

# Traversing the Threshold: A Phenomenological Inquiry on Student Professionalism in Pharmacy Education

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## ABSTRACT

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*Development of student professionalism in both academic and experiential learning programs has been one of the focal points in pharmacy education. Evidently, its quantitative assessment has received considerable attention in pharmacy literature while few articles dealt on describing it as an experienced phenomenon. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry is to capture undergraduate pharmacy students' lived experiences of professionalism while in the liminal state. Participants' accounts of learning experiences from academic and practice environments were obtained during individual face-to-face interviews which focused on essence questions on professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Data were subjected to phenomenological reduction using the Colaizzi's method and the themes of understanding, embracing, and embodying expectations emerged. Significant findings of this study can assist curriculum experts and clinical preceptors in designing professional courses and experiential learning tasks, respectively, with emphasis on scaffolding student professionalism.*

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## Introduction

Professionalism is one of the educational outcomes or competencies in the pharmacy curriculum (Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, 2015; Medina et al., 2013; Jungnickel, Kelley, Hammer, Haines, & Marlowe, 2009). Pharmacy students must be able to acquire professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes to promote the standards of the profession (Roth & Zlatic,

2009) and incorporate professionalism in actual practice (American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, 2008). The professional traits that should be developed among and practiced by pharmacy students include altruism, honesty and integrity, respect for others, professional presence, professional stewardship, and dedication and commitment to excellence (American College of Clinical Pharmacy, 2009). Notably, the students must be able to recognize the

fiducial relationship between pharmacists and patients as the center of professionalism (Roth & Zlatic, 2009).

Significantly, efforts geared toward the development of student professionalism are evident in pharmacy education literature. For instance, findings revealed the positive effects of team-based learning methods on the professionalism scores of pharmacy students (Elmore, Skelley, & Woolley, 2014) and simulated learning modules on their professionalism skills (Fejzic & Barker, 2015). Likewise, a structured format in an elective course (Horton, Morin, Pervanas, Mukherjee, & Belliveau, 2014) and a specific course learning activity with ethical scenarios (Smith & Dinkins, 2015) were found influential on students' perceptions of the professional tenets and on applying the professional standards in pharmacy practice, respectively. Moreover, existing studies explored how pharmacy students viewed professionalism. Relevant findings revealed that they gained an understanding of professionalism and adherence to the code of conduct (Hanna, Gillen, & Hall, 2017), recognized knowledge, responsibility, and possession of good character as attributes of professionalism (Rutter & Khalid, 2010), reflected that they acquired most or some of the expected pharmacist skills (Langley & Aheer, 2010), and identified role models, practice experiences, and practical classes as factors contributing to the enhancement of professionalism (Schafheutle, Hassell, Ashcroft, Hall, & Harrison, 2012).

Quantitative investigations on professionalism as demonstrated or viewed by pharmacy students existed in pharmacy literature while only a few articles dealt on describing it as an experienced phenomenon. This phenomenological inquiry focused on professionalism as experienced by pharmacy students while in the transition or liminal state. The concept of liminality, from the Latin *limen* which means threshold, has been discussed in health professions education, such as medicine (Neve, Lloyd, & Collett, 2017), nursing (Lyneham & Levett-Jones,

2016; Barton 2007), and occupational therapy (Tanner, 2011), but still considered to be under-researched in the field of pharmacy.

This qualitative study is a part of the research work undertaken by the authors in understanding pharmacy students' accounts of experiences of being in the liminal state, particularly in the undergraduate level in the Philippine setting. The previous output highlighted pharmacy students' college adjustment particularly on how they developed progress in their academic performance, expanded their social connections, supported their emotions, and became attached to the university using a grounded theory approach (Ng & de Guzman, 2017). While this current paper puts emphasis on the lifeworld experiences of professionalism from lecture and laboratory professional courses to practicum among pharmacy students, significant findings of this present study can assist curriculum experts in designing professional courses as well as clinical preceptors in preparing experiential learning tasks with particular emphasis on scaffolding student professionalism. Further, this can be helpful in improving specific aspects of the pharmacy program, in addition to the professional courses and practicum, which can also influence student development of professionalism.

### **Purpose of the Research**

This study aimed to describe undergraduate pharmacy students' *lebenswelt* of professionalism from academic and practice settings while in the liminal state of their educational journey.

