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The status of professional identity and professional self-efficacy of nursing students in China and how the medical documentaries affect them: A quasi-randomized controlled trial

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Professional identity and self-efficacy are important for the education and career development of students. However, how to improve these factors among Chinese nursing students needs further study. This quasi-randomized control trial was designed to explore the effect of medical documentaries on professional self-efficacy and identity among nursing students in Chinese technical schools.

Methods: A total of 277 nursing students were enrolled in this study and divided into an experimental group ($n = 135$) and a control group ($n = 142$). The experimental group was invited to watch Chinese medical documentaries, whereas the control group remained on a waiting list. A self-designed general questionnaire, along with professional identity and professional self-efficacy questionnaires, was completed by the nursing students.

Results: No significant change in professional self-efficacy was observed (-3.55 ± 14.23 , $P = 0.173$) in the experimental group, while professional identity significantly declined (-6.24 ± 12.85 , $P = 0.002$) after the intervention. No significant change was found in the two aspects in the control group.

Conclusion: Medical documentaries negatively affect professional identity but do not affect professional self-efficacy. Further researches should be conducted to explore the real reasons.

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1. Introduction

Nurses are important in healthcare institutions. However, the continued decline in annual recruitment [1] and attrition rate of nurses [2] have led to a growing worldwide shortage [3], which may affect the quality of care they provide. Finding a qualified nurse is money and time consuming; hence, nursing educational facilities should develop a teaching system that encourages nursing students to continue in this career and prepares them to an ever-changing healthcare environment [4].

Nursing students in Chinese technical schools are trained for 3 years in basic medical knowledge and operating techniques after they finish junior high school. These students share unique features. First, most of the students are approximately 18 years old;

student of this age may not have any strong opinions about a future job, which means their professional value could still be shaped through education [5]. Second, the educational system of Chinese technical schools is poorly developed. More attention is paid to theoretical knowledge and practical skills than to cognition and perceived abilities, which are needed in the nursing career. Moreover, required courses such as “Introduction to nursing,” “Nursing ethics,” and other similar topics are lacking. Few studies in China have examined pedagogical skills for elevating the professional psychological status of nursing students in technical schools.

Several theories, including socialization theory, have been proposed to achieve this objective. Socialization is classically defined as the process by which individuals acquire and internalize the values, norms, roles, and skills that enable them to function as members of their cultural group [6]. Four mechanisms underlie socialization: internal reinforcement, external reinforcement, social comparison, and self-identity. In internal reinforcement, individuals can reinforce their existing beliefs based on their experience and then build their evaluation criteria. In external

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reinforcement, the behavior of people with similar social characteristics can greatly affect belief building. In social comparison, people can decide what to do or what to think by comparing themselves with people having similar social characteristics. In self-identity, people can transform what they have heard, seen, and felt into their own thoughts. The socialization process in professions has been studied widely. Some researchers have proposed that the socializing influences to which students are exposed during their professional education may have a greater impact on their future practice than the academic and clinical information they learn [7]. The goal of professional training is to prepare its participants to enter new roles. This preparation entails learning new skills, behavior patterns, and norms; internalizing values and attitudes; and acquiring self-identification with a specific role [8,9]. Among these goals, two key concepts are discussed in this study.

One concept is professional identity, which is known in the social sciences as career, occupational, or vocational identity [10] and refers to “one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motive, and experiences” [11]. Professional identity is a critical factor in providing a high level of care to optimize patient outcomes [12,13]. This factor elicits negative effects in a stressful workplace [14–16] and minimizes attrition rates [17,18]. The lack of a professional identity may contribute to why nursing students and nurses leave the program or their vocations [19]. Moreover, professional identity is a constant preoccupation when recognizing a well-defined nursing role [20]. Thus, strategies that help create a well-defined role are essential in forming professional identity.

Another important concept is professional self-efficacy. According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1997), self-efficacy is the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute a course of actions to fulfill particular objectives [21]. Successful past experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological and psychological states comprise the foundations for the development of self-efficacy [21]. Self-efficacy determines our motivations, emotions, and behaviors [22,23]. It varies in different situations [24], and specific self-efficacy can capably predict behaviors and attitudes in specific situations [25]. Hackett and Betz [26] introduced professional self-efficacy into career fields and suggested that it can produce desired outcomes and change environmental perceptions. A meta-analysis by Stajkovic and Luthans [27] revealed a positive association between professional self-efficacy and job-related performance on the basis of the effect size of 144 studies. People with low professional self-efficacy have low motivation to confront problems. Furthermore, nurses with high self-efficacy are motivated more internally compared with outside pressures for their careers [28]; hence, they are able to understand and perform practical tasks [29]. Thus, schools need to improve the levels of professional self-efficacy.

For a number of reasons, a tense relationship exists in China between medical professionals and patients [30]. This relationship has drawn societal attention. Researchers are trying to ease this tension through various means, including medical documentaries, which are produced by the media and shown on television. These medical documentaries seek to familiarize people with actual hospital situations so they could appreciate medical professionals instead of blame them. In some sense, medical documentaries can be viewed as tools for professional socialization. However, few trials have been conducted to prove its effects. Consequently, we wondered if these medical documentaries could influence the professional identity and self-efficacy of nursing students.

Therefore, the purposes of this study are twofold: 1) Explore the status of professional identity and self-efficacy of nursing students in technical schools; 2) Explore the effects of medical documentaries on nursing students’ professional identity and self-efficacy.

2. Materials and methods

Our method is a quasi-randomized controlled trial in a three-year nursing technical school in China. This study was conducted from September 2015 to January 2016.

All students involved in the study signed an informed consent before completing the measures (guardians of students under 18 years old received a call to ask for their permission). This study has been approved by the local Research Ethics Committee.

2.1. Participants

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. Criteria for selecting the subjects were as follows: 1) full-time students of the school; 2) students who had completed courses in accordance with the teaching program; 3) physically and psychologically healthy students; 4) students who agreed to participate in this study; and 5) students who had never watched a medical documentary.

2.2. Randomization

To avoid communication between students in the same class, the researchers recruited students by taking a whole class as one unit. Six classes were involved in this study. Computer-generated random numbers were used to assign three classes to the experimental group and the other three to the control group.

2.3. Intervention

The medical documentaries, which were used as interventions, were of a serial program named “Life Ties” that is played on Beijing TV. One episode is broadcasted weekly, and each episode lasts for approximately an hour. These medical documentaries have two components. First, they tell real stories that highlight the dedication of medical professionals as they work together to save lives and respond to various demands. Some scenes show how this trait earns people’s respect. Second, the documentaries show the difficulties medical professionals face when confronted with various work contradictions and challenges. These medical documentaries seek to familiarize people with actual situations in the hospital so that they would appreciate medical professionals. Video clips were shown once weekly; each showing lasted 4 h, and the whole study lasted four months. After watching each documentary, the students were encouraged to express and discuss their feelings with each other. We made sure that all of the included students have never watched the documentary before. The control group was included on a waiting list and received standard teaching methods consistent with the existing program.

2.4. Instruments

2.4.1. Demographics questionnaire

The questionnaire was self-designed and sought to collect demographic data, including gender, age, living situation (urban or rural), family status (only child or with siblings), part-time employment experience (if yes, whether the job is related to nursing), and other organized experiences and activities.

2.4.2. Professional identity questionnaire for nursing students

This questionnaire was a 17-item, self-reporting scale with five dimensions: professional self-image, benefit of retention and risk of turnover, social comparison and self-reflection, independence of career choice, and social modeling. Items were graded from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), with scores ranging

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