Concept of professional socialization in nursing

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Abstract: Each nursing student comes to nursing with a lay image of nursing portrayed by nurses they have seen. This lay perception of nursing that a nursing student holds is transformed to a more professional understanding that is acquired in nursing schools. This process is known as professional socialization. It is a process of learning the norms, attitudes, behaviours, skills, roles, and values of the profession. It involves the internalization of the values and norms of the profession in the individual's own behaviour and self-concept. The ultimate goal of professional socialization is to internalize a professional identity of the profession. Professional socialization sets in to reduce the tension from the scenario of reality shock and facilitate adaptation during the transition process. This paper serves as a concept paper with the main purpose of introducing and explaining the concept of professional socialization in nursing to help the readers in gaining further understanding of the concept, especially within the local context. The first author has also incorporated her own personal reflections with regards to her socialization process to nursing.

Introduction

The authors would like to follow up on a comment made in the press recently. Gnanapragasam[1] commented that nowadays, it is difficult not only for diploma graduates but also degree holders to secure a job in nursing. Many of the graduates ended up with jobs such as insurance agents, receptionists, store clerks, tuition teachers, sales assistants, and were also involved in part-time businesses. According to a Government study[2], more than 54% of the private nursing diploma graduates could not find a job three to four months after graduating in 2010, compared to only 21.7% in 2008.

This issue is worth looking into as it would exacerbate the current nursing shortage problem in the long run. Nevertheless, the public should not only point their fingers towards the Health Ministry for not providing sufficient job opportunities to the graduate nurses. It was found that fresh nursing graduates portray certain attitude problems when it comes to employment.

An understaffed private doctor[3] from Rawang, Selangor, had interviewed numerous nursing diploma graduates. He pointed out that most of the graduates are just plain fastidious when it comes to matters such as salary and working hours[3]. They are reluctant to work on weekends, evening and night shifts, not to even mention working overtime or on public holidays. The new graduates would still decline employment in lieu of them being aware that it was expected of them to work on shift basis. Moreover, these fresh graduates have zero working experience and yet high salary expectations. As a result, their working period barely lasted five months, some not even one month. With all these inappropriate attitudes, it is not surprising at all that 54% of private nursing graduates could not find jobs.

Hence, the authors were propelled to examine the concept of socialization and relate it to the nursing profession. From all these setbacks, it can be speculated that these graduates failed to be socialized into the nursing world.

Concept of Professional Socialization

The main purpose of this paper is to help the readers in gaining further understanding of the concept, especially within the local context. Each nursing student enters nursing with a lay image of nursing from their own observation. According to Leddy[4], most students enter nursing with a service orientation in which nursing is viewed as helping sick people recover. This lay perception of nursing is soon replaced with a more professional understanding acquired in nursing school[5].

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Socialization is defined as the process of learning new roles, knowledge, skills, and characteristics of a group in the society. Acquisition of the behaviours and attitudes allows the individuals to become members of groups and society[6,7].

Professional socialization has been defined by many authors[4,5,8,9,10,&11]. Most of the authors agreed that it is a process by which a lay person is being adopted into a profession. From the review of the literatures, its definition revolves around the learning of the norms, attitudes, behaviours, skills, roles and values of the profession[8]. In order to be socialized into a profession, one has to internalize the values and norms of the profession in his own behaviour and self-concept.

From the literature review, professional socialization could be described as a process and an outcome. When described as a process, it is the transmission of values, norms and ways of seeing that are unique to the profession[9]. When described as an outcome, it is the formation of a self-view as a member of a profession with the requisite knowledge and responsibilities[9].

Concept of Professional Values

Every professional group has its own preferred standards called professional values (e.g. integrity, honesty, or autonomy)[5,9]. These values serve as a guide and motivator for individual and professional behaviour[5]. As a result of one's values, individuals are willing to take risks, overcome barriers, abandon their comfort zone, and put in more efforts[12]. Besides that, values are also the foundation for commitment to patient welfare which is essential in professional practice[13]. Values also guide a caring, professional nurse in conducting ethical behaviours for the provision of safe healthcare[13].

Values are learned[14]. It is within the nursing educational program that a student develops, clarifies, and internalizes professional values[9]. Students should examine their value orientation as they can assess how values mould their professional behaviour and practice. Studies suggest that value-based nursing care will lead to increased quality of care[15]. Also, by understanding their own values and those of their profession, the nursing students will benefit from realizing the rewards of nursing as a caring profession. Hence, nursing education should be designed in such a way to facilitate the development of professional values and value-based behaviours[16].

Professional Socialization as a Process

Professional socialization is based upon role theory which has its origin from the sociology field. Role theory emphasizes on the preparation of students to face particular job expectations or roles instead of facing life in society[4]. A role is the expectations coming with a position in society[9].

There are two processes that help individuals learn their roles: first is the process of interacting with groups and significant others, and second is to learn from role playing, identification, modeling, instruction, observation, trial and error, and role negotiation[8].

On top of that, there are two types of sociologic conditions, structural and cultural, involved in the professional socialization process[11]. For structural conditions, an individual's roles are determined by rules such as hospital policies, doctors' orders, and job descriptions; whereby cultural conditions are "the idea systems prevalent in a society as expressed in words, symbols, and ceremonies"[11].

