Self-reflection during first clinical practice: The experiences of nursing students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Self-reflection can be used as a tool for describing student experiences and have a significant impact on their learning. It enables nursing students to develop the ability to identify and analyse their problems and find possible solutions.

Objective: To present students' self-reflection in their first clinical practice as their first stage of our nursing study program.

Methodology: The research was based on a naturalistic philosophical paradigm using a qualitative methodological approach. The research took place at one of the Slovenian universities with an undergraduate nursing education program. Purposive sampling was chosen. The data were obtained through written self-reflection diary entries collected between March and June 2016. A thematic analysis was selected for data analysis. Ensuring that all ethical considerations were covered, seventeen students in the first clinical practice were included.

Findings: Three main thematic themes were identified that define the experience of students in their first clinical practice: (1) emotional experience, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) learning.

Conclusions: The research has found that the experiences and the perceptions of students in the first clinical practice are mainly expressed emotionally. Self-reflection helps students to express emotions and feelings to reliving and to identifying problems and also, to understanding themselves better. Further research should be focused on the importance of the students' self-reflections in their professional and personal growth.

1. Introduction and Background

Student nurses must be trained and qualified to work in complex and ever-changing environments in order to deliver person-centred nursing care. Student nurses are exposed to various clinical environments that influence their growing identification with the profession of a nurse (Eick et al., 2012). Furthermore, students learn how to cope with challenges encountered in the clinical environment. Moon (2004) recommends the use of reflective practice when dealing with challenges encountered in the clinical environment. Reflection has its own learning value and contributes to better learning (Husebø et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2016). It is learning from experiences, that takes into account previous knowledge and incorporating new knowledge to improve practice (Jasper and Rosser, 2013). Further, reflection is also a tool for expressing emotions and students' feelings (Alphonso, 2007; McAuley, 2006).

Reflective practice as an integral part of the study program should take place continuously during the entire study of future registered nurses (Mann et al., 2009). The literature describes several models and approaches to reflective learning (Boud et al., 1985; Dewey, 1998; Gibbs, 1988; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Moon, 2004; Schön, 1987). Using a model for self-reflection helps nursing students to focus on learning and increases self-awareness after they have experienced an event on their clinical practice (Barksby et al., 2015). Students need a clear guidance and structure for reflective writing, so they can develop the higher-order thinking skills for problem solving, increasing their emotional intelligence through the reflective writing (Mahlanze et al., 2015). The Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle was used for self-reflection in the first clinical practice, which enables students to organise their thoughts and reflective writing (Bulman and Schutz, 2008). However, some authors warn that the structure should not be too restrictive as it may limit the student's freedom in reflection writing (Duffy, 2009; Epp, 2008; Harris, 2008).

In nursing education, a self-reflection diary has been used for decades in nursing education as one of the most effective tools for learning and developing mental abilities and skills, e.g. self-awareness, the

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ability to use an analytical and reflective way of thinking, to judge and to make evidence-based decisions (Benner, 2001; Epp, 2008; McCallister, 1993; Tate, 2004). Nursing students are placed in clinical practice to correlate theoretical knowledge with practical nursing skills in a clinical environment and to socialise students into personal and professional behaviors and practices (Mahlanze and Sibiya, 2017). The first contact with a clinical environment is stressful (Levett-Jones and Bourgeois, 2015) and causes anxiety (Tully, 2004) in students, due to: the work process, the environment, the staff, the elderly people who the students do not know and the fear of making errors. Writing a self-reflection diary enables students the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, ideas and attitudes (Mahlanze and Sibiya, 2017) regarding various aspects of clinical practice. For those involved in the educational process and the training of nursing students, self-reflection diaries are an ideal opportunity for a deeper insight into the students' way of thinking, their feelings and opinions, and an effective tool for monitoring the students' learning, professional and their personal development of students (Cvetek et al., 2016). The students' ability for reflective expression significantly influences their qualifications and effectiveness (Kennedy et al., 2015). Reflective thinking and writing self-reflection diaries develops the students' ability to recognize and analyse problems, as well as find solutions to solve them (Harris, 2005). Furthermore, it improves their ability to clarify and self-evaluate, leading to students' personal growth (Bulman and Schutz, 2008), and helps to improve their experiential learning during clinical practice (Bagnato et al., 2013).

