Preparation of undergraduate health and care students from the United Kingdom in an international learning experience in Japan: A phenomenological study

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Introduction

Developing cultural competence, is an important element of health and care (H&C) students' professional and personal development (Potts, 2015). This can enable delivery of culturally competent care to diverse populations in a world transformed by closer commercial integration, increases in economic migrants, and people seeking refugee status (Brown et al; 2015; Hassan, 2017). Literature acknowledges international placement experiences allow H&C students to engage with local people and experience customs and social practices that differ from their own (Crawford et al., 2017). This supports the development of cultural competence and awareness of global health issues (Gower 2017). Consequently, Browne and Featherstone 2018 recommend undergraduate H&C programmes include international learning experiences.

There is little research examining the impact of preparation students receive before international experiences. However, there is evidence that students experience anxiety before and during international visits (Brown et al., 2016; Lovett, 2018). These include lack of insight into the country being visited and fear of not adapting to different environments (Gower, 2017). These may negatively impact on students' ability to learn and develop cultural competence skills. To address this, Chan et al., (2018) argue pre-departure preparation is essential when planning international learning experiences (Chan et al., 2018). Gower (2017) claims academics have an essential role in preparing students for the cultural differences they will encounter. However, challenges associated with this include academics requiring insight into the culture they are visiting and, awareness of their own biases and prejudices (Cone and Hayley, 2016). This may explain some of the evidence suggesting that student preparation is ineffective in supporting adaptation to unfamiliar environments (Curinckx et al., 2018).

This study is original as it investigates an under-researched area of practice. The focus is identification of the fears and anxieties experienced by a group of interprofessional undergraduate H&C students before a 1-week cultural exchange to Japan after attending

two pre-departure briefings. The potential negative impact these may have on students' ability to learn is discussed. These are applied to constructivist (Piaget, 2001) and humanist (Rogers, 1983) learning theories. Recommendations for future practice to prepare interprofessional undergraduate H&C student groups for international visits are made.

Theoretical Background

Cultural competence can be described as continuously developing and enhancing knowledge, skills, and attitudes to deliver care based on an individual's cultural beliefs (Papadopolous, 2006). Calvillo et al (2009) suggest this encompasses developing insight into cultural influences, such as health beliefs and perceptions of health and illness. Repo et al., (2017) maintain cultural competence enhances H&C by ensuring care delivered reflects cultural and individual needs. Undergraduate H&C programmes within the U.K. are recommended to include international perspectives within the curriculum (Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) (2014); Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2018), to promote insights into H&C needs of people from different cultures. U.K. health education faculties' engagement in international learning includes student and staff exchanges (Baltruks and Daly, 2018). This recognises the value of embedding cultural competence education in undergraduate H&C programmes (Horvart et al; 2014) which may include international learning opportunities. However, cultural learning is not an automatic consequence of an international learning opportunity (Keogh and Russel-Roberts, 2009), due to challenges students encounter when adjusting to learning in diverse cultures.

Humanistic learning theories (Rogers, 1983) suggest students are intrinsically motivated to learn and the educator is instrumental in providing a sense of belonging by ensuring the learning environment is safe and welcoming. Constructivist learning theories (Piaget, 2001) focus on active engagement in learning and assimilation of new knowledge to what is already known. However, anxiety associated with the learning environment can lead to difficulties with engagement and making sense of new information (Rogers 1985; Piaget,

2001). Therefore, educators require skills to facilitate learning in new and challenging environments. Evidence from social and psychological sources recognise that belonging is an integral component of human motivation (Levett Jones and Lathlean, 2008). Increased anxiety related to the learning environment, can have a negative impact on students sense of belonging (Levett Jones and Lathlean, 2008) which can hinder learning (Kamali et al., 2017) as feeling excluded reduces cognitive processing ability (Baumeister et al., 2002).

