The Nursing Profession: Approaches to Capturing the Interest of Men

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Abstract

This study used a qualitative research method to examine the lived experiences of male nurses who are currently practicing. A review of the literature determined that current methods of recruitment remain mostly unsuccessful. A gap in the literature identified the need to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of practicing male nurses without regard to other variables. Open-ended questions were emailed to participants and the responses uncovered three distinct ideas. These ideas identified interests in nursing, gender-based discrimination, and changes needed according to the participants recalled experiences. This research showed that experiences of practicing male nurses are similar to the experiences of student nurses, but the perspective of the nurse changes with gained experience. With the concern of negative societal stereotypes being identified as a major problem, efforts to recruit and retain men in the nursing profession are shifted toward a new target.
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Despite the fact that men have a significant place in the history of nursing, it remains to be perceived as a feminine occupation that continues to be dominated by females (McMurry, 2011). Although the number of men in the nursing profession has increased over the last decade, the male gender maintains its position as the overwhelming minority. According to the Department of Health and Human Services (2013), the number of male registered nurses has slightly increased from 7.7% in the year 2000 to 9.1% in 2010. Why is this? Where are all the men? Why don’t they join the nursing profession? Now, more than ever, opportunities to increase the proportion of men in the nursing profession are being presented.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) indicates that 2,737,400 registered nurses were employed in the United States as of 2010 and projects that employment for registered nurses will increase to 3,449,300 by 2020. This expected growth of 26 percent, which will provide 711,900 job opportunities, is based on the principles that technological advancements are allowing an increased number of diagnoses to be treated, a new movement of preventative care has been implemented, and the elderly population has increased on account of the baby boomer generation reaching elder ages (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In addition, the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis estimates that in the next 10-15 years the 1,000,000 registered nurses currently over the age of 50 years will reach retirement (Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Between the new opportunities and expected departures, it is possible that nursing could experience a shortage in the near future.

In order to help supply this demand, nursing continues to explore methods for improving the attractiveness of the profession to males. An abundance of literature about men in nursing indicates that various methods of investigation have been used. These methods include
comparing both male and female perspectives on nursing, exploring the reasons given by former male nurses for leaving the nursing profession, and surveying lived experiences; however, these lived experiences tend to focus on male nursing students instead of actual male nurses. Unfortunately, the experiences of men working in the profession have not been studied as extensively as required. Hence the reason why little information is available regarding the thoughts of experienced, practicing male nurses (Macwilliams et al., 2013). After all, if one were seeking for ways to usher men into the nursing profession, wouldn’t the men who are nurses provide the most beneficial information? The purpose of this study was to survey the lived experiences of practicing male nurses. This study used the research question: “What are the lived experiences of male nurses who are currently practicing?” When coupled with the findings from previous literature, the findings from this study will hopefully propose more informative methods for not only recruiting males into nursing, but also sustaining them within the profession.

**Literature Review**

As mentioned in the present paper, there is plenty of literature concerned with the task of drawing men into nursing. In an attempt to discover the reasons behind the lack of men in nursing, multiple themes have continuously been exposed. These themes have uncovered the following: Common reasons why men enter nursing, stereotypes or discrimination that males encounter in the nursing environment, and concerns that have caused men to leave the nursing profession.

**Reasons for Entrance**

Harding (2009) conducted a study using a qualitative approach, which aimed at determining the reasons behind a group of men in New Zealand deciding to enter the nursing
profession. Participants included 18 male nurses that were selected using purposive sampling. Sampling occurred using 20-audiotaped interviews lasting 40-90 minutes. Analysis of the interview produced the following reasons for choosing nursing as a profession: previous life experiences, being called to serve others, opportunities for financial security, work satisfaction, and personal relationships with nurses. Eleven of the participants reported having female nurses as friends or relatives (Harding, 2009). The findings from two separate studies that also use a qualitative approach, but focus on the educational experience of male nursing students support the findings of Harding (2009) about the factors that go into the decision to become a nurse.