For the students' professional and personal development, it is important to know and recognize what they experience during their clinical practice, what emotions they have facing and what their first experiences in the clinical environment are. Our research focused specifically on the latter aspect. The purpose is to determine how nursing students experience their first year clinical practice in the nursing homes based on self-reflection diaries.

The research question was, "What are the experiences of students during their first clinical practice in nursing care in a nursing home?"

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Design

The qualitative methodology design was used to analyse the students' self-reflection about their first experiences with the elderly people in the nursing home. Qualitative methodology is the most appropriate research approach for this setting (Creswell, 2006) as it focused on understanding the students' experiences during clinical practice. As a method of data collection, self-reflective diaries were used. Self-reflection diaries also provide an opportunity for clinical mentors to hear the voice of student. Expressed students' toughs present a part of their learning through experience (Dunlap, 2006). The research was based on Gibbs' reflective cycle model (1988), which represents a theoretical framework and helps the students to structure the writing of self-reflection (Fig. 1). Using a model to write students' reflective diaries can be a useful way for students to focus their thoughts and to benefit from a clinical event (Watkins, 2018). The Gibbs' reflective cycle was chosen because of its simplicity to follow the steps and because it enables students to understand and develop students reflective thinking (Mahlanze et al., 2015; Chong, 2009; O'Connor, 2008).

Before beginning of clinical practice, the students were informed about the purpose and aims of writing a self-reflection diary on their clinical practice events. They received precise oral and written instructions for writing self-reflection diaries and an example of a completed, substantively relevant self-reflection. The students were encouraged to recall an event clinical practice. It is worth noting that at that time these students had little or no experience in reflective writing and had received no explicit teaching about reflection (Cvetek et al., 2016). Prior to the writing of self-reflection, they received basic instructions about the importance of reflection, learning and professional development and about the methods and processes of reflective thinking. Students wrote their self-reflection diaries in their spare time, outside of the clinical environment, ensuring the objectivity of the data (Polit and Beck, 2012).

2.2. Sample and Settings

The research was conducted at one of the Slovenian faculties with an undergraduate nursing care study program. Purposive sampling was used to collect data as this enables obtaining the opinions of the target population (Polit and Beck, 2012). The research included a total of 17 students, 16 females and one male, who were doing clinical practice in the nursing homes. We considered written self-reflection diaries of students on full-time students, who were doing clinical practice for the first time, and used the agreed submission deadline as an inclusion criterion. Further inclusion criteria were self-reflection diaries written and structured following Gibbs' reflective cycle.

The data were collected from March to June 2016. The students sent their written self-reflection diaries as a Word document on the Moodle open-source learning platform where data was protected in encrypted folders. Access to electronic data was protected with a personal password. All documents were modified so that the identity of the research participants was hidden. Each written document was marked with the letter R ('self-reflection') and a serial number.

2.3. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis in the six steps according to Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. This was an accessible, useful and flexible research method for analysing qualitative data, because it provided a rich and precise interpretation of data and also reflected the actual situations and helped to clarify and unravel the real situation (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Data analysis was carried out in six phases: 1) familiarizing with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, 6) producing a report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The transcribed text was encoded by meaning and the semantic related codes were merged into sub-themes that were formulated into main themes. The coding, sub-coding and designing the themes was done by two independent researchers (NMR, ZF). All the themes were then refined by the third author (MP). Any discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached.

All the researchers have many clinical experiences. Two of them (NMR, ZF) had more than ten years' experiences in nursing care of elderly people and between 5 and 10 years' experiences with teaching nursing students. Both authors are educated in education in reflective learning and hold a certificate of attendance.