A source of anxiety for students undertaking international learning opportunities is related to intercultural communication as they lack knowledge and skills to adjust how they communicate with those from different cultures (Wolfe Kohlbry, 2016). Gundykunst and Mody's (2002) Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory identifies uncertainty as a cognitive response, produced when an individual is unable to predict the feelings and perspectives of others. The emotional response to this is anxiety, which generates stress and nervousness. Cultural uncertainty results in elevated levels of anxiety and uncertainty (Duranto et al; 2005). This can result in avoiding communication with others, abruptly terminating conversations or relying on stereotypes when interpreting information. Consequently, learning may be hindered. Gudykunst and Nishisda, (2001) suggest anxiety and uncertainty impact on perceived effectiveness of communication between those in the Western Cultures and Japan. They conclude that managing uncertainty and anxiety is necessary to ensure successful communication in interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

Cultural competence development following international clinical experiences has been documented (Maltby et al., 2016). However, there is limited research focusing on exchanges where the objective is learning about, and engagement with, the culture of the country visited (Chan et al., 2018). Cultural learning is known as co-curricular or cooperative learning (Chan et al., 2018) forming part of the informal or hidden curricula (Leask, 2009 p.205); and is not considered an essential element of H&C education programmes.

Japan as a Destination for U.K H&C students and Japanese Culture

Literature highlights cultural differences between the U.K and Japan such as, respect for and, maintaining harmony with others, and controlling public displays of emotion (Tanaka et al; 2010). Japanese culture focuses on values, including "patience, modesty and hospitality" (Sakashita, 2018 p. 50). Status and hierarchy are embedded in Japanese society (Sakashita, 2018). These values translate into what is considered acceptable behaviour in Japan. For example, speaking loudly and having audible mobile phone ring tones when on public transport (Sakakibara, 2017) are discouraged. There is an established and complex ritual of gift-giving embedded within Japanese society (Lotz, et al., 2003). Unusual food, different language, and distinct dress codes, associated with unfamiliar cultures (Pawar, 2017) are evident in Japan. These cultural differences may explain why only five students from U.K universities educating professions allied to nursing, health, and medicine, participated in overseas experiences to Japan in the academic year 2014-15 (Council of Deans for Health 2017).

There is limited research focused on the impact of preparation students receive before international experiences. Furthermore, there is no published literature examining this in relation to interprofessional undergraduate H&C student groups from the U.K. visiting Japan. This study will provide valuable insights into this complex phenomenon providing additional information for cultural visits in the future.

Context

The research was undertaken at a university in the South England. The Health Faculty has a Memorandum of Understanding with a Japanese partner. Annual cultural visits take place with undergraduate H&C students from the U.K. visiting Japan for nine days. Students in this study engaged in a co-curricular exchange, as learning was not clinically focused. The aim was for students to learn about Japanese culture and develop cultural competence by learning through classroom-based interaction with Japanese students, clinical observation in

hospital settings, and cultural sightseeing activities. All students attended two mandatory pre-departure briefings. These discussed how cultural differences between Japan and the U.K. translated into societal expectations; and provided guidance on managing these. Table 2 outlines the information students received.

Study Design

Aim

The study aimed to

- Explore thoughts and feelings experienced by undergraduate H&C students participating in a cultural exchange before departure; after they attended two mandatory pre-departure briefings and,
- Reveal the student voice in this unexplored area of H&C student education

Methods

The research was based on an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (I.P.A.). This approach was chosen as little is known about fears and anxieties H&C students from the U.K experience before participating in a visit to Japan. The aim was to examine the individual perceptions of the seven students (n=7) who participated in the study (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017). I.P.A. assumes knowledge is socially constructed, with the researcher's interpretation being an integral part of the research (Wagstaff et al., 2014). It is a dynamic process, intending to provide a thorough and detailed account of the participants experience to gain understanding of what it might mean to them (Cronin and Lowes, 2016). The researcher uses their perceptions to attempt to make sense of what an experience might mean for the participants and is referred to as the double hermeneutic (Smith, 2015). Researcher subjectivity, and potential biases, are evident throughout the I.P.A. research process. This was managed through "contextualised analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2014 p. 21) and a reflexive diary. In addition, independent verification, and participant validation were employed to establish rigour and trustworthiness of the findings (McGaha and D'Urso, 2019).

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit undergraduate H&C students visiting Japan in 2017 and 2018. The inclusion criteria were that all participants were undergraduate H&C students who participated in the cultural exchange to Japan in either 2017 or 2018. Students from Foundation Year programmes were excluded from the study. This enabled selection of participants that had experience of the phenomena investigated. Not all students undertaking the visits, participated in the study. Seventeen students joined the visits. Nine in 2017 and eight in 2018. Seven students participated in the study: three from 2017 and four from 2018. Participants were from Adult Nursing (AN) (n=3), Operating Department Practice (ODP) (n=2), Mental Health Nursing (MH) (n=1), and Occupational Therapy (OT) (n=1). Characteristics of the participants are shown in table 1.