The first study, performed by Ierardi et al. (2010), aimed at surveying the experiences of male students during their nursing education in a Massachusetts hospital-based associate degree nursing program. The study used seven male participants (n=7) who were all enrolled in their third nursing course. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using an interview guide that contained 12 open-ended questions designed to keep the interviewer on track and maintain consistency amongst the participants (Ierardi et al., 2010). Data analysis included recording interviews, transcribing them verbatim, and reviewing them several times in order to recognize patterns and similarities. Noticeable patterns were acknowledged as findings. Wanting to care for others was the first pattern identified. The second pattern revealed that all of the participants had left another career in order to pursue nursing because the profession provides opportunities for advancement and achievement. As the participants in this study expressed their desire to pursue achievement through helping others, the findings of Harding (2009) are supported along with other current literature. For instance, Brown (2009) stated, “Male human beings are believed to be potentially capable of as much emotional richness and interest in relationships as are women” (p. 122).
In the second study conducted by Meadus and Twomey (2011), the research question “Tell me what is your experience of being a male student nurse in a baccalaureate nursing program?” (p. 271) was used to steer this qualitative, phenomenological study. Phenomenological research is an inductive descriptive approach used to describe an experience as it is lived by an individual (Burns & Grove, 2011). The study took place in Atlantic, Canada and used purposive sampling via emails and posters to recruit students from three different nursing programs within the province. Participants included 27 male students who were in different years of the program. Interestingly, 11 students had a previous degree, 11 had completed some type of post-secondary education, and 12 participants reported being related to a nurse (Meadus & Twomey, 2011). Common ideas presented themselves as findings. The first three ideas are choosing nursing, becoming a nurse, and caring within the nursing role. According to Meadus and Twomey (2011), the most common reasons for electing the nursing profession included job security, demand for nurses, opportunities for advancement, relationships with nurses, and the desire to help others. When coupled with the fact that 22 of the 27 participants made the decision to change educational goals, and 12 participants admitted to being related to a nurse; the findings from the two previous studies are further supported. Ierardi et al. (2010) recognized that most male nurses had left another career to pursue nursing; while Harding (2009) indicated that having a relationship with a female nurse was positively correlated with the decision to enter nursing.

**Deterrents**

Most of the literature published concerning the topic of men in nursing has produced findings that support the presence of gender stereotypes and sexual discrimination as being a major deterrent from the nursing profession. For example, Ierardi et al. (2010) shed light on this
matter as findings from this study suggested that the most common negative experience
associated with education involved societal stereotypes being put on display as the participants
were repeatedly mistaken for physicians during their clinical rotations. According to lerardi et
al. (2010) the most notable challenges presented in both the classroom and clinical settings
include gender stereotypes and sexual discrimination. In the study performed by Meadus and
Twomey (2011), male students’ educational experiences with gender stereotyping and sexual
discrimination are encounter more frequently.

Several participants shared their encounters with gender-based stereotypes. The most
common incident occurring when they were called doctor and having to continuously identify
themselves as a student nurse. Another experience the males frequently encountered was being
thrust into situations requiring them to lift and move patients, or even step into potentially
dangerous situations strictly because of their male gender. Surprisingly, this discrimination only
transpired at the hands of the females on the nursing staff (Meadus and Twomey, 2011).
Discrimination is the basis for another common idea found in the study, which is visibility. This
idea centers on the fact that the males feel like they are being recognized strictly because of their
gender. For example, the students recall feeling like they are being called on in class because
they stand out to the instructor. On the other hand some male nursing students view being
visible as a positive aspect of discrimination (Meadus and Twomey, 2011).

Gender stereotypes and sexual discrimination are further supported by three studies,
which all aimed to compare the experiences of male nurses with those of female nurses.
Rowlinson (2013) is the first of the three studies that will be discussed. Using a qualitative
method with a phenomenological approach, Rowlinson (2013) surveyed the research question “Is
the lived experience of being a nurse different depending on your gender” (p. 219)? Participants
included two colleagues of the researcher with one being a male nurse and the other being a female nurse. Interviews consisting of open-ended questions were the source of data collection (Rowlinson, 2013). The findings indicated that gender stereotyping came up more frequently on the male nurse’s transcript with 21 appearances compared to only nine appearances on the female’s transcript. That being said, this study indicates that gender is still seen to influence the lived experiences of male and female nurses when compared to one another (Rowlinson, 2013).