### **Methodology**

A descriptive phenomenology design, which depicts individuals' lived experiences, lifeworld, or *lebenswelt* (Bevan, 2014) of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), was utilized to surface the meaning of student professionalism in pharmacy education.

The study population consisted of 20 purposively selected undergraduate pharmacy students from two higher education institutions affiliated with Philippine Association of Colleges of Pharmacy. The participants, with a mean age of 21 years and mostly female (n=12), represented students who were officially enrolled in their final year level in the second term of academic year 2014-2015 and have completed the pharmacy practicum requirement.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university ethics review committee and the program heads. The schedule of the interviews was arranged based on the availability of the participants and the interview proper was conducted in the assigned rooms in the institutions. Voluntary participation was made certain by primarily explaining the details of the research and they were informed that their decision would not affect their grades or any class-related evaluation. Also, they were reminded that they were free not to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with, to ask for the audio-recorder to be turned off, or even refuse to participate in data collection at any point. The respondents were also given opportunity to raise questions regarding the study and their consent to participate was then obtained. Subsequently, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted. An interview protocol was prepared and served as a guide during the interview. This consisted of essence questions focusing on the participants' learning experiences from academic-related topics to practice environments, particularly on professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The collected data were transcribed immediately after each scheduled session and randomly checked to ensure the quality of transcription. Data were subjected to phenomenological reduction using the Colaizzi's method (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007; Catacutan & de Guzman, 2016). The participants' responses were read a number of times and the significant statements related

to the phenomenon were extracted. The meanings or categories for each statement were formulated. These formulated meanings were clustered into sub-themes and themes. Then, the findings were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Further, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, peer debriefing and informant feedback were employed.

## Results and Discussion

From the qualitative analyses of the participants' responses, *The Pharmacy Students' Cone of Professionalism* (Figure 1) emerged. This characterizes three themes of student professionalism– *understanding*, *embracing*, and *embodying expectations*–signifying the essence of professionalism based on undergraduate pharmacy students' learning experiences. The model illustrates student professionalism as a conic section – the intersection of the cone (represented by professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and plane (represented by academic and practice environments). To facilitate professionalism, the professional attributes required of a would-be pharmacist are being developed in the academic and practice settings which include shaping and meaning-making mechanisms, respectively. In addition, the arrows signify progression from *understanding*, then *embracing*, and finally to *embodying expectations*.

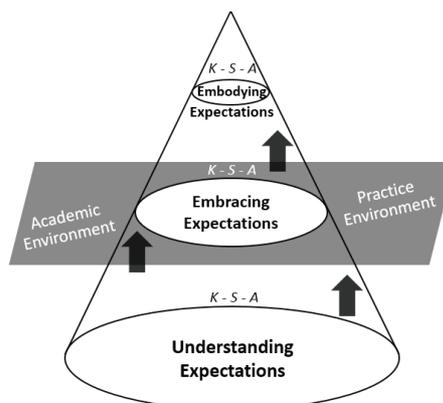


Figure 1. *The Pharmacy Students' Cone of Professionalism.*

### *Understanding Expectations*

This first theme underscored that student professionalism entailed understanding what is expected of a would-be pharmacist by demonstrating receptiveness to listen to discussions and follow instructions as well as to observe peers, professionals, and clients. The participants recollected their experiences from their professional pharmacy courses, in both lecture and laboratory classes. During the first few meetings of each course, which were shown to be consistent from introductory to final year courses, orientations through the discussion of the syllabi were conducted by their lecturers and laboratory instructors. They encountered new concepts and skills in pharmaceuticals, pharmaceutical chemistry, pharmacology, and quality control, to name a few. While most of them encountered difficulties with new pharmacy-related terms, some still expressed their interest in the topics discussed. One of the students said: *'There were terms which were newly introduced to us and I accepted them as additional knowledge'* [P5]. Also, they had different course learning activities, such as formal lecture, case analyses, research, and role-playing, and were assessed with more weight on the knowledge and skills they demonstrated than their attitudes or behavior. During these activities, they listened quietly but participated in class discussion when needed. Likewise, they encountered individual and group laboratory experiments, such as drug compounding, manufacturing, pharmacology, and quality control tests, allowing them to observe the required skills while their instructors discussed and demonstrated the procedures. Meanwhile, as they were starting with their internships in the community, hospital, and industrial pharmacy settings, they were initially oriented on institutional policies, pharmacy activities, and student assessments, observed diverse roles of pharmacists in each setting, and met other professionals and clients.

