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Original Article

Fostering Compassionate Nursing Practice: Integrating Virtue Ethics and the Right-Action Approach Through Critical Companionship

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Abstract

Background: The right-action approach typically articulated in codes of ethics, establishes fundamental standards for professional behavior but may fall short in fostering a compassionate mindset. In contrast, virtue ethics prioritizes the development of moral virtues essential for empathetic care. This paper investigates the integration of principles from both the right-action approach and virtue ethics within nursing education, aiming to enhance ethical reflection and critical thinking among nurses.

Methodology: It was an observational study based on the focus group discussions (FGDs). Each focus group consisted of 10 nurses and a total of three focus groups were conducted in a period of two months (November to December 2022). Nurses were recruited through a random sampling technique from the Koohi Goth Women Hospital, Karachi.

Results: Results indicated the important connection between the integration of both principles of right action and virtue ethics. Nurses experience that the addition of virtual ethics and the right action approach facilitates them to integrate ethical principles with practical reasoning, fostering patient-centered and evidence-based care. According to the responses generated through Focal Group Discussions (FGDs), most nurses emphasized the significance of nurturing skilled companionship through critical reflection in nursing practice. . . Furthermore, the role of codes of ethics was also underscored as foundational guidance for them, providing essential frameworks for ethical reflection and professional conduct, particularly in challenging care scenarios.

Conclusion: The integration of critical companionship complements the teachings of codes of ethics in nursing education and curriculum, contributing significantly to the development of competent and ethical nursing professionals.

Keywords

Critical Companionship, Virtual Ethics, Code of Conduct, Focus Group Discussion.

Introduction

Nursing education encompasses various approaches to ethics that guide nurses in providing compassionate and proficient care. One approach focuses on teaching nurses the principles of right action, as outlined in codes of ethics specific to nursing practice¹. These principles, such as non-discrimination, confidentiality, and informed consent, define the morally acceptable actions for nurses but often emphasize acts rather than the nurse's attitudes or virtues.

Another approach, advocated by van Hooft, emphasizes virtue ethics in ethics education for nurses². This approach places significant importance on cultivating a caring attitude as the foundation for exemplary nursing care. It goes beyond mere adherence to codes of ethics, aiming to empower nurses to navigate complex ethical dilemmas with integrity and compassion, especially in situations lacking clear guidelines¹.

The virtue ethics approach in nursing education is deeply rooted in ancient philosophical traditions, particularly Aristotle's concept of virtues as fundamental character traits that enable individuals to lead morally virtuous lives³. The impact of the virtue ethics approach on ethical decision-making is profound. Nurses trained in virtue ethics are equipped with the capacity to navigate ethical dilemmas by drawing upon moral virtues and principles rather than relying solely on external guidelines². They are better prepared to balance competing ethical considerations, prioritize patient well-being, and act with integrity and compassion⁴.⁵. This approach underscores the significance of context, relationships, and moral character in guiding ethical decision-making processes.

Nursing ethics education often emphasizes the principles of a right-action approach, defining how nurses should behave to deliver effective care⁵⁻⁸. This approach is crucial in providing a structured framework for ethical decision-making and professional conduct in healthcare settings. Codes of ethics, prevalent in many Western European countries, serve as guiding documents that outline the expected moral behavior of nurses⁵⁻⁸.

However, while codes of ethics provide essential guidelines, they have faced criticism for their limited focus on external behaviors rather than nurturing a deeper moral attitude among nurses^{2, 9, 10}. Critics argue that adherence to codes alone may not ensure good nursing care, as genuine caregiving requires more than just following rules—it necessitates a compassionate and empathetic attitude toward patients.

Critical companionship emphasizes the learning process and the essential role of practical reason (prudence) in cultivating virtues¹¹. By placing student nurses in clinical settings under the guidance of mentors, they can effectively learn ethics in a practical context. This method encourages student nurses to reflect on their practice, fostering self-awareness and critical thinking about their actions.

Codes of ethics in nursing provide essential guidance for both inexperienced and experienced nurses¹¹. For novice nurses, they offer clear-cut principles to direct professional behavior, such as non-discrimination, confidentiality, and informed consent. For seasoned nurses, codes of ethics can serve as beacons that stimulate reflection on their practice, particularly in chaotic care contexts¹¹. The critical companionship method complements the teaching and practice of codes of ethics in nursing education and training. By fostering critical reflection and cultivating the virtuous attitude of caring, critical companionship can significantly contribute to the development of skilled and ethical nurses¹². The International Council of Nurses Code (2000) provides a valuable resource for ethical reflection in daily practice¹³, as demonstrated in the workbook by Fry and Johnstone¹⁴. This workbook offers practical pointers, background information, case studies, and aids to facilitate ethical reflection, ensuring that codes of ethics remain relevant and applicable in various care contexts.

Methodology

The study employed specific inclusion criteria to ensure the participants were representative and relevant to the research objectives. Nurses who

met the following criteria were included: a minimum of one year of clinical experience, currently employed at Koochi Goth Women Hospital, and willing to participate in focus group discussions. Exclusion criteria involved nurses with less than one year of experience, those not currently working at Koochi Goth Women Hospital, and individuals unwilling to engage in focus group discussions.

The sample size calculation was determined based on statistical considerations to achieve adequate representation and meaningful insights. Considering the complexity of the topic and the desire for diverse perspectives, a sample size of 30 nurses across three focus groups (10 nurses per group) was deemed sufficient. This sample size was chosen to ensure a balance between the depth of discussion within each group and the overall breadth of experiences captured across the three groups.

The focus group discussions (FGDs) were structured to explore a range of themes related to the nurses' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in the healthcare setting.