The second study was conducted in order to investigate gender differences and similarities between male and female nurses (Andrews, Stewart, Morgan, & D’Arcy, 2012). The study was conducted throughout communities in northern and southern Canada that were considered to be rural or remote on the basis of having less than 10,000 inhabitants. Male and female nurses working in these qualified areas acted as the participants yielding 165 male and 2,945 female participants (Andrews et al., 2012). Andrews et al. (2012) used a quantitative approach with a descriptive design. Descriptive research provides detailed accounts of characteristics dealing with particular groups, requires a large number of subjects, and is conducted in natural settings with no manipulation of the situation (Burns & Grove, 2011). Sampling was done with the use of a survey that was mailed to the participants. Gender differences exposed by Andrews et al. (2012) support the perceptions that male nurses look for advancement opportunities and higher rates of pay, earn higher wages, rate their job security as good, and identify attractive employment opportunities in nursing. In addition, larger proportions of male nurses show interest in employment mobility and admit that their support group at work includes physicians. Andrews et al. (2012) found “one of the most striking results of the analysis was the proportion of male nurses who reported experiencing aggression in the workplace” (p. 569).
The third study gives a different insight into the opinion of male nurses. Simpson (2011) performs research that questions how male nurses feel about women in the nursing profession. Using a qualitative approach, Simpson (2011) searches gender differences by questioning men about women and women about men. Taking place in Australia, the participants included 16 male nurses and eight female nurses that were selected after responding to an advertisement about the study. The data was collected via interviews that examined how each gender felt about the opposite sex. The findings showed that the female nurses were mostly supportive of their male counterparts. The men were seen to have a unique ability to think and act quickly in stressful situations. Several female nurses pointed out that they believed the men received more attention from the physicians and were quicker to advance in their careers. On the other hand, the male nurses described the females as compassionate caregivers that liked to follow routines and were less likely to improvise or engage in conversation with physicians. The men stated that they were often asked to perform the task that were considered “manly”, such as lifting or moving patients and dealing with potentially violent patients (Simpson, 2011).

**Concerns Causing Departure**

When considering the scarcity of males in the nursing profession, retaining their presence is also a major aspect that must be considered. A study of the literature has provided three articles that help identify the most noticeable causes for men to quit the nursing profession. The first study looked to uncover potential causes of work-related exhaustion by focusing on causes of job stress and achievement motivation. Hsu, Chen, Yu, and Lou (2010) conducted a survey using a quantitative, cross-sectional design. Data was collected using a questionnaire that was divided into parts and answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Of the males invited to participate, 121 responded and made up the final sample (Hsu et al., 2010). The findings of the
study showed that the relationship between job stress and occupational burnout was substantial. Further analysis indicated that role conflict alone was responsible for 40.8% of the work-related fatigue (Hsu et al., 2010).

The second study considered nurses throughout the United States of America with a focus on gender-based work barriers, work, and life satisfaction (Rochlen, Good, & Carver, 2009). Rochlen et al. (2009) used a quantitative approach with a correlational design. Correlational research involves measuring selected variables and using statistical analysis to determine the strength and type of relationship between the two (Burns & Grove, 2011). The final sample size consisted of 174 male nurses working in various locations throughout the USA. The data was collected through completion of an online survey developed by the authors (Rochlen et al., 2009). The findings suggest that an increase in experiences with gender-related work barriers or discrimination will produce increased gender role conflict, decreased social support, decreased job skills, and decreased satisfaction in both work and life. The findings also imply that social support is positively correlated to work and life satisfaction in male nurses. It is then conceivable that decreased social support and decreased self-perceived skills is related to more gender-related barriers (Rochlen et al., 2009).