Data Collection

Data was gathered via written reflective accounts from students before the visit. This was a voluntary activity. These reflective accounts enabled participants to reflect on their thoughts and feelings, related to the visit, in a written format. Headings of "Personal", "Professional", "Benefits", "Challenges" and "Barriers" were used to guide the reflections. These were in paper form and given to participants after the final briefing. Completed reflections were returned to the researcher in blank, sealed envelopes, on the day of departure.

Data Analysis

Analysis was via an adapted version of the I.P.A process. Each reflective account was read multiple times. Emerging themes were identified and recorded. Similar themes were coded. As new themes emerged, previously analysed surveys were revisited to determine if this was a new theme, or whether data could be clustered with an existing theme (Smith, 2015). Final themes were independently reviewed (Creswell and Miller, 2000) and following discussion, endorsed by a healthcare professional with a doctorate in education. The final

themes were sent to participants for member checking via email. All participants responded confirming the themes represented an accurate reflection of their pre-visit experience. This process aimed to validate the trustworthiness of the data (Seale, 1999).

Ethical Considerations

Full Ethical approval was gained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (17/FHW/17-009). Participants who volunteered to participate were provided with information prior to written consent being gained before data collection. Assurance was given that participation or withdrawal from the study would not impact on their studies. Participant privacy and anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Data were stored in accordance with research governance procedures in the University and Data Protection regulations (Data Protection Act 1998 & 2018). Anonymity was ensured by allocating participants with a pseudonym.

Findings

The findings highlight some of the anxiety experienced by the students before departure. Whilst preparation was different for both groups, anxieties and concerns expressed were similar. It is acknowledged the briefings may have contributed to this as the personal experiences of those leading the session may have influenced the responses (Trolian et al., 2016) as these were facilitate by people who had visited and worked in Japan.

Within the data, participants acknowledged they were enthusiastic about the visit. Mary (Year 3 ODP student) believed she:

> *"could learn new ways of delivering care to patients from nurses in Japan"*

Jo (Year 2 AN Student) was;

> *"Hoping this trip would allow me to meet people who come from different cultures"*

and Cheryl (Year 2 OT Student) was;

> *"really looking forward to comparing their cultures and ours"*

However, students expressed anxieties and concerns which were identified in three overarching themes: "Barriers to Learning", "Aspirations for Learning" and "Preparation". The overarching theme of "Barriers to Learning" is presented as there is no literature published that examines potential barriers to learning that U.K. undergraduate H &C students experience before undertaking a cultural exchange to Japan. It is noted that all the data related to this was under the reflective account heading of "Challenges". This suggests the students were experiencing anxiety prior to leaving for Japan. Within this theme of Barriers to Learning, three sub-themes emerged. These were: "being a stranger", "cultural differences" and "communication".

Overarching Theme: Barriers to Learning

- **Being a Stranger**

"Being a stranger" was associated with feelings of anxiety about travelling, sharing accommodation, and being with people they did not know. Students from a range of undergraduate H&C programmes were involved and most participants on each visit were nursing undergraduates (2017 n=7: 2018 n=4). This created unease for students from other professions before the visits.

Sue (Year 1 MH Student), commented she was nervous:

> "*going and living with strangers and I hope we all get along OK*".

Mary (Year 3 ODP Student), supported this stating:

> "*sharing rooms with people I did not know before [makes me] "anxious".*

However, the nursing students also expressed unease about being with people they did not know.

Jo (Year 2 AN Student), identified a challenge for her was:

> "*going [to Japan] with people I have never met before".*

Whilst Frida (Year 2 AN student) expressed concern about

"the group dynamics"

A male student Jack (Year 3 ODP Student) also expressed:

"fears of being alone because I was the only male student on the trip…and the host university is an all-female institution"

Barriers to Learning

- **Cultural Differences**

The theme of cultural differences suggests students understood that behavioural expectations in Japan would be different from those in the U.K. Sue (Year 1 MH Student) recognised that this resulted in her being:

"scared and anxious…it is very far away from everything I know"

whilst Jo (Year 2 AN Student) commented that she wanted:

"to make sure I am not offending them [the Japanese] in anyway".

