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Review Article

Psychological Safe Environment: A Concept Analysis

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KEYWORDS

psychological safety;
simulation;
nursing education;
concept analysis

Abstract

Background: Nursing students are increasingly participating in simulation-based learning experiences. The psychological safety of these environments has an effect on learning. Clarity surrounding antecedents, attributes and consequences of this concept can assist nurse educators in providing an optimal simulation learning environment.

Design: Using the Walker and Avant method, a concept analysis of psychologically safe learning environment in simulation was conducted.

Results: Psychological safe learning environments in simulation contain three defining attributes. 1) ability to make mistakes without consequences; 2) the qualities of the facilitator and; 3) foundational activities such as orientation, preparation, and objectives and expectations.

Conclusion: This concept analysis provides a clear definition of psychologically safe learning environments in simulation and will facilitate the application of this concept in simulation-based learning activities.

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High-fidelity patient simulation (HFPS) as a pedagogy has been integrated into most of the nursing education programs during the past decade. Educators and researchers are continually exploring optimal ways to develop, execute, and debrief HFPS to provide an optimal learning experience for participants. An important area identified in the simulation literature is the concept of a

safe environment within HFPS. Paige (2016) describes the need to clarify some of the undefined concepts in HFPS. Psychologically safe learning environment within the context of HFPS is one area where minimal research has been conducted. There is existing literature on safe learning environments (Fey, Scrandis, Daniels, & Haut, 2014; Ganley & Linnard-Palmer, 2012; Henricksen, Altenburg, & Reeder, 2017; Rudolph, Raemer, & Simon, 2014); however, the focus and attainment of psychological safety ranges widely.

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A literature search on the concept of psychologically safe learning environments revealed various disciplinary uses, definitions, terms, and emerging topics. Therefore, the purpose of this concept analysis is to clarify the meaning of psychologically safe learning environment in the context

Key Points

- Psychologically safe learning environments are essential for optimal learning within simulation.
- Student learning is enhanced with students perceiving a psychologically safe learning environment in simulation.
- Defining attributes include making mistakes without consequences, qualities of the facilitator, and orientation activities.

of human patient simulation (HPS) using the approach by Walker and Avant (2011). In addition, identifying defining attributes, antecedents, and consequences will allow for HFPS educators to ensure they are creating and maintaining a psychologically safe learning environment for their learners.

Background

The concept of psychological safety in nursing education is not a new phenomenon. Fowler and Rigby (1994) argued that students experienced distrust and anxiety

during experiential learning activities as they perceived the facilitators as lacking in skills and expertise to provide for the psychological safety of participants. Psychological safety in the health care environment is linked to participants engaging in self-correcting behaviors, as they do not believe they will be punished for mistakes (Aranzamendez, James, & Toms, 2015; Lyman, Ethington, King, Jacobs, & Lundeen, 2017; Tucker & Edmondson, 2003). In studies that addressed psychological safety in simulation, researchers found that increased stress impairs knowledge recall and decreases clinical performance during simulation (Harvey, Bandiera, Nathens, & LeBlanc, 2012), whereas psychological safety is associated with a decrease in anxiety in stressful situations (Ignacio et al., 2015). Psychological safety influences learning in a simulation environment.

Currently in nursing education, the concept of psychological safety in simulation is often associated with simulation-based experiences (SBEs) that include patient death (Baile & Walters, 2013; Bartlett, Thomas-Wright, & Pugh, 2014; DeMaria et al., 2010). This is in large part because of the emotional stress that these situations can create. It is believed that introducing these emotionally stressful situations in a simulated event with a structured debriefing would allow the participant to feel better supported and less anxious when encountering these situations in the clinical setting (Harvey et al., 2012; Twigg & Lynn, 2012). Although these are undoubtedly situations that can be emotionally stressful, this is not the only environment

that elicits emotional distress that requires a psychologically safe learning environment.

In SBEs, educators and researchers may add emotional stressors to the simulation, either intentionally or unintentionally (DeMaria et al., 2010; Gillan, Jeong, & van der Riet, 2014). In these situations, participants may indicate that the stress in the simulation was helpful in preparing them to manage stress and anxiety in similar situations (Ignacio et al., 2015), whereas others may indicate that the stress was excessive (Nielsen & Harder, 2013). In reviewing the literature, the issue is neither the context of the simulation nor whether to introduce emotional stressors in the simulation; the issue instead is that the simulation is conducted in a psychologically safe environment. The literature is not consistent with what a psychologically safe environment in HFPS entails, which was the impetus for conducting this concept analysis.

The method by Walker and Avant of conducting a concept analysis was used. The purpose of conducting a concept analysis is to determine the structure of a concept and break it down into simpler parts. It is used to clarify overused and vague concepts to promote a shared understanding of what is meant by the concept. Creating psychologically safe learning environments is considered essential in the simulation literature (Henricksen et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2009); however, it is not indicated within the literature how this should be attained. What is missing from the literature is a shared understanding and definition of what psychologically safe learning environments specifically entail. The method by Walker and Avant recommends examining the concept from a broad perspective by including literature beyond a single discipline and to cluster the commonly found characteristics of the concept to create the attributes of the concept. Given that the method by Walker and Avant allows for the broadest insight into the concept, it was chosen for this concept analysis.

Data Sources

A literature search was conducted using the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature, PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and ABI/INFORM databases using the keywords psychological safety, nursing, health professions, medicine, simulation, and/or education. Articles that were included in the concept analysis included those published in the English language in peer-reviewed journals between the years 2000 and 2016. Articles included in the analysis were related to health care, organizational management, and education. These were included as there was in-depth discussion regarding the safe environment. Although there were articles in the field of aviation, these were excluded as these articles did not address means to create and/or maintain a safe environment in simulation.

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