2.4. Rigor

The research trustworthiness was assured by credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability criteria, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was assured with the approach that enables expressing students' own opinions, views, feelings and emotions. Dependability was ensured with the coding process being carried out by two totally independent researchers (NMR, ZF). Conversations about possible disagreements took place between all the authors until a complete consensus was achieved. The confirmability criterion is ensured by careful protection of the original documents for possible later insights.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Prior to the research, a written consent for the implementation of the research was obtained from the institution's management. The
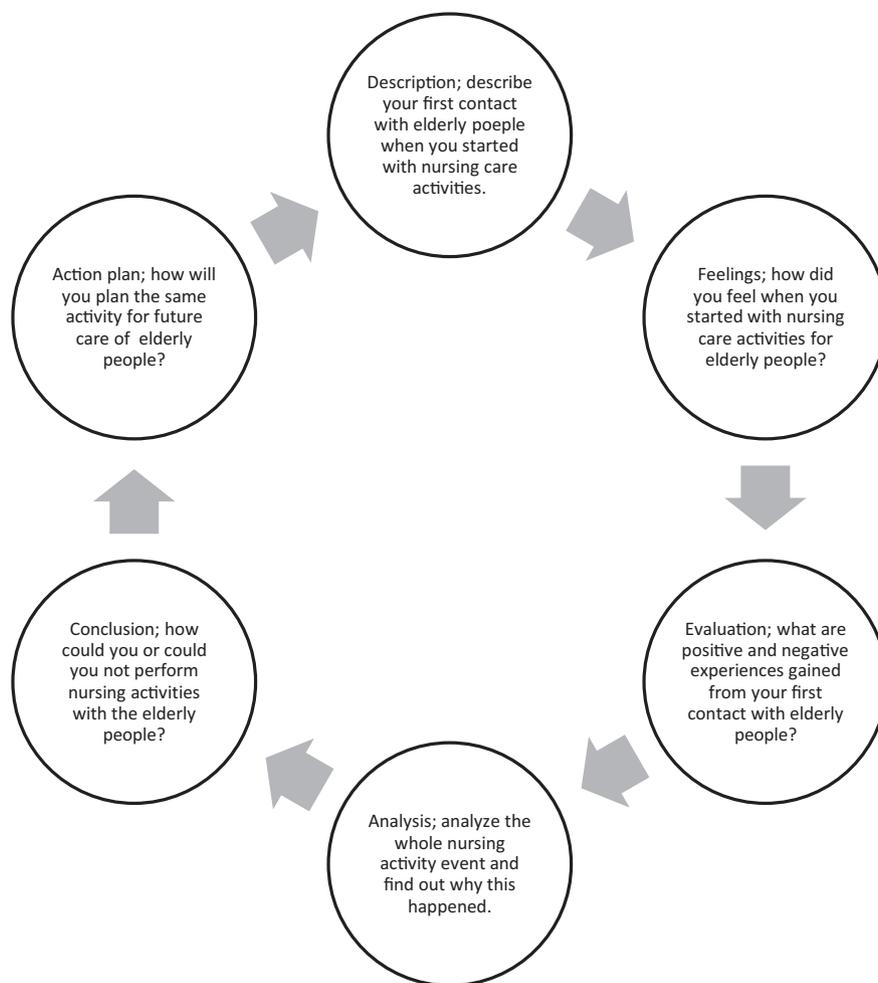
Fig. 1. Gibbs' reflective cycle.
(Adopted from Gibbs (1988).)

research was conducted in accordance with the standards of qualitative research (British Sociological Association, 2002), Helsinki Tokyo Declaration (World Health Organization, 2001), The Code of Ethics in Nursing Care of Slovenia (Kodeks etike v zdravstveni negi in oskrbi, 2014). The confidentiality of the elderly people was ensured. The students have been focused only on their own experiences with clinical practice. The identity of the particular elderly people in the self-reflection diaries was not mentioned.

The research participants were informed of the aims and purposes of the research and collaboration was voluntary and anonymous. They were also informed of the right to refuse to cooperate (Polit and Beck, 2012) and of the fact that the collaboration in the research is non-binding and does not affect the final assessment of clinical practice. The participants had an opportunity to withdraw at any time without any explanation.

3. Findings

In the self-reflective diaries, students mostly described the feelings that they had experienced during clinical practice. Based on the analysis and synthesis of the students' self-reflections, we have developed three main thematic themes:

- Emotional experience;
- Interpersonal relationships and
- Learning.

3.1. Emotional Experience

The students expressed different feelings and emotional responses. They described them in many ways, from negative to positive: frightening, anxiety, unpleasant feelings, tearfulness, discomfort, fear, joy. The students' feelings were strongly expressed in all the analysed self-reflections diaries. Students often find themselves in new situations that cause fear, uneasiness, and anxiety.