A third study by Rajapaksa & Rothstein (2009) explored the main reasons that male nurses cited for leaving nursing. The study was a secondary analysis of a survey conducted by the Bureau of Health Professions Division of Nursing of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (Rajapaksa & Rothstein, 2009). Participants included 104 males located across the United States that were no longer working as registered nurses, but were employed in some other occupation. The findings indicated that men were more likely to cite salary as a reason for leaving nursing. The findings also suggested that male nurses do not leave nursing for
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other occupations because of dissatisfaction, but instead because of the low financial rewards associated with nursing when compared to other occupations (Rajapaksa & Rothstein, 2009).

Although the research studies previously discussed do provide valuable information regarding men in nursing, the studies did not focus exclusively on the experiences of practicing male nurses. Instead experiences of student nurses, comparisons with female nurses, opinions of former nurses were used. While the findings do provide knowledgeable insight, the scant number of male nurses proves that current methods of attracting men to the profession need to be altered substantially.

Method

The study used a qualitative research method with a grounded theory approach. Burns & Grove (2011) state “grounded means that the theory that developed from research has its roots in the data from which it was derived” (p. 77). The lived experiences of practicing male nurses were examined using semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions were constructed by the author and included six open-ended inquiries.

Participants

The participants were contacted via e-mail and asked to partake in the study. Of the four participants contacted, all responded and agreed to contribute. The sample was comprised of 4 male registered nurses who are currently practicing. Their ages ranged from 25 to 53 years and all had a minimum of three years experience as a registered nurse. All four participants were white; three were married; one was single; one held an advanced practice license. All four participants grew up in Louisiana; all four graduated from a nursing school in Louisiana. All four participants knew the researcher.
Ethical Considerations

Although the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not involved, ethical considerations were carefully thought out and reviewed. The participants’ identities remained anonymous as they were not informed of one another and were not required to meet face to face. Confidentiality was maintained and ensured as only one copy was printed and all other forms of the data were deleted. Privacy was further guaranteed as the researcher agreed that no direct responses would be quoted in the findings. The participants were informed of their right to refrain from answering any of the questions. Informed consent was established by submission of the answered questions and the researcher agreed to share any findings of the study upon request.

Data Collection

All four participants received the six open-ended questions via their personal e-mail addresses. They were instructed to read each question and transcribe any and all responses that came to mind. The questions pertained to their interests in nursing, occurrences or incidents in the work environment, and changes that could or should be made in the nursing profession. The participants were given three days complete and return their experiences to the researcher via e-mail.

Data Analysis

Procedures for analyzing data involved reviewing the responses several times. Each participant’s response to all six questions was read. Then all of the responses to each specific question were read. This process was repeated multiple times over the course of several days in order to detect any distinct similarities. It must be noted that no comments, alterations, or corrections of any kind were made to the submitted responses. Each response remained entirely original.
Results

After meticulously reviewing the data, three main ideas began to surface. These ideas included the following: Interests in nursing, gender-based discrimination, and needed changes. The findings for each idea will be discussed separately.

Looking at the idea of interests in nursing, responses imply that all of the participants initially became interested in nursing either because of the employment opportunities, or because they had a close relationship with a female registered nurse. When asked to elaborate on the aspects of nursing that have maintained their interests in the profession, all four of the participants identified advancement opportunities and being able to care for others at some point in their response. These findings provide additional support to the results of the studies performed by Harding (2009); Ierardi et al. (2010); and Meadus and Twomey (2011).

As the idea of gender-based discrimination is considered, both positive and negative experiences emerged from the responses. Common negative experiences that frequently occurred included being called upon to perform manly tasks such as lifting, turning, or moving patients. Surprisingly, the participants in this study viewed some of the experiences with gender-based discrimination as positive. These experiences included quicker opportunities for advancement, being immersed more frequently in conversations with physicians, higher salaries, and being thrust into potentially aggressive situations. By simply existing, these gender-based experiences support the findings of multiple studies in the review of literature. However, identifying some of these incidents as positive experiences indicates the possibility of original findings.