Moreover, they followed instructions and complied with the course requirements. Yet a few of them were a bit overwhelmed and performed the activities given by their professors just to comply. One student shared: *'I accomplished the course requirements one day at a time and prepared them to meet the deadline. But sometimes I felt ashamed because some of my classmates could finish it way ahead of the submission date'* [P18]. Also, they recalled the varied behaviors of their classmates and group mates in course activities as well as their encounters with their professors who possess different personalities and employ various teaching strategies. One mentioned: *'I consider my professors as role models'* [P11]. While in the practice settings, the students at first were quiet especially when they were with professionals and could not avoid feeling nervous when they were interacting with them. Some of them particularly expressed how they observed pharmacists interact with patients because at first they did not know how to express themselves or convey their knowledge to them. Also, some were inhibited to mingle with other student interns since they do not know each other. But they expressed that they followed practicum instructions, observed strict rules and policies, demonstrated punctuality, and dressed appropriately.

Generally, the participants in this study responded when introduced to new professional pharmacy concepts and practices in the classroom and actual work settings which included policies and instructions and they are likewise in the company of students, academics, and practitioners. Relevant papers indicate that students in the transition state can represent individuals who are learning the new practice (Barton, 2007), may perceive professional concepts as something which are difficult to grasp or can be life-changing (Neve et al., 2017), may have struggles in building connections with a client, and may have theoretical knowledge of clinical practice but fail to see its relevance in the actual work setting (Tanner, 2011).

Notably, in the pharmacy curricula, there are certain areas which are regarded as more conceptually difficult compared to others and the relevance and application to the profession are oftentimes misunderstood (Husband, Todd, & Fulton, 2014). Hence, it is essential that students should be assisted while encountering concepts and skills and synthesizing these in a progressive manner (Jungnickel et al., 2009) as well as include hands-on experiences in addition to didactic instruction. Traditional lectures limit students' opportunities to develop significant skills, most importantly, professionalism (Jungnickel et al., 2009), while active learning strategies engage students in the learning process (Gleason et al., 2011). Besides, students should be given opportunities to observe pharmacists in practice settings (Jungnickel, et al., 2009). Preceptors' or practitioners' behaviors in practice settings also play a vital role in the students' preparation as pharmacists aside from the active role of educators as students' models or mentors. The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (2008) encourages pharmacists to become mentors to students in order to foster professionalism. Role modeling is one of the essential means to teach professionalism and deemed influential for students to understand it better (Roth & Zlatic, 2009).

Thus, the findings of this theme suggest that the design of the pharmacy curricula should introduce students to or orient them on the necessary professional concepts and skills at the onset of their education to assist them in their understanding of the profession. There should be several opportunities for active learning in lecture or laboratory courses and in experiential programs to allow students to engage in the process of learning the professional skills. Also, the curricula should facilitate students' full understanding of concepts and practices, particularly those they find troublesome, through implementation of appropriate teaching-learning strategies. Lastly, proper attitudes and behavior should be exhibited by

faculty members and preceptors to positively influence students' professional socialization early on and throughout their education.

### *Embracing Expectations*

Remarkably, it was also evident in the participants' learning experiences that student professionalism involved embracing professional expectations and this was manifested by their eagerness to engage in active learning and to interact with other people in the classroom and practice settings. The participants progressively applied the knowledge that they acquired in different course activities, integrated it in other courses, gained new knowledge from their experiences, and applied what they learned in actual situations. For instance, in their courses, some of these activities include role-playing in which they played the role of pharmacists conducting medication counseling, checked actual patient cases in the hospital and discuss edits analyses in class, and worked on an undergraduate research. While experiencing varied curricular activities, the participants articulated how they consulted their professors or asked their classmates if certain lessons were difficult to understand and exerted effort in preparing for oral presentations and laboratory experiments. One student explained: *'Prior to the experiment, all the needed materials should be prepared because I personally wanted to work in an efficient manner' [P16]*. They eagerly considered other factors when analyzing patient cases, identified the root cause of the problem, and determined the rationale of a specific reaction. Some of them shared that they were enthusiastic in performing course activities. Meanwhile, they also applied their knowledge during internship and experienced medication counseling, monitored patients' medications, and responded to queries from other departments, to name a few. They learned how to understand issues and problems in the actual practice, tried their best to answer queries from professionals, and expressed their willingness and initiative to perform tasks.