Other students made specific comments about their concerns. Cheryl (Year 2 OT Student) noted that:

"the *culture of [giving] gifts amongst Japanese people is worrying me"*

and Frida (Year 2 AN Student) revealed concerns about her behaviour stating:

"I always thought of myself as clumsy, the exact opposite of what is culturally acceptable in Japan…..embarrassing myself is a worry".

The notion that differences in acceptable behaviour could be embedded in a culture was also expressed by Mary (Year 3 ODP Student) who stated:

"I have concerns that I will offend Japanese people with any behaviours that might be interpreted as rude or offensive due to different cultural customs"

What could be perceived as other culturally acceptable attributes, such as body image were also discussed by Cheryl (Year 2 OT Student), who commented:

"I am feeling concerned about my height and weight when travelling to Japan, I am worried I will appear very large".

The findings indicate that there was unease about cultural differences which was not confined to those associated with visiting a country with a different culture. There also appeared to be anxiety about professional differences as on both visits, most students were nursing undergraduates. For example, Jack (Year 3 ODP Student) expressed his feelings in his comment:

"I'm concerned about being overshadowed and not being able to stand outside the nursing umbrella"

Barriers to Learning

● **Communication**

No students spoke Japanese. Therefore, it was unsurprising communication was a concern. Mary (Year 3 ODP Student) stated that:

"I expect language to be a possible barrier"

this was echoed by Cheryl (Year 2 OT Student) who commented that:

"the language barrier seems to be the main barrier on my mind".

Sue (Year 1 MH Student) recognised her language limitations and said:

"I only know English and I am not very good at picking up new languages".

Whilst Frida (Year 2 AN Student) appeared to be concerned about coping with:

"a different language and unusual names".

These comments indicate that difficulty in communicating was a worry for them. Linda (Year 2 AN Student) felt the challenge of communication was complex and commented she was anxious about:

"speaking and listening but [also] understanding and being heard".

This comment implies anxiety about whether learning might be hindered due to the language barrier. It may also signify concerns regarding whether what was said would be understood by the Japanese people the participants interacted with. This was also highlighted by Sue (Year 1 MH Student) who was troubled that:

"[I] might not being able to get my points across easily and some things may be lost in translation".

Discussion

The visit aimed to facilitate student learning about Japanese culture. However, anxiety experienced before departure could have impacted on learning as conditions needed for learning to occur (Illeris, 2015) may have been absent. Arguably, all students were initially motivated (Rogers, 1983) to learn as the visit was voluntary and self-funded. However, the narratives highlight that the "unknown" was a source of anxiety. This included cultural uncertainty (Duranto et al 2005) which may have generated feelings of exclusion, reducing the students' ability to absorb and process new information during the visit (Baumeister et al., 2002; Kamali et al., 2017; Levett Jones and Lathlean, 2008). Whilst these authors did not examine the experiences of students engaging in cultural visits, the findings provide insight into the potential negative impact that anxiety and feelings of exclusion might have on students international learning experiences.

The findings reflect previous research associated with students undertaking international experiences such as adjusting to a different culture and managing language barriers (Maltby et al., 2016). However, concern relating to the culture of the student group is a new emergent theme. Students undertaking international activities need to have a sense of

belonging to build "strong positive personal relationships with others" (Lovett, 2018, p. 6). However, Lovett, (2018) relates this to those they meet, rather than those they are travelling with.

Students in this study were from diverse H&C professions and did not know each beforehand. This appeared to create anxiety, related to "fitting in" both personally and professionally. This could be related to limited understanding of professional values of students from alternative programmes, lack of personal contact with them prior to the visit (Hall, 2008) and fear their professional identity could be challenged (Best and Williams, 2019). This may impact upon their ability to learn from, and communicate with each other, and may result in an over reliance on stereotypes when doing so (Duranto et al 2005). Therefore, the findings from the current study add to the body of knowledge related to anxiety and uncertainty within an interprofessional international learning context by providing a nuanced understanding of the student's perception of themselves and other H&C professionals students.