When ask what changes needed to be made in the nursing profession based on the experiences of the participants, one overwhelming topic arose. All four of the participants
recognized society’s negative perception of male nurses as one of the professions major problems. This finding supports the results of Rochlen et al. (2009), which imply that social support is positively correlated to work and life satisfaction in male nurses. If social support declines, work and life satisfaction will decrease as well. Meanwhile, none of the participants reported considering an exit from the profession.

**Discussion**

This study not only supports, but also contests the findings of previous studies. This was to be expected as the present paper explains that not enough studies were conducted while focusing exclusively on the lived experiences of male nurses.

The gender-based discrimination that was considered to be positive experiences in this study gave rise to several questions. Does the perspective of a male nurse change over time as he becomes desensitized to the nursing environment, or can the reasons for these differences be explained? For example, do opportunities for advancement present themselves quicker for males, or do males seek out more appealing job opportunities? Do physicians really prefer to communicate with male nurses, or do male nurses subconsciously seek out conversations with male physicians as a method of taking a break from being surrounded by women? Does a male nurse get paid a higher salary, or do male nurses work more hours? Do male nurses really like being thrust into aggressive and potentially dangerous situations, or do male nurses shoulder that burden in an effort to maintain their masculinity in a female-dominated occupation. These questions give rise to the need for more research that focuses entirely on the lived experience of practicing male nurses.
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although this study yielded results, several limitations must be considered. The research was limited by the small sample size. All participants were of the same ethnicity; all participants grew up and went to nursing school in Louisiana, which keeps these findings from being generalized. One participant is a nurse anesthetist and lives in Houston, Texas so he may not be involved with the same experiences. Three of the participants were married, which may keep them from considering a career change. The most noticeable limitation is the fact that the researcher knew all of the participants. This can affect the way the participants responded to the questions. The researcher also designed the questions, which could ultimately skew the results.

Future research on the lived experiences of practicing male nurses should use face-to-face interviews. Permitting the participant to talk rather than trying to transcribe the responses will allow more experiences to be recalled.

Contributions

The findings of this study provide evidence that negative societal stereotypes continue to be a major reason for the scarce amount of male nurses. Not only do these negative stereotypes deter men from pursuing a nursing career, but they also decrease the work and life satisfactions of practicing male nurses. Decrease work satisfaction can also lead to a decrease ability to perform skill in a safe manner (Rochlen et al., 2009). In order to increase the quality of patient and family care, certain changes must be made. Davies (2013) provides detailed examples of possible ways for public health nurses to help change these negative societal stereotypes. For example, two student nurses coordinated a nursing practice group to give registered nurses, students, and potential nursing students a chance to talk about men in nursing. Topics discussed include the bias that males face when choosing a career in nursing, benefits of having men in
nursing, ways that the public can support males who choose a career in nursing (Davies, 2013). According to Davies (2013), public health nurses could help the cause by speaking to students at the schools in the community, which would increase the awareness that male registered nurses have an important role in health care. Another main point of discussion was the fact that men in nursing would benefit by seeing more male nurse leaders in profiled in public (Davies, 2013).

In an attempt to profile more male nurses in public, nursing school faculty, male student nurses, and male nurses should increase their efforts to educate the public about the invaluable contributions made by men in the nursing profession. Appearing and presenting at public events such as college and career days, or health fairs can achieve this. Clementson (2008) recommends that healthcare organizations implement policies that require a spokesperson to attend community events such as sporting games or churches in order to teach the community about the importance of nurses. Implementing policies that allow local nursing organizations to work in collaboration with schools to offer a mentoring system for male nurses is also discussed. This would allow males to feel supported about their career choice (Clementson, 2008).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of practicing male nurses in an attempt to discover new methods of attracting males to the nursing profession. The findings of this study revealed that practicing male nurses tend to experience the same problems as student nurses; however, the experienced nurse has either developed a new perspective regarding gender-based discrimination or has become desensitized to the nursing environment. With the findings of the study supporting the notion that negative societal stereotypes are still a major concern, new methods of introducing male nurses to the public have been brought forth.
References