Further, they interacted with others in their learning environment. When asked about their professors, they shared that they were professional and competent and they could approach them if they had some concerns. They were one in saying that their professors' actions had an influence on them. Likewise, they did not only develop teamwork when working with their classmates on a group activity, but also developed a strong bond with them. As verbalized by one student: *'We could relate with the same stress that we felt, we helped each other, and I think that strengthened the bond that we had' [P3]*. She further added: *'Aside from teamwork, we had good communication in the group.'* They also acknowledged that they had different opinions about certain topics and positively resolved personal conflicts or issues. During their internships, they worked harmoniously with other student interns when performing specific tasks which were assigned to them. Additionally, they showed respect when given the opportunity to interact with preceptors, doctors, and other health care professionals. Some of them also had the chance to counsel different types of patients and politely talked to them. One of them recalled: *'I had this patient who really insisted what she already knew about her condition and medication. So, I acknowledged the correct thing that she said and added more relevant information' [P20]*.

Notably, this theme described how the participants engaged themselves to learn as well as interacted with peers, professionals, and clients while in the transition state. It is imperative that students should be able to integrate and apply the knowledge gained from foundational courses to various patient-centered cases (Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, 2015). Prevailing pharmacy literature presented how students applied the knowledge gained from didactic lectures to medication counseling using standardized patients (Gillette, Rudolph, Rockich-Winston, Stanton, & Anderson, 2017), pharmacotherapy cases (Cheng, 2012), and introductory pharmacy practice experiences (Krueger, 2013), among others. Learning professionalism skills

should be integrated in the curriculum through practical classes, in addition to direct teaching and practice experiences (Schafheutle et al., 2012). These simulated learning activities can contribute to the students' ability to act professionally when they face challenging situations in practice (Fejzic & Barker, 2015). Likewise, it is crucial to note that pharmacy students should also demonstrate professional attributes when dealing with patients, practitioners, teaching staff, and other students (Hall & Ashcroft, 2011). Relevant articles revealed how students, while in the transition state, established close informal relationships with other student members during experiential placements enabling them to practice new skills in their learning environment (Barton, 2007). Moreover, the students' daily interactions with faculty and pharmacy practitioners can contribute to their professional development and these role models should demonstrate professionalism at all times (Roth & Zlatic, 2009). Practitioners should also facilitate students' learning during experiential education particularly their transition from student to professional (Tanner, 2011). Further, students also have opportunities to interact with real patients allowing them to learn and practice professionalism skills (Schafheutle et al., 2012). Dealing with patients in a sensitive manner and communicating with the teaching staff and pharmacists (Hall & Ashcroft, 2011), particularly when working in a collaborative environment (American College of Clinical Pharmacy, 2009), are also considered professionalism attributes.

These significant findings imply that the curricula and practicum should prepare students not only in understanding professional concepts and skills but also in applying, integrating, or analyzing those tasks in course or experiential training. In addition to simulated or case-based activities, diverse strategies should be utilized to enhance students' knowledge and skills as they encounter different actual patient cases or perform clinical activities. Efficient means to scaffold students' grasp

of lessons and enthusiasm in performing course tasks should be provided to enhance their engagement in the learning process. Finally, interaction of students with other people in the classroom and practice environments should be supported to strengthen student professionalism.

### *Embodying Expectations*

Finally, student professionalism also encompassed embodying professional expectations as the participants conveyed their desire to commit to self-improvement as well as to work with interprofessional teams to serve others. While few of the participants considered themselves ready for practice once they graduate from the university, most of them believed that they were not yet fully equipped with the attributes required of a pharmacist. Some shared that they had professional knowledge but were not sure if that would be enough in actual practice and still wanted to unlock other skills such as communication or critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, most of them expressed how they yearned to possess the necessary professional attitudes and behaviors to improve on what they already have. One student mentioned: *'There's still room for improvement. I could never be perfect but I could always improve. I look forward to more things that I could learn in practice'* [P9]. Further, he said: *'We should be open to criticisms, accept them, and improve ourselves'*. Likewise, they desired to learn more and believed that this could be obtained not only inside the university but also through exposure in various work settings. As stated by one student: *'I'm not sure if I'm emotionally or mentally ready for professional life. But I know that I could also learn through experience'* [P15]. Another added: *'I think that the professional attributes that you had would only be complete once you are already in the field'* [P11].

