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UNDERSTANDING WHY PROFESSIONAL NURSES WORK

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Abstract

The project studied factors impacting professional registered nurses in maintaining active employment. Participants chose to enter the nursing profession to provide service. They were motivated to stay in the nursing profession in an employed situation to 1) provide financial support of themselves and their families, and 2) from a desire to serve. Respect as individuals was motivation to do their best work. The results of the study reinforce the desire of the nursing profession to serve its clients and patients. The results demonstrate the commitment of registered nurses to the nursing profession. They also demonstrate the desire of professional nurses to be responsible family members and citizens, working to earn sufficient funds to care for themselves and their families and to meet financial obligations.
Understanding Why Professional Nurses Work

Introduction

Traditionally, from before the time of Florence Nightingale to the present, nursing provided an opportunity to serve one=s fellowman. The benefits to the person providing the service traditionally included feelings of love and brotherhood and whatever spiritual blessings the provider believed would come. Temporal benefits to the person providing the service were generally not discussed or considered motivation for entering nursing or remaining in the profession. The patient or client and their care have traditionally been the center of all nursing service. There has been little consideration for the needs of the individual nurse, the educational level acquired by the nurse, or the high levels of technology or information with which the nurse must work.

Nursing literature discussing the reasons that professional registered nurses chose the profession and continued working in the profession is almost nonexistent. In 1979 Lucie Young Kelly talked about the Appliance nurse phenomenon. She defined the Appliance nurse as "..one who works only long enough to pay for a new household appliance." Though the term was scarcely used in the literature, its meaning seemed to be understood by nurses using it in conversation. In a brief survey of this researcher=s colleagues, it was understood that appliance nurses were those who worked episodically and usually for a short period of time until they earned enough money to pay off a debt or to take care of personal or family desires or needs. It has been applied to nurses who are not actively involved in