, friendly, and welcoming clinical environments (Kim and Jung, 2012; Gerrard and Billington, 2014).

By contrast, negative placement experiences can have a detrimental impact on students' willingness to question, as well as their confidence, self-esteem, self-concept, career choice, and learning (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009a; Ashktorab et al., 2015; Bickhoff et al., 2016; Grobecker, 2016; Henderson, 2014; Kim and Jung, 2012; Mohamed, 2014).

Students' subjective sense of belonging is a prerequisite for quality clinical learning experiences (Courtney-Pratt et al., 2012; Gerrard and Billington, 2014; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008). Although other international research has explored nursing students' belongingness experiences, no studies of this type have been conducted in Japan. Therefore, this paper adds an important dimension to the body of international research by exploring the belongingness experiences of Japanese nursing students.

## 2. Background

Seminal researchers suggest that the "need to belong" is a

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pervasive, universal and fundamental human need that influences emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes (Maslow et al., 1970; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). The concept of belongingness, as well as the consequences of having this need thwarted, have been investigated in the disciplines of psychology, social science and education in relation to family, friends, colleagues, work, educational and environment, social and community groups (Ashktorab et al., 2015; Malone et al., 2012). The inability to meet this need impacts health, social adjustment, and welfare (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Based on the importance of belongingness, Levett-Jones (2007) employed a mixed method study in Australia and the United Kingdom to measure and explore nursing students' belongingness experiences whilst undertaking clinical placements. The following definition was derived from that study:

*A deeply and contextually mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels (a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a group, (b) connected with or integral to the group and those of the group. The experience of belongingness may evolve passively in response to the actions of the group to which one aspires to belong and/or actively through the actions initiated by the individual (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009a, p.2872).*

Numerous studies have identified that belongingness is fundamental in fostering effective clinical learning (Gerrard and Billington, 2014; Kim, 2010; Kim and Park, 2011), positive learning behaviours (Freeman et al., 2007) and enhanced professional identity (Kern et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2014). In addition to this, belongingness also increases student satisfaction (Lamont et al., 2015; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008), motivation, confidence (Gerrard and Billington, 2014; Grobecker, 2016), and self-esteem (Begen and Turner-Cobb, 2012). Furthermore, belongingness results in fewer somatic and psychosomatic illnesses (Begen and Turner-Cobb, 2012), and increases interactions with mentors and clinical staff (Sedgwick et al., 2014), which leads to extending broader professional networks (Newton et al., 2009). Moreover, belongingness increases students' ability to provide quality patient care (Mohamed, 2014) and enhances academic achievement (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2007). It also has a direct impact on retention and career decisions (Metsälä et al., 2012; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008; Sedgwick and Yonge, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Vinales, 2015).

Conversely, alienation and negative interpersonal relationships, such as being excluded or rejected from groups, is considered to be the antithesis of belonging, and can cause deterioration in students' health and well-being, diminished self-esteem (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2007), and decreased motivation to learn (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008; Grobecker, 2016). Kern et al. (2014) suggest that nursing students who experience feelings of alienation and the resultant distress, anger and confusion, tend to adapt their behaviours to meet the expectations of nursing staff, and as a result, become less assertive and unwilling to adopt a questioning approach. In addition to this, students tend to lack the confidence to speak up when poor practise is witnessed and therefore, are more likely to conform to unethical practices in order to be accepted by clinical staff or mentors (Bickhoff et al., 2016; Levett-Jones and Bourgeois, 2015; Vinales, 2015).

### 2.1. Belongingness Scale-Clinical Placement Experience

The Belongingness Scale-Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE) (Levett-Jones, 2007) is a valid and reliable tool that has been

used to explore this construct in Korea (Kim and Jung, 2012), Australia (Levett-Jones et al., 2007), United Kingdom (Levett-Jones et al., 2007), Finland (Metsälä et al., 2012), Australia in the field of Midwifery (Mckenna et al., 2013), Iran (Ashktorab et al., 2015), Canada (Sedgwick, 2013) and the United States (Grobecker, 2016). However, little is known about Japanese nursing students' sense of belonging and more importantly how this fundamental need is influenced by Japanese cultural values. There is an opportunity to more fully understand and potentially improve Japanese nursing students' placement experiences by examining their belongingness experiences and the factors that impact on and are consequences of that experience.

## 3. Methods

A sequential mixed method approach was utilised in this study. Quantitative data were collected to measure the extent to which nursing students experience a sense of belonging whilst on clinical placement. This stage of the study was followed by a qualitative phase with in-depth interviews used to elicit students' perspectives of clinical placements and the factors that impact on and are consequences of belongingness.

## 4. Context of the study

A large regional university in Southern Honshu, Japan, was chosen for this study. This university has one main campus and two satellite campuses in the region. The study was conducted at one of the satellite campuses which offers a four-year bachelor of nursing degree. Like many universities in Japan, this university has an affiliated hospital where most of the participants' clinical placements were conducted. Additionally, students undertake placements in other nearby clinical facilities such as: public health, community nursing and palliative care centres. Academic staff supervise students while they are on placement and in some healthcare facilities clinical facilitators are also appointed to support students. Although facilitators are expected to have at least five years nursing experience, in addition to a post-graduate certificate in a specialised area, these requirements are often waived due to the shortage of available staff. Students' clinical placements commence at the end of second year and continue throughout the remainder of their degree. Each student undertakes 736 clinical placement hours in total.

## 5. Research participants

Purposive sampling was utilised to recruit third and fourth year nursing students who had completed a variety of clinical placements. Second year nursing students were excluded because they had limited clinical placement experiences. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university ethics committees prior to contacting potential participants.

## 6. Data collection

Quantitative data were collected using the BES-CPE, an instrument designed to measure nursing students' sense of belonging in the clinical environment (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). The BES-CPE is a 34 item self-report instrument which uses a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = Never true, 2 = Rarely true, 3 = Sometimes true, 4 = Often true and 5 = Always true. Four items (Q10, Q14, Q22 and Q26) are reverse scored to minimise response bias. Previous evidence of the scale's validity has been established (Kim and Jung,

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