Moreover, they expressed their desire to build future collaborative relationships with other professionals particularly those in the health care setting. They were one

in saying that they should demonstrate professional traits when working with fellow pharmacists and other health care professionals. Even though they noticed that there still seems to be a gap between pharmacists and other health care staff, particularly physicians, they likewise shared how they should be respected and that they should help each other to ensure patient care. One of them said: *'You would not survive alone as a professional. You are needed in the health care team. You should know your roles. You should learn teamwork to have continuous patient care'* [P19]. This was supported by another student when she said: *'You should cooperate with physicians and nurses to yield better results for patients'* [P10].

Significantly, the study participants articulated how they wanted to improve themselves and be involved in an interprofessional team to serve patients. Pertinent research findings revealed that in their final year, pharmacy students viewed the need to acquire the knowledge required of the profession (Rutter & Khalid, 2010), perceived themselves to have obtained most or at least some of the professional skills, and recognized that there are professionalism traits that could only be acquired during experiential trainings (Langley & Aheer, 2010). Students acquiring professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior is a crucial aspect of learning in order to deliver quality patient care (American College of Clinical Pharmacy, 2009). Students should demonstrate commitment to the development of professionalism (Roth & Zlatic, 2009), be accountable for their own learning and self-improvement, and seek to become lifelong learners (American College of Clinical Pharmacy, 2009). A relevant article revealed how students viewed practitioners' commitment to their own learning as a core professional value (Lyneham & Levett-Jones, 2016). Commitment to self-improvement is considered a professional trait (American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, 2008) and pharmacists should continuously keep themselves abreast with professional advancements (Roth & Zlatic,

2009). Moreover, pharmacists should work collaboratively in interprofessional health care teams in order to meet patient care needs (Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, 2015; Medina et al, 2013). Students should be prepared for interprofessional team practice to proficiently take part as a member of the health care team involved in direct patient care and therapeutic decision-making (Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, 2015). For instance, pharmacy students could provide evidence-based pharmacotherapy recommendations with a group of resident physicians (Lundquist & Moye, 2009) or develop care plans with nursing students (de Voest, Rackugas, Bambini, & Beel-Bates, 2013), to name a few. Finally, it should also be taken into consideration that students should be able to recognize that a patient's well-being should be the focal point in health care practice (American College of Clinical Pharmacy, 2009) and to understand that a relationship between a patient and a health care practitioner that is based on trust is the core of professionalism (Roth & Zlatic, 2009).

Hence, these put forward that the curricula and experiential programs should be able to provide learning opportunities for students to become committed to self-improvement and lifelong learning. Interprofessional collaboration, student interactions with professionals, particularly those from other health care professions, should be emphasized so that students will have a valid understanding of their roles in interprofessional practice as well as other practitioners' contributions in the health care team. Also, it should be highlighted in the curriculum that pharmacists and the actions or decisions of other health care professionals should put the best interest of patients above their own. Practitioners who are involved in patient care should serve as a good example to students by demonstrating commitment to continuing education and their profession, working effectively with other health care team members, and observing one's fiduciary duty to patients.

## Conclusion

Overall, this qualitative study emphasized the essence of student professionalism based on the accounts of pharmacy students regarding their academic and practicum experiences while traversing the threshold in their educational journey. The findings of this study presented the themes of student professionalism – understanding, embracing, and embodying expectations. This paper underscored the participants' collective experiences concerning their receptiveness to listen to discussions, follow instructions, and observe others in the academic and practice settings; their eagerness to engage in active learning and interact with other people; and their desire to commit to self-improvement as well as work with interprofessional teams in order to serve others. Moreover, the study findings can contribute to the enhancement of the curricula, experiential placements, and other aspects of the program with emphasis on developing students' professionalism early on and throughout their education. Specific relevant implications take account of the need to facilitate students' engagement in the learning process, their commitment to lifelong learning, and recognition of one's roles and contributions in the health care team. Further, proper measures should be provided in order to highlight the significance of role modeling as an influential factor in strengthening student professionalism.



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