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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore third-year medical students' perceptions of their teacher-learner relationships with their clinical educators.

Teacher-learner relationships are ubiquitous in adult education. Interestingly, however, very little is known about the nature of these relationships. In fact, it has been suggested that "the person who said that fish would be last to discover water may well have been thinking about interpersonal relationships in adult education" (Tiberius, Sinai, & Flak, 2002, p. 464). This lack of attention given to the relationships between teachers and learners can be seen as problematic, as it has been argued that not only are teaching and learning activities embedded within the context of relationships, but research has also found that nearly half of the variance in the effectiveness of teaching is associated with relational variables (Tiberius et al., Williams et al., 2004). Furthermore, previous research suggests that this lack of attention given to relationships is particularly problematic in regard to the studies of communities of practice, as "relationships are a key factor in how *newcomers* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) learn and make meaning of their profession" (Jarecke & Taylor, 2010, p. 6). Communities of practice (CoP) are defined as "groups of people who come together informally to share enterprise, learn, and practice" (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003, p. 171). Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) describes the process by which individuals (newcomers) enter communities as peripheral members and over time and through the adoption of members' skills, behaviors, and identities, eventually become more central community participants (Lave & Wenger). Relationships as a central construct is missing from the literature on CoP/LPP, and it has been suggested that research is warranted to determine how relationships impact both the formal and informal learning that occur within CoPs, as well as to investigate how relationships impact students' access to communities (Jarecke & Taylor).

The medical setting served as an ideal context for addressing this gap in the literature, as the experiences of third-year medical students parallel the current research on CoP/LPP. Research involving third-year students (as peripheral members entering the clinical context for the first time in their training) suggest that they often have difficulty with the socialization process and navigating the hierarchical structure of the clinical environment (e.g., Seabrook, 2004). Oftentimes, these findings are associated with medicine's hidden curriculum, referring to "the imprinting of attitudes and values onto impressionable students by their more experienced educators" (Adler, Hughes, & Scott, 2006; p. 463); through the modeling of particular behaviors (e.g., ignoring, berating students) (Gofton & Regehr, 2006; Seabrook). Although evidence suggests that by enacting this curriculum, clinical educators have particular influence over medical students' emotional, intellectual, and professional development, little is known about their teacher-learner relationships (Haidet & Stein, 2006). Therefore, this study examined third-year students' perceptions of their teacher-learner relationships, and how these relationships impacted students' views of teaching, learning, and their future roles as educators. This investigation used a two-fold sequential exploratory mixed methods study design; qualitative

interviews allowed for the emergence of themes (Jarecke, 2011; Jarecke & Taylor, 2010), which were then used to develop a quantitative survey, findings of which are presented here.

Theoretical Frameworks

Informing this study were communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation (CoP/LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the relational-cultural theory (RCT) (Miller & Stiver, 1997). CoP/LPP, as defined previously, were employed due to the distinct parallels that can be drawn between current research of third-year medical students and the tenets espoused by this theory. However, although this framework provides a lens through which previous findings may be explained, it falls short in examining the role of relationships in the enculturation of students. Thus, this study also drew on the RCT, a psychological developmental theory that seeks to provide insight into ways individuals grow within and through relationships (Miller & Stiver). Specifically, this theory posits that growth-fostering relationships are the "source and goal of development" (p. 22), and involve "a sense of mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment" (Dooley & Fedele, 2004, p. 230). Therefore, this framework provides insight into third-year students' perceptions of their teacher-learner relationships as they encounter their placement on the periphery.

Methodology

This study used a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, which involved the sequencing data collection (Creswell et al., 2003). This involved first conducting qualitative interviews to allow for the development of a survey instrument. This survey, findings of which are presented here, was distributed to a class of second-semester, third-year medical students during a scheduled seminar. There were 72 participants, resulting in a 47% response rate. Data was coded using PASW and appropriate statistical tests were conducted.

Findings

Findings suggest that students have particular conceptions about the quality and importance of their relationships with educators, and that they believe that these relationships impact their sense of belonging, as well as their views of teaching, learning, and their future careers. Additionally, students suggested that their relationships are characterized by a number of factors.

Students' Perceptions of the Quality, Importance, and Impact of Relationships
This section discusses the survey findings in regard to students' perceptions about the quality, importance, and impact of their teacher-learner relationships.

Quality and Importance. Overall, students rated their teacher-learner relationships rather highly. For instance, when describing the quality of their relationships, 56% of students suggested that they were good, and 15% classified them as very good. On the other end of the spectrum, a small percentage of students (1%) categorized their relationships as poor, while 25% labeled them as satisfactory. Students were also asked how important it was to have good relationships with educators. Findings suggest that all students felt relationships with educators

were important to some extent. In fact, 79% of students responded that it was extremely important, while the remainder suggested it was somewhat important (15%) or important (4%).