The study timeline spanned from November to December 2023, allowing for in-depth discussions and data collection within a reasonable timeframe. This timeframe was selected to minimize potential bias from external factors and to capture a snapshot of the nurses' experiences during that period.

During the FGDs nurse's questions revolve around the concept of 'critical companionship,' for searching the empathic factor in them. Also, integrated questions designed to know the benefits of both approaches—principles of right action and virtue ethics and their possible coexistence could provide a holistic understanding of ethical care.

Result

The majority of nurses from FGDs emphasize the principles of a right-action approach, defining how nurses should behave to deliver effective care. They

concluded that the codes of ethics play a role in setting ethical norms, they must be complemented by educational strategies that foster a caring attitude among nurses. Most of the nurses admit that the integration of ethical principles and moral character development during their course of study is crucial in preparing nurses to navigate ethical challenges and provide compassionate, patient-centered care in diverse healthcare settings. Nurses utter the importance of empathy, compassion, integrity, honesty, and resilience as a foundation to deliver patient-centered care and nurture positive therapeutic relationships.

Nurses who embody these virtues are more attuned to patients' emotional needs, demonstrate cultural sensitivity, and foster trust and therapeutic rapport. The virtue ethics approach emphasizes the ethical significance of interpersonal relationships, effective communication skills, and ethical leadership within nursing practice. Nurses trained in virtue ethics are equipped with the capacity to navigate ethical dilemmas by drawing upon moral virtues and principles rather than relying solely on external guidelines. This approach underscores the significance of context, relationships, and moral character in guiding ethical decision-making processes.

From the viewpoint of virtue ethics, nurses can acquire the ability to act with care and kindness through the concept of critical companionship, which focuses on developing skilled companions. During FDG interviews nurses who had been in this field for more than 10 years also pinpointed one exclusive way of building moral decision-making.

It's been advised that role-playing exercises, ethical dilemmas, and narrative-based learning engage students in ethical discourse and help them navigate the complexities of moral decision-making. This is how nurses can develop a holistic understanding of ethical care, embodying both professional competence and compassionate values.

Discussion

The integration of virtue ethics and the right-action approach within nursing education offers a compelling framework for cultivating compassionate and ethical nursing professionals, as revealed through focus group discussions with experienced nurses. These discussions shed light on the intricate interplay between these ethical frameworks and their implications for ethical reflection, critical thinking, and patient-centered care.

The discussions underscored the necessity of nurturing moral virtues alongside adherence to codes of ethics^{15, 16}. While codes offer essential guidelines, they may not alone cultivate the profound caring attitudes crucial for exemplary nursing. Nurses emphasized virtues like empathy, integrity, and resilience as foundational for building trustful therapeutic relationships and delivering patient-centered care¹⁷.

Critical companionship emerged as a valuable educational strategy, aligning with virtue ethics' emphasis on character development^{17, 18}. Through reflective practices, role-playing exercises, and ethical dilemmas, nurses can deepen their understanding of ethical principles and enhance moral decision-making. Many researchers seconded this practical approach enables nurses to navigate complex ethical scenarios with prudence and compassion, contributing to improved patient outcomes and ethical practice⁴. The study highlighted the complementary nature of virtue ethics and the right-action approach. While virtue ethics focuses on character formation and moral virtues, the right-action approach provides a structured framework guided by codes of ethics. Integrating these approaches bridges the gap between ethical theory and practical application, equipping nurses with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for ethical care provision.

This article advocates for integrating both approaches into nursing ethics education to ensure comprehensive and compassionate care. A virtue ethics approach complements ethical principles by emphasizing the development of caring attitudes

alongside professional competence. This integrated approach fosters ethical decision-making, promotes reflective practice, and nurtures compassionate values essential for navigating diverse healthcare settings.

Moreover, tensions between the two approaches can be reconciled through integration, creating a robust framework for nursing ethics education. Nurses embodying virtues like empathy and compassion are more attuned to patients' needs and foster trust and therapeutic rapport, essential for high-quality, patient-centered care¹⁹.

Educational tools such as critical reflection and role-playing exercises are crucial for cultivating a caring attitude among nurses. Integrating the principles of the right-action approach with virtue ethics equips nurses with ethical guidelines and moral character, enhancing their ability to navigate ethical dilemmas and deliver holistic care^{20, 21}.

In essence, virtue ethics in nursing education emphasizes moral character, whereas the ultimate goal of critical companionship is to enable nurses to practice in a person-centered and evidence-based manner, combining expressive and intuitive relationship processes with rational analysis, critique, and evaluation of practice and its knowledge. This approach has been tested through action research, demonstrating its potential to inspire unique forms of critical companionship, support person-centered care, and transform relationships and roles among practitioners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of virtue ethics and the right-action approach in nursing education is essential for developing ethical, compassionate, and competent nursing professionals. Through focus group discussions, it became evident that nurturing moral virtues alongside adherence to codes of ethics is crucial for exemplary nursing practice. The concept of critical companionship emerged as a valuable strategy, enhancing ethical reflection, critical thinking, and patient-centered care.

By combining these approaches, nurses gain a holistic understanding of ethical care, embodying both professional competence and compassionate values. Studies suggested that the integrated approach equips nurses with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to navigate ethical complexities in diverse healthcare settings. It also fosters a caring attitude, promoting reflective practice and nurturing ethical decision-making.

Educational tools such as critical reflection and role-playing exercises are vital in cultivating these attributes among nurses. The ultimate goal is to enable nurses to practice person-centered and evidence-based care, transforming relationships and roles to improve healthcare provision.

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