Social activities arranged by host organizations during exchanges can create a welcoming environment and foster a sense of belonging for visiting students (Marshall, 2017). However, social events could also promote a sense of togetherness amongst the visiting group, as belonging is associated with interpersonal involvement with others and being accepted (Somers, 1999). This may reduce anxiety and promote learning within the visiting student group. The findings suggest interpersonal relationships with peers is viewed by students as an essential element of an international visit. This reflects Pawers' (2017) conclusions that peer support reduces the stress experienced whilst travelling abroad.

Challenges related to language and communication reflect findings from previous research (Wolfe Kohlbry, 2016). Whilst students could be supported to work with translators during pre-departure workshops, translators may not be effective in supporting learning, as the

cultural context of meaning may not be translatable (Strong et al., 2014). Furthermore, engaging interpreters might create additional barriers to learning about the culture as students have less opportunity to communicate directly with native speakers (Tuckett and Crompton, 2014). Moreover, the use of translators may increase the student's anxiety as this could highlight their cultural uncertainty (Duranto et al, 2005). A solution to reducing anxiety associated with communication could be providing language lessons before departure (Brown et al., 2016). This might reduce the negative impact of adjusting to a different language and lessen anxiety associated with this (Keeping, 2015). The ability to communicate in a different language could enable students to be mindful of the challenges associated with communication and potentially diminish uncertainty and anxiety (Gudykunst and Nishida 2001).

Pre-departure preparation of undergraduate H&C students enabling acclimatisation to the host country is an essential component of an international learning experience (Holmes et al., 2015). However, the content of pre-departure briefings and the impact this has on students' requires further investigation (Curinckx et al., 2018). The researcher in the current study would concur with this recommendation as despite attending pre-departure briefings, students were apprehensive about the cultural differences they would encounter. The results also indicate that cultural preparation needs to include socialisation within the visiting student group, particularly when this is a mixed interprofessional cohort.

Limitations

The sample was predominately female participants, therefore, the voice of the male student is underrepresented. It is acknowledged this might impact on the findings from the study (Abo-Zena, 2012). Briefings for each of the visits included different materials, which might have impacted on the perceptions each group had before departure. The reflective accounts were completed after the final pre-departure briefing. This might have influenced responses as information given may have created anxiety not previously present. I.P.A is associated

with the researcher bringing their perceptions and interpretations (Rodham et al., 2015) to the research process. The researcher was the accompanying academic, and had an "insider" perspective, with prior knowledge, and experiences (Berger, 2013). These may have influenced data analysis with themes being over-identified (Smith et al., 2009). Only one researcher was involved in data analysis. Therefore, value assumptions may be evident in multiple aspects of the study. However, member checking was employed to reduce this bias. The findings do nevertheless illuminate a previously under-researched area of H&C student education, providing valuable insights in the experiences of students' who received a briefing prior to undertaking a cultural exchange visit.

Recommendations

The findings provide valuable insights into the fears and anxieties undergraduate H&C students experienced before a cultural visit to Japan. These concerns could result in a reduced sense of belonging, increased stress, and feelings of exclusion which may negatively impact on learning. The findings suggest preparation is required to enable students to positively adjust to cultural differences and to facilitate group dynamics, especially when students do not know each other and are from different undergraduate H&C programmes.

It is recommended that strategies are implemented to ensure that the preparation for cultural visits to Japan meets the needs of those participating. This could be achieved by:

1. Workshops enabling students to voice concerns and anxieties, which can be addressed in briefings to enhance preparation for the visit.
2. Facilitating "getting to know you" sessions before the visit, to help facilitate relationships within the visiting student group.
3. Developing online resources that students can access such as links to websites, journals and books providing insight into Japanese history, culture, and traditions.
4. Providing students with basic Japanese language lessons.

5. SKYPE sessions with Japanese staff and students before the visit to help enhance a sense of belonging between the host country and visiting students.

Conclusion

This study identifies some of the fears and anxieties undergraduate H&C students from the UK participating in a cultural visit to Japan experienced before departure. The recommendations suggested above when implemented will enhance the preparation of future undergraduate H&C student groups visiting Japan. In doing so, potential barriers to learning may be reduced, allowing them to engage in meaningful knowledge development and enhance cultural competence skills.

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