

5 An Examination of University Paramedical Students' Enculturation into the Ambulance Service-A sociological perspective

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

The study explores student paramedics' enculturation into an NHS ambulance service trust. It illustrates the many challenges and dichotomies which face neophyte paramedics as they go from a university classroom setting into their day-to-day clinical work placements. The challenges they face are not the result of individuals alone, rather they result from an inherent subculture ingrained within the organisational structures of the ambulance service. This ethnography contributes to the social science literature on health and social care by presenting a sociological perspective of student enculturation, from the university into an often-chaotic working environment. The research explores the subculture and hidden curriculum which gives rise to it, as it seeks to understand how this appears to hamper and impede the pedagogy experienced by students. This is not the pedagogy taught in university, rather a pedagogy which arises out from the intricacies and nuances of the traditional working environment of the paramedic.

Full paper

The aim of this research was to establish how and why, following a period of formal university education, student paramedics become enculturated, *'the processes whereby newcomers come to participate in the normative practices of a cultural community'* (Kirshner & Meng, 2012: 65), into a National Health Service (NHS), Ambulance Service Trust. The paper explores and critically analyses students' enculturation away from the university to understand the relationship between two different cultures. It suggests the culture which neophyte paramedics experience in the clinical practice setting is different from the culture nurtured and experienced by students in university. The paper argues that the culture experienced in the workplace is a subculture drawn from the traditional practices and processes embedded within the ambulance service. It further argues this subculture creates a hidden curriculum which students are exposed to. This hidden curriculum gives rise to a form of pedagogy which, in part, inhibits and impedes the students' ability to influence and change the subculture which they become accustomed to. To help understand this, an ethnographic approach to explore, interpret, and illustrate the traditional workplace practices, cultural norms and hidden curriculum which neophyte paramedics experience in the clinical workplace was adopted.

Prior to undertaking this research, I had noticed distinct differences in the students' returning to university from their clinical practice placements. Their behaviours, attitudes and working practices to that previously seen in the university. I wondered why this was occurring after a relatively short period of time in clinical practice. In addition, I was aware of the high number of reported fitness to practice (FTP) cases (complaints), being referred to the UK regulator, The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2019), concerning both experienced and novice paramedics. I was also mindful of the growing number of adverse events taking place in healthcare. These were all questions which I needed to understand. To fulfil these objectives ethnography provided a suitable research approach. I decided to observe a group of university student paramedics over a prolonged period of eighteen months as they attended their day-to-day clinical work placements. This allowed me to witness the students' real-life experiences, along with the intricacies and nuances of their day-to-day work. As in the research, I used observational fieldnotes, audio recordings and my recorded reflective notes to capture the day-to-day practices of both the students and experienced paramedics. I was able to reflect on my observations and clarify my fieldnotes with follow-up interviews and conversations with the students and paramedics. Riemann (2012) suggests the written work is a synthesis of the researcher's impressions which are recorded as fieldnotes, observations or interview data. In collecting the fieldnotes several issues arose from my data. For example, students mimicked their paramedic colleagues' behaviours and attitudes, they made derogatory comments about patients and at times students were coerced into avoiding emergency calls along with occasionally damaging ambulances, such as kicking and damaging

the dashboard. Students internalise and interpret the placement setting differently to that previously taught in university and which further adds to the dichotomies experienced by students. How they are influenced by and interact with the traditional cultures of the workplace and their perception of themselves within the paramedic environment, are explored. I needed to understand the various cultural meanings which students came to interpret as normal practice, such as those identified by (Devenish, Clark & Fleming 2016; Becker et al. 1961 and O'Meara, 2011), as these are essential components of the socialisation process. At times I use the terms enculturation and socialisation interchangeably. However, it is important that I define the two terms and their respective differences at the outset. Therefore, I very simply define these terms as – socialisation as a process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society, whereas enculturation is the process of being socialised in a certain culture.

I argue that students, when on placement, are drawn into a different form of practice. This form of practice influences and impedes the pedagogy to that experienced in the university. Metz (1981) work supports this, suggesting it is as a consequence of the traditions and practices embedded within the very fabric of the ambulance service workplace.

I illustrate how three dominant constructs: *work experience, professional identity and organisational culture*, are woven throughout the narrative of the work. I reveal how forms of student enculturation influences and impacts upon the student learning. I suggest that the pedagogy emerging from the practice placement experience is not reflective of the pedagogy which students experience in the university classroom setting.

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