

Beyond Belief

Comparing U.S. and Chinese nursing students' views on mental illness

Caregivers' beliefs about mental disorders—from causes of illness to potential outcomes—can play a critical role in shaping treatment. While there has been substantial research into the area of mental health literacy, “there is scant literature concerning mental health beliefs among nursing school students,” said Wei Liu, Ph.D., assistant professor in the College of Nursing and Public Health.

“As front-line clinicians working in emergency room settings, we face many patients with psychiatric mental disorders,” said Dr. Liu, who worked for more than a decade as an emergency nurse in China and Australia before joining Adelphi. “I am interested in nurses' attitudes towards mental illness, as I believe these attitudes and our understanding of mental illness will

ultimately influence the way we deliver patient care.”

Between April 2016 and April 2017, Dr. Liu enlisted two groups of fourth-year nursing students in the United States and China in a descriptive, cross-sectional survey to explore views on mental health. “I was interested in gaining a better understanding of nursing students' preparedness for the delivery of care to patients with mental illnesses upon completion of their bachelor of nursing program,” she said. “In addition, I wanted to understand how differing educational systems in the U.S. and China have affected nursing students' mental health literacy level.”

Dr. Liu recently presented her findings in a series of three articles.

In an article in the March 2018 issue of the *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, “Mental health literacy: A cross-cultural study of American and Chinese bachelor of nursing students,” Dr. Liu discusses nursing students' knowledge about mental disorders and the effectiveness of specific interventions for managing depression and schizophrenia. She found that nursing students in both countries shared similar views on a broad range of interventions for managing disorders, though she also identified notable disparities. “The major difference was that the Chinese students showed more preference to occasional alcohol consumption [as a helpful intervention] and specialized therapies, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and electroconvulsive therapy,” she said. “The U.S. students held less skepticism

toward traditional and religious practices as possible treatment options.”

Dr. Liu says her discoveries point to areas for improvement in nursing education in both countries. “Chinese nursing students need to be educated about safe alcohol consumption guidelines adopted by the National Health and Family Planning Commission,” she said. “And U.S. nursing students need to increase their awareness of national practice guidelines for managing mental disorders, particularly with respect to the use of specialized therapies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and electroconvulsive therapy.”

Her article in the October 2018 issue of the *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, “Beliefs about prognosis and outcomes for people with mental disorders: A cross-cultural study of Bachelor of Nursing students from the U.S. and China,” compares attitudes about prognosis and long-term outcomes for mental health patients undergoing interventions. While nursing students in

both countries were generally positive about treatment, Dr. Liu found that “the Chinese students were more pessimistic about the prognosis and long-term outcomes after treatment for depression and schizophrenia.”

Dr. Liu's study suggests the need to deepen students' understanding of mental illness—in particular, challenging negative assumptions through innovative educational techniques, such as inviting mental health patients to lecture and using simulated illness experiences in classroom settings. Clinical placements in community and hospital settings would give students experience in managing patients who may be acutely unwell but relatively stable. The article urges nurses and students to reflect on how their attitudes might affect their clinical practice.

In a third article, published in the March 2019 issue of *Nursing & Health Sciences*, “Recognition of, and beliefs about, causes of mental disorders: A cross-sectional study of U.S. and Chinese

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Wei Liu, Ph.D., a registered nurse in New York and Australia, focuses her research on mental health literacy, medication management, health communication and wound care.



undergraduate nursing students,” Dr. Liu examines students' recognition of mental illness and beliefs about the causes of mental disorders. “The findings highlight the need for the incorporation of mental health issues, including symptomatology of different mental disorders and their application to patient care, into various aspects of the U.S. nursing curriculum,” she said. “In China, opportunities can be created for nursing students to discuss the impact of personal beliefs on care delivery and social stigma during clinical placement.”

Dr. Liu is continuing to promote mental health literacy in nursing education. Her current research focuses on the impact of virtual simulation on nursing students' learning outcomes, particularly with respect to their knowledge and beliefs about mental illness. ■