Impact of Relationships. Students were asked a number of questions in regard to the impact of their relationships on their learning, their views of teaching, and their future careers. Furthermore, they were asked about the impact of relationships on their sense of belonging to the clinical environment. Findings suggest that almost all of the students either agreed (68%) or strongly agreed (22%) that their educators motivated them to learn and that their relationships facilitated their learning (69%, 21% respectively). Most students also agreed (56%) or strongly agreed (42%) that educators impacted their view of clinical teaching and how they hoped to teach in the future (44%, 50% respectively). Additionally, 39% of students agreed and 36% strongly agreed that relationships impacted their decisions to pursue a career in a particular specialty. Furthermore, when asked to respond to the question: My relationships with my clinical educators make me feel like I belong here, 40% of students agreed while 22% strongly agreed, 21% remained neutral, 6% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. These findings revealed significant differences based on age (t[56]=2.60, p=0.012), marital status (t[68]=2.09, p=0.041), and years of experience in the workforce between undergraduate education and medical school (t[39]=2.97, p=0.005).

Students' Perceptions of Teacher-Learner Relationship Characteristics
Findings of the qualitative portion of this study indicated that students viewed their relationships as: A source of empowerment; lacking authenticity; impacted by empathy; dependent on personality compatibility; and shaped by contextual factors (Jarecke, 2011; Jarecke & Taylor, 2010). The quantitative findings based upon these themes are presented in this section.

A Source of Empowerment. Empowerment is a feeling of being encouraged, strengthened, and of having the capacity to act (Dooley & Fedele, 2004). Qualitatively, students suggested that educators either served to foster empowerment, often through the provision of feedback, or to deplete it, primarily by ignoring students. The quantitative findings indicate that most students agreed (54%) or strongly agreed (22%) that their relationships were a source of confidence and made them feel that they could succeed (65%, 22% respectively). Few students agreed (13%) or strongly agreed (4%) that they were generally ignored by educators. Significant negative correlations were found between the tendency to be ignored and students' perceptions of the quality of their relationships (ρ =-.343, p=<0.01) and their sense of belonging (ρ=-.284, p=<0.05), while empowerment factors (confidence, succeed) were positively correlated with students' sense of belonging (ρ =.626, p=<0.01).

Lacking Authenticity. Authenticity is an awareness of the self and the other, and openness to being genuine in the context of the relationship (Dooley & Fedele, 2004). Qualitatively, students suggested that they could not be themselves or be open and honest with educators, primarily due to evaluations. Survey findings indicate that more than half of students agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (19%) that their relationships were characterized by openness and honesty, and the majority of students agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (22%) that their relationships made them feel comfortable to be themselves. In regard to the impact of evaluations, nearly half of students either agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (18%) that being evaluated impacted their ability to form relationships with educators, and about one-third either agreed (26%) or strongly agreed (7%) that they could not be themselves around clinical educators because they were being evaluated. A significant positive correlation was realized between authenticity factors (openness, honesty) and students' sense of belonging (ρ=.647,

p=<0.01), while a negative correlation was found between evaluation factors (*ρ*=-.265, *p*=<0.05) and students' sense of belonging, meaning that as the lack of authenticity in relationships (due to evaluations) increases, students' sense of belonging decreases.

Impacted by Empathy. Empathy is the joining with and understanding of another's subjective experience (Dooley & Fedele, 2004). Qualitatively, students referenced empathy as something that was shown by educators when they recognized the responsibilities of medical students. Quantitative findings suggest that most students agreed (61%) or strongly agreed (22%) that they share an understanding with their educators about each other's responsibilities. In addition, most students agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (3%) that educators offered study time. However, few students believed that their educators remember what it's like to be a third-year student, with 14% agreeing and the majority of students disagreeing (32%) or strongly disagreeing (11%). A significant positive correlation was found between empathy factors and the quality of relationships (*ρ*=.302, *p*=<0.05) and students' sense of belonging (*ρ*=.563, *p*=<0.01).

Requiring Reciprocal Engagement. Reciprocal engagement is a perception of mutual involvement and commitment (Dooley & Fedele, 2004). Qualitatively, students spoke about how their relationships benefitted from educators taking an interest in them, being able to make a contribution, and being accepted as part of the medical team. Quantitatively, most students agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (17%) that their relationships with clinical educators were characterized by a commitment to help one another, and that their educators gave them responsibility (58%, 8% respectively), and provided assignments to facilitate learning (58%, 8% respectively). A significant positive correlation was found between engagement factors and the quality of relationships (*ρ*=.254, *p*=<0.05) and students' sense of belonging (*ρ*=.525, *p*=<0.05).

Dependent on Personality Compatibility. Students qualitatively suggested that their relationships with educators were dependent on their personalities being compatible with one another; however, they also noted how certain personality traits were common among specialties. Quantitatively, slightly less than half agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (7%) that their ability to form relationships with educators depended on whether their personalities were compatible. Most students indicated that they were more compatible with educators who were working in areas of medicine in which they were most interested (40% agreed, 22% strongly agreed).

Shaped by Contextual Factors. Qualitatively, students referenced contextual factors as impacting their ability form relationships as well as the depth of these relationships. They noted the lack of time with educators made establishing relationships difficult. Quantitatively, the majority of students either strongly agreed (19%) or agreed (56%) that their ability to form relationships with educators was limited by time constraints. The clinical hierarchy was another factor affecting relationships, as students noted that they were more likely to be friends with those closer in the hierarchy and those closer in age. This was somewhat substantiated as the majority of students agreed (40%) or strongly agreed (35%) that they had better relationships with residents than attending physicians, and nearly half of students agreed (35%) or strongly agreed (14%) that they had better relationships with educators who were closer in age.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, much can be gleaned about teacher-learner relationships in the clinical context, and their impact on third-year medical students. It is clear that students value their relationships with educators, and that these relationships have a significant impact on students' educational and professional development. Perhaps most glaring

is the impact of positive feedback, which is a mechanism for student empowerment; providing students with motivation and confidence, as well as instilling them with a sense of belonging. Additionally, educators' engagement seems to be an important component of relationships for students, as it facilitates their abilities to contribute and become part of the team; again, helping them to feel as though they belong to the community. Furthermore, educators' engagement along with their displays of empathy appear to have significant impacts on students' views of the quality of their relationships. Yet, these displays do not involve significant requirements for educators, as qualitatively students indicated that what they desire most from educators are common courtesies; taking an interest in them (not ignoring them), asking about their responsibilities, and providing study time (Author, 2011). It is through such courtesies that students identify positive relationships; in turn, this study suggests that the more positive these relationships, the better students consider the teaching and the better the learning experience.

Along these lines, it is interesting to consider that previous research has highlighted contextual factors challenging clinical teaching (Taylor, Tisdell, & Gusic, 2007), yet this study suggests that overcoming such challenges may not be time-intensive. However, students did suggest that contextual factors do impact relationships, particularly in regard to the clinical hierarchy. Specifically, numerous students suggested that they tended to be closer to educators who were closer in the clinical hierarchy and closer in age. Such findings allude to a need for further investigations regarding how age may impact students' views of their place on the periphery as well as how they view those serving in other positions within the CoP. For instance, are relationships with superiors different for adult students returning to school after years in the workforce? How do "traditional" students view superiors who are not similar in age? Such studies could lead to valuable discussions about the role of the adult learner in CoPs; discussion which are particularly important in light of this study's findings suggesting that relationships are less likely to contribute to "nontraditional" students' feelings of belonging.

Furthermore, this study suggests that due to evaluations, students are potentially less likely to engage in authentic relationships with educators, and feel more compelled to act in a certain manner, or replicate certain behaviors in order to achieve particular marks. Qualitatively, for instance, students suggested that they needed to "be who they are" in order to ensure academic success (Author, 2011, p. 122). In this respect, evaluations tend to enhance the power of educators and propel the continuance of the hidden curriculum; as students recognize the necessity of adopting the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of their educators. In viewing these findings through the lens of CoP/LPP, distinct parallels can be drawn between the hidden curriculum and the process of LPP. For it is through the informal learning occurring in the hidden curriculum and through the process of LPP that individuals become socialized (Gofton & Regehr, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991); and in turn, adopt the identities of their predecessors in order to become more central participants. What becomes important, however, is that as students recognize that they need to "be who they are" they are not adopting the identity of a single educator (as the work of Lave & Wenger would suggest), but they are adopting the identity of a collective "they;" "they" ultimately representing the culture of the institution. Therefore, as students adopt the prevailing premises of the institution, they become central members and invariably recreate the institutional culture through their future relationships. One can argue, however, that just as relationships can serve to recreate culture, they can also serve to change culture. Herein lies the challenge for researchers and educators alike; the investigation of "education through the 'lens' of student-teacher relationships," must continue so that "educators

may be able to harness the power of relationships to modify students adoption of the prevailing premises" of the organizational culture (Haidet & Stein, 2006, p. S18).

Taking this into consideration, further research implications emerge in regard to the theoretical frameworks of this study. In regard to CoP/LPP, this theory must be investigated further in regard to the parallels between LPP and the hidden curriculum in order to investigate how cultures influence students' socialization in CoPs, as well as how these cultures can serve to perpetuate dominant ideologies. Additionally, more research is needed to determine how relationships impact the informal or hidden curriculum and how they may impact issues of access to CoPs. In regard to RCT, although the findings support the theory's assumptions that engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment impact relationships, this theory does not discuss the role of power as influencing these characteristics, nor does it address how context may impact these constructs. As a result, further research is needed to explore the role of power and its impacts on these constructs, to investigate learning relationships within organizational structures, as well as to examine how organizational cultures influence relationships.

In conclusion, this study provides practical, theoretical, and research implications in the hopes that this is the beginning of an exploration into the nature of teacher-learner relationships. It is through future studies and greater understanding of these relationships, along with the dedication of conscientious practitioners, that change can occur in the context of learning; a change that can lead to a view of the teaching and learning process as a relational one. This view puts both the teacher and the learner at the center of the educational endeavor, along with their values, beliefs, goals, experiences, and emotions, and allows for the co-construction of knowledge and meaningful explorations of learning and growth.

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