"I never found myself in a situation like this. First I was frightened, my heart was racing. Probably the fear of the unknown, of expectations, unable to do much for someone."

(R6)

In some self-reflection diaries we could sense that feelings lead students to thinking about the event and about new, important discoveries.

"For me the event was emotional. I barely held back the tears as I realized the person's suffering. I was touched that by the fact that a single touch I could calm her. She was clinging to my hand, asking whether I would hold her and I comfort her. The event was different from others, as for the first time I had the feeling that I helped someone by my presence and just touching."

(R10)

Students were involved in daily activities and in the process of elderly people nursing care in the nursing homes. During the process of giving nursing care to the elderly people, the students evaluated the

Table 1
Overview of data synthesis.

Thematic themes	Subthemes	Codes
Emotional experience	Feelings	Helplessness
		Confusion
		Uneasiness
		Feeling uncomfortable
		Anxiety
		Agitation
	Emotions	Mercy
		Indifference
		Scared
		Kindness
Interpersonal relationships	Relationship nurse-student	Superiority
		Respect
	Relationship nurse–elderly person	Understanding
		Lack of empathy
		Opportunity to test in practice
Learning	Qualification	Use of learned skills
		Strengthening knowledge
		Uncertainty
	Lack of knowledge	Uncertainty about oneself
		Ignorance

needs for nursing care and adjusted their nursing care interventions. The students stated that each elderly person is different and needs to be evaluated based on how much help is needed. Their written self-reflections show that they were strongly touched by the emotional responses of the residents. For example, they described fear, helplessness, sadness (Table 1):

> "This woman was sad as her hands were shaking due to her illness. As everybody was busy, nobody paid attention. Therefore, I approached her and asked if she wanted to make a rabbit together. She told me she could not, due to her illness. I told her I could help her and that we would make the rabbit together. She was very happy and content she could make it, regardless of her handicap."
>
> (R2)

3.2. Interpersonal Relationships

Some students described that the staff in the nursing team kindly welcomed them and they felt like part of the team and treated as equal co-workers.

> "The staff are very kind, accept you and treat you as a co-worker."
>
> (R11)

In their self-reflections, the students the attitudes of nurses towards the residents, which students often perceived completely differently than the nurses. Most often they described an unfriendly approach of the staff to the elderly people. In their self-reflections the students described fear, helplessness and sadness when witnessing rough and routine treatment of the elderly people.

> "The nurse entered the room, loudly woke up the curled up sleeping woman. She scared her even before she was aware of her, then she moved her and laid her down straight and left the room without a word."
>
> (R13)

In their self-reflections, the students also described how they learned to establish relationships with the residents and how to choose different approaches to the people with dementia.

> "While reading the newspaper, a woman suddenly stood up and got very upset. For no reason she started to scream. The other people were looking at her bemused and looked at both workers and each other. She got more

and more upset, saying she didn't want to stay there and that she was leaving. She was very angry and judging by her movements, she could have hit or pushed anyone away if she had had the chance. The carers told her in a friendly and humorous tone to stay. After a few minutes she calmed down, as they told her that her friend was coming, danced and sang with her and read her the horoscope."
>
> (R7)

3.3. Learning

The students were in their first clinical practice in an elderly people nursing care unit. Learning and gaining knowledge in the field they are just about to get acquainted with is very intense. They were scared at first as they did not know what kind of nursing interventions are carried out in nursing homes. Students wrote that it took them more time for nursing care interventions than it did the nurses because they think there is a difference between nursing manikin (as they had practised) and an older person. They tried to carry out care in accordance with the learned standards, professional guidelines, accurately and without mistakes. Some felt very confident as they carried out all the activities several times in the simulation environment and believed that the nursing interventions could be carried out in the same way.

In some situations, students gained new knowledge or learned that they could confirm in the clinical environment what they had learned earlier in theory.

> "When I later thought about the event, I was very happy to have done this. I realized that I must always make sure that elderly people feel accepted and that they are allowed to do things that they can accomplish. We have to devote ourselves to every individual and encourage them to believe more in themselves and that they can achieve things themselves. If the situation were to repeat itself, I would do the same."
>
> (R2)

The results show the connection between learning and new insights through intense emotional experience, as in this reflection:

> "…with this I realized the power of the therapeutic touch. When I was thinking about it, I cried. Although I felt satisfied, because I could help, the event shook me and exhausted me emotionally. The person's suffering hit me."
>
> (R3)

Students often found themselves in a completely new situation that they could not control and this was for them a whole new aspect of care and an important learning experience.