Last but not least, professional socialization is a lifelong process beginning with the curriculum and faculty of the nursing program and is then extended into work setting[8]. The development of professional values does not only begin with professional education in nursing but also continues along a continuum throughout the years of nursing practice[17].

Professional Socialization as an Outcome

The ultimate goal of professional socialization is to develop a professional identity whereby each of these attributes becomes part of a nurse's personal and professional self-image and behavior[5].

Professional socialization is the result of exposure to multiple socialization agents who are the people initiating the socialization process[9]. Socializing agents that nursing students come across include clients, faculty, colleagues, other health care professionals, family, and friends. The outcome of professional socialization is to allow all these people to communicate effectively[9]. By interacting with different groups of people, students have the opportunities to learn different experiences from each other and subsequently contribute to professional self-development.

As a result of professional socialization, students' pre-set values are replaced with the values of the nursing profession. The change in one's values will subsequently result in a change in behaviour. Lastly, an individual's self-concept is changed with the end result of the development of a professional identity.

Internalizing Professional Socialization through Nursing Education

Nowadays, there are different pathways of educational preparation that students can take in order to become registered nurses. For instance, in Malaysia, students can enroll in a diploma or bachelor program and ultimately sit for the licensing exam. Some colleges still offer assistant nurse program.

Professional socialization through education is the pathway to learning new roles as students observe and experience the culture of nursing[5]. Formal socialization occurs in both the classroom and clinical setting while informal socialization occurs through observation or interaction with other healthcare workers.

The works of first year nursing students are generally hands-on and skill based. Students focus more on the facts, rules, and guidelines for practice. For instance, learning how to give injections would be presented with the procedural guidelines and the students would then practice the skills. Fundamentally, students at this stage are more passive as learners and do what they are told. On the contrary, the final year students are more able to make sound judgment, apply knowledge to practice, test knowledge against questionable situations, and solve problems with alternative solutions. Students are more actively engaged in learning and thinking through problems. In other words, the students have moved from a position of dependence to one of interdependence.

New graduate nurses have the highest attrition rate[18]. This might be due to the existence of a theory-practice gap and the scenario of reality shock. Professional socialization sets in to reduce the tension and facilitate adaptation during the transition process. Reality shock was defined by Kramer[19] as fears and difficulties experienced by new graduates in adapting to the work setting accompanied with feelings of powerlessness and ineffectiveness. Reality shock results from a theory-practice gap – a conflict between a new graduate's knowledge and skills acquired in the educational program and the reality of the behaviours required in the actual work setting[8]. Priorities and pressure change when the graduate moves from the classroom to the work setting. Eventually, conflict arises as new graduates strive to balance the needs of the patients with the needs of the work setting. Psychological stresses arise resulting in a decrease in the ability to cope effectively with the demands of the new role. Unfortunately, some new nurses "drop out" at this point rather than taking steps to resolve reality shock[20].

Methods that could facilitate students in professional socialization are encouraging students to gain experience during their training periods in the clinical areas and pairing students with practicing registered nurse as their preceptors. The use of role models, preceptors and mentors can assist in clarifying role expectations and decreasing conflicts among the new graduate nurses.

Outcomes of Professional Socialization

There are 3 different outcomes of professional socialization process. Firstly, students are well socialized into nursing profession and successfully internalize the norms, attitudes, behaviours, skills, roles, and values of

the profession. Subsequently, this group of students is channeled successfully into the working world with all these attributes. These students have high potentials to excel in the working world.

Secondly, there is another group of students who are socialized into the nursing profession as evidenced with passing the examination and yet diverted into areas other than clinical area. These students might end up with jobs such as nurse researchers and educators. Socialization process has helped this group of students to discover their interests in nursing other than the clinical area.

At this junction, the first author would like to share her own views and experiences of socialization into nursing. The author managed to complete her 4-years of bachelor of nursing program. However, her inclination was not for clinical setting due to its nature of work. The author decided to quit clinical practice and further develop herself as a researcher. Yet, she still always reflects on the socialization process she had gone through. She strongly believes that professional socialization has been successful in preparing the writer for the working world of nursing profession. Nonetheless, the writer believes that she would be socialized better into nursing by getting more clinical experience during her training. Also, it would be more effective if she was paired with a registered nurse or clinical instructor as a mentee to whom she could turn when she was in doubt.

On top of that, there is another outcome whereby students have not internalized the values of professional socialization into nursing. They have challenges in adapting to the "real world of nursing" and face difficulty in adapting to the work environment. These students will not be able to secure a job as they embrace some attitude problems including being dissatisfied with the salary and working hours. This group of students will possibly end up being part of the 54% of graduates who could not find jobs after graduation[2].

Conclusion

Nursing is a dynamic profession where new technology and evolving roles demand continuous adaptation. Therefore, professional socialization, like learning, is a continuous, interactive, and lifelong process[21-23]. Professional socialization is an important process and through professional socialization, it is possible to develop a professional identity in place of lay perception as experienced by the first author. The 4-year nursing degree program had prepared her to face the working world. A major concern of nursing faculty is to create educational experiences to facilitate the transition from student to professional nurse[18]. Consequently, the concept of professional socialization should be incorporated into the nursing curriculum, be it diploma or baccalaureate programs. In this way, students are prepared to face reality shock in the transition process.

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