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Belongingness: A critique of the concept and implications for nursing education

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Summary Clinical experience is recognised as central to nursing education. Quality clinical placements across a range of venues are vital to the development of competent and confident professionals. However there is evidence, both empirical and anecdotal, suggesting that nursing students' clinical placement experiences are often fraught with problems. These problems are long standing and multi-dimensional. For many students clinical placements are typified by feelings of alienation and a lack of belongingness. This paper proposes that the problematic nature of clinical placements may be better understood through the lens of 'belongingness'. A critical review of selected studies drawn from the psychological and social science literature provides insight and useful direction for a more focused review of the nursing literature. The potential relationships between belongingness, nursing students, and their clinical placement experiences are then exemplified by excerpts taken from the nursing literature (including unpublished material). Finally, an ongoing study that seeks to address the paucity of empirical research in this area is highlighted.

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Introduction

Clinical experience is recognised as central to nursing education. Quality clinical placements across a range of venues are vital to the development of competent and confident professionals. However there is evidence, both empirical and anecdotal,

suggesting that nursing students' clinical placement experiences are often fraught with problems (e.g. [Clare et al., 2003](#)). These problems are long standing and multi-dimensional. For many students clinical placements are typified by feelings of alienation and a lack of belongingness ([Goh and Watt, 2003](#)). This paper proposes that the problematic nature of clinical placements may be better understood through the lens of 'belongingness'. A critical review of selected studies drawn from the psychological and social science literature provides insight and useful direction for a more focused review of the nursing literature. The potential relationships between belongingness, nursing students, and their clinical placement experiences are then exemplified by excerpts taken from the nursing literature (including unpublished material). Finally, an ongoing study that seeks to address the paucity of empirical research in this area is highlighted.

Belongingness – the concept

Human beings are social creatures; the need to belong and be accepted is fundamental and drives much of human pursuit, activity and thinking. In turn, the converse of social exclusion can be devastating ([Baumeister and Leary, 1995](#)). There is a broad range of social science and psychological literature that details the importance of belonging, as well as the deleterious emotional, psychological, physical and behavioural consequences of having this need thwarted. Before turning to an examination of these factors, belongingness will firstly be defined.

There are several complementary definitions of belongingness in the literature that reflect elements of the discipline from which they originated. Social scientists have defined belongingness as the experience of personal involvement (in a system or environment) to the extent that the individual feels himself (sic) to be an integral part of that system ([Anant, 1967](#)). In undertaking a concept analysis of belongingness [Hagerty et al. \(1992\)](#) identified two additional defining attributes: valued involvement (the experience of being valued, needed and accepted), and fit (that is the person's perception that his characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment). [Maslow \(1987\)](#), in a seminal work aimed at understanding what constitutes human need, reiterates these descriptions in his explanation of belongingness as the human need to be accepted, recognised, valued and appreciated by a group of other people.

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of belongingness is based on the work of the psychologists [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#) and further developed by [Somers \(1999, p.16\)](#). It defines belongingness as 'the need to be and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels...which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance, caring and valuing to others'.

Theoretical perspectives

[Maslow \(1987\)](#) posited a motivational hierarchy with five sets of goals or 'basic needs': physiological, safety and security, belonging and acceptance, self-esteem and finally self-actualisation. He theorized that unless each stage of the needs hierarchy is met, people will be unable to focus successfully on the needs of the next level. Thus in terms of belongingness, according to Maslow, progress towards achieving self-esteem or true self-actualisation will be thwarted unless belongingness, acceptance and appreciation are experienced first. However, as pointed out by [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#), this theory was accompanied neither by original data nor review of previous findings. Maslow himself readily admitted that while his theory conformed to known facts, clinical, observational and experimental, it was derived mostly from clinical experience ([Maslow, 2000](#)). He further suggested that his theory should "stand or fall, not so much on facts currently available or evidence presented, as upon researches yet to be done ([Maslow, 2000, p. 253](#))".

Testing the hypothesis

[Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#) also theorised that belongingness is a fundamental human motivation. In an extensive critical review of empirical evidence from the last three decades, these authors hypothesised that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. They proffered that for a motivation to be truly fundamental it should influence a broad range of human activity and be capable of offering viable and consistent interpretations of patterns observed in historical, economic, or sociological studies. Furthermore [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#) suggested that if belongingness is a fundamental need then aversive reactions to a loss of belongingness should include ill effects such as maladjustment, stress, behavioural

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