> "I was never in such a situation before. I got very scared. Probably it was fear of the unknown, expecting what will happen when you are not able to do much for someone. You see someone who has enough, who doesn't have any desires left, except to say good-bye. This event influenced me a lot, it left a big impression, I couldn't stop thinking about it."
>
> (R6)

4. Discussion

The purpose of the research was to determine how nursing students experience their first-year clinical practice in nursing homes based on self-reflection diaries. The main themes are interwoven and influence each other. The identified thematic themes show that it is extremely important for students to perceive feelings, experiences and emotional reactions as they have a significant influence on the students' learning and interpersonal relationships.

In response to the research question "What are the experiences of students at their first clinical practice in nursing care in a nursing home?" during the re-reading of texts we quickly found that students experience clinical practice emotionally very demanding. Most of the

students expressed fear, fright, unpleasant feelings and nervousness. There are several reasons for the occurrence of negative feelings, such as a feeling of unwillingness to suffer, death, and dying (Parry, 2011). Furthermore, Killam and Heerschap (2013) report exposure to nudity and the need to perform personal and intimate care, fear of making mistakes and causing harm to the elderly people. Levett-Jones et al. (2009) also mentions the disparity between theory and practice and feeling not welcome in a clinical environment. Therefore, self-reflection diaries are useful as a stress-management technique for students (Craft, 2005), because it is basically a guiding process that helps nursing students to achieve higher levels of thinking, which encourages and strengthens their personal and professional development (Parker et al., 1995; Kim, 1999; Hannigan, 2001; Cvetek, 2015).

We established that three main thematic themes are characteristic of self-reflection about the event, expressed by first year students of nursing care: emotional experience, interpersonal relationships and learning. The main isolated themes provided great insight into the thinking and experience of students during clinical practice at the beginning of their professional training. The results of our research are consistent with other studies that found that the emotional response of students during their first clinical practice is very intense (Koskinen et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2016). Life experiences, expectations and emotions are typical of the education of nursing students. They are an important part of learning in a clinical environment (Bagnato et al., 2013). Harris (2008) noted that writing self-reflections diaries during clinical practice allows students to develop their professional experiences. Through self-reflection, students learn about themselves, their own emotional experiences and perceptions of the emotional responses of others (Bagnato et al., 2013). Moreover, writing self-reflection diaries is a good tool that helps nursing students to critically evaluate gained experience (Bagnato et al., 2013; Harris, 2008). We established that students` self-reflection helped them to gain the courage and strength needed to face their own feelings and that they can express it by writing self-reflection diaries. This finding is supported by Sun et al. (2016) which reported that self-reflection helps to gather the strength and courage students need to face the perceived difficulties in the clinical environment. Our results coincide with the findings that self-reflection diaries help with express their own emotional responses like anxiety, gain self-awareness and increase the ability to handle stressful situation (Ganzer and Zauderer, 2013; Moscaritolo, 2009; Sun et al., 2016). Bagnato et al. (2013) reported that self-reflection can be used as a form of therapeutic writing for students to express their feelings, relive, recognize and understand them. In this way students can face emotional experiences and their understanding of them is deepened. In promoting writing self-reflection diaries, the role of clinical mentors is to stimulate and guide students according to their own enthusiasm (Duffy, 2009; O'Donovan, 2007; Fijačko et al., 2017). However, the mentors should maintain the conductive clinical environment, where the students feel welcome and confident and with non-judgmental feedback from them (Mahlanze and Sibiya, 2017).

Through self-reflection, students reflected on their relationship with the elderly people and the relationship between them and the nurse. That enabled them to deepen their awareness of the complexity of the clinical environment (Dahl and Eriksen, 2016), and developing into a mature and responsible nurse (Kuo et al., 2011). Students are often worried about establishing therapeutic relationships with elderly people. That is why students need the positive examples by nurses (Koskinen et al., 2011). An unprofessional nurse's attitude may cause feelings of embarrassment, helplessness and emotional distress (Sun et al., 2016), which does not help nursing students in their personal, and especially in professional development.

Self-reflections promote experiential learning (Bagnato et al., 2013), which is also confirmed by our results. Students often expressed satisfaction because they received confirmation of their own knowledge and understanding during clinical practice. For example, a student expresses their experience with the power of a therapeutic touch. Some

other students find that every person can be fallible and acknowledge their own failings and say "I'm sorry". Bulman et al. (2012) also indicated that self-reflection diaries deepen students' critical thinking, contribute to a better insight into their clinical practice and promote self-confidence. Learning in the clinical environment provides learning through experiences and present an opportunity for establishing meaningful therapeutic interactions for students (Patterson et al., 2016; Wotton and Gonda, 2004; Lasater and Nielsen, 2009; Skaalvik et al., 2012). Similarly Harris (2005) pointed out that students develop the ability to identify and analyse problems and provide suggestions for solving them.

In our research, students stressed the importance of acquiring experience in real situations, improving their own practice and learning from critical events. Every student has had a debriefing on their written self-reflection diary with the clinical mentor. They discussed their feelings, reactions, what they had learned from the described clinical practice events and how they would like to change the situation in the same circumstances. Debriefing also provides constructive feedback and improves levels of student's reflection (Mahlanze et al., 2015) especially because this was their first writing of self-reflection diaries on clinical practice.

The self-reflection diaries involve personal issues. That is why the ethical principles were considered. The Brockett's (1990) guidelines like respect, justice, a beneficence, self-awareness and caring have been taken into the consideration. Using self-reflection diaries as a teaching tool represents a challenge for educators because they get a deep insight into the student's thinking and behavior.

The consolidation of the knowledge and the opportunity for testing of what has been learned in practice will have an influence on students' self-confidence (Kuo et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2016). Furthermore, Kuo et al. (2011) pointed out that self-reflection considers students' experiences and events during clinical practice and stimulate metacognition, personal and professional growth. We must teach students holistic, person-centred care and performance of practical nursing skills. Students need to learn how to take responsibility for acquiring knowledge and perform nursing interventions with evidence-based nursing care. Such care is based on professional guidelines and standards that are the result of research and scientific evidence. With this in mind, students' knowledge will be up-to date, which have the positive influence on health, reduces the everyday living risks for the elderly people and contributes to careful, integrated and individual care.

4.1. Limitations

Our study was conducted only on one group of students at one faculty with a nursing student program, which is why findings cannot be generalised. There is a question of the usefulness of implementing findings of this study to other nursing care study programs. During the writing process, students were in a dependent role in relation to their clinical mentor, which could have influenced the content of their diaries. Only submitted written self-reflection diaries were included in the thematic analysis. Many students reported that writing self-reflection diaries was just another obligation for a successful completion of clinical practice. Methods to overcome this barrier included encouraging students to understand that reflection is important for their professional and personal growth. Students can express their feelings and emotional distress through writing (Craft, 2005).

5. Conclusion

The article presents the experiences of students during their first clinical practice in nursing care in a nursing home. We found out that feelings and emotional reactions are extremely important for students and they have a significant influence on students' learning and interpersonal relationships. Reflective thinking and writing can be effective tools for students that enable them to develop self-awareness, self-

confidence, improve interactive skills and individual approaches to nursing care. Self-reflection helps students to develop the ability for critical thinking and improve the experiential learning at the same time. Nursing students should be encouraged to use self-reflection diaries in order to raise the level of awareness and thinking about events and experiences, express feelings and emotions, exchange experiences, validate clinical knowledge and gain insight into their behavior.

This paper adds a new deep insight into the students' feelings and experiences with their first contact with elderly people. The most common emotional experiences were helplessness, uneasiness, discomfort, anxiety, fear, compassion. The nursing staff gave them the feeling of kindness and superiority. The students stressed the importance of the opportunity to test their gained knowledge in clinical practice, which consolidated their knowledge. At the same time, students were still uncertain about themselves and their knowledge.

Many studies focus on reflection of students' clinical practice in nursing elderly people, but there is a lack of emphasis on students' emotional expressions. Especially because we believe that the first contact with the clinical environment has a strong impact on students' further professional growth and performance of nursing care. Further studies of self-reflection should focus on researching the importance of students' reflections for their professional and personal growth.

Acknowledgments

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