

# Review of: "Picture collage: A pedagogical reflective practice tool for nursing students in mental health practice"

Antoinette Damant<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of KwaZulu-Natal

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

I am a strong advocate of utilising creative, visual methodologies as research and pedagogical development tools in any area and am more than happy to be reviewing a paper which documents the use of picture collages as a potential pedagogical developmental tool and creative medium to enable nursing students to explore the impact of their clinical practice experience on their learning and mental wellbeing.

The paper highlights the problem of inherently inadequate training in how to relate to people living with mental health conditions. It further advocates the importance that nursing students are adequately supported to manage the demands of their nursing education, and makes the argument that in mental health settings, nursing students are exposed to challenging clinical learning environments such as caring for patients who self-harm or are suicidal. I agree that such challenges may very well generate doubts and anxieties about their practice and that reflection can help them to analyse and process these thoughts and feelings and furthermore, allow them spaces to cognitively appraise their abilities to analyse the impact on their own mental wellbeing when exposed to psychologically distressing events in their clinical learning environment. This point is well made.

I understand that the stigma following mental health issues are considered a major barrier to accessing mental health services in most countries and in many societies. The paper discussed some of the global, culture-specific, and profession-specific stigmas surrounding mental health practice, but highlighted for the reader the context of this issue in relation to Islamic culture in the UAE to the fore, which was helpful and very interesting in understanding the context in which these nursing students exist. The widespread belief that mental illness is contagious together with the external locus of control in Islamic culture (the central tenet of which is submission to the will of God), the paper makes the important point of recognising that psychoanalytic approaches which focus on individualism are at odds with Islamic values and highlights the benefits of adapting psychoanalytic approaches to incorporating Islamic values and beliefs into psychiatric practice.

While the prevailing cultural stigmatisation of mental health serves as a significant social barrier to implementing public mental health agenda in the Gulf Arab States, this creates additional barriers to nursing students who are themselves of Islamic faith and belief. The paper rightfully notes that facilitating reflection amongst such nursing students, inevitably has its challenges and that this would require adequate preparation of students and providing them with a safe space to reflect effectively and explore their thoughts and feelings about learning experiences in a mental health clinical setting. The authors stressed that the frame of reference of the students' perspectives of mental health, mediated by cultural

stigmatisation of mental health was an apparent barrier to reflection to their effective reflection on their clinical learning experience. They went on to report that a safe medium to enable students' forthright self-expression of clinical experiences became paramount, and that, in facilitating their reflective practice, it was important to carefully navigate sociocultural factors to help them uphold their cultural identities while simultaneously guiding them to assimilate and accommodate mental health knowledge. I think this point is one which would be of benefit to all researchers and lecturers who are working in a similar field, to take heed of.

The paper helpfully outlines the steps that would need to be taken in this regard: firstly, developing students' cognitive and metacognitive skills surrounding mental health; and secondly, creating a learning environment where students would feel able to express their beliefs, values and attitudes without the fear of being judged. This requires a safe, supportive, and non-judgmental space to challenge their perceptions and assumed knowledge of mental health towards developing a new understanding of their mental health practice.

A constructivist framework aptly underpins the process of creating the reflective practice reported on in this paper. The authors noted that this framework set an effective scaffold for their reflective practice so that they could develop an awareness of the limitations of their knowledge and reappraising prior culturally influenced perspectives of mental health and illness which they held.

The authors report that they found a medium that would allow students to fully examine their inner thoughts and feelings about mental health practice, in the choice of picture collage. They justify their rationale for this choice by pointing out the potential of the creative process of collaging as an arts-based exercise to tune into participant's true feelings and enable a connection between the inner and the outer world.

This exercise required students to use only picture cuttings to layer and connect images to tell the story of their mental health practice journey. The authors report that in their individual picture collage design, students articulated meaningful and memorable anecdotal experiences of their journey in the mental health placement. They furthermore found that the sensory process of creating and engaging with the picture collage and speaking to their hopes, fear, anxieties, and expectations, lent itself well to amplifying the students' voices. The authors make a strong rationale and argument for the use of such an exercise.

The authors found that the metaphorical representation of their clinical experience through the assembly of pictures was an effective mode to enable students' self-expression and illustrated students' transition process of their perspectives of mental health prior to their clinical practice and in the final days of their mental health placement. The paper reports that the collage activity enabled students to engender a contemplative engagement with their inner self about meeting patients' needs in the mental health placement and their own mental wellbeing without undermining their own cultural needs and that their engagement with the picture collage allowed for a more transparent reflection of their practice in mental health settings in enhancing their mental health awareness and self-compassion.

This paper is an excellent example of how the picture collage activity illustrates a creative way of enabling students' learning experience in a delicate area of practice by using artistic processes. From a sensory-based way of knowing, it

highlights evidence of the potential of picture collages to enable self-expression using metaphorical visual expression of clinical learning experience through the assembly of pictures; and developing ways to facilitate students' finding new insights and meanings. The accessible and experiential nature of the picture collage provided an effective inclusive pedagogical tool to create a safe space for students to reflect on a stigmatised topic while enabling attitudinal change by uncovering students' genuine thoughts and feelings about a sensitive area of practice and their own mental health.

The paper was well written, grounded in theory, and a pleasure to review. I am happy to recommend it go through to publication, with no changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to review this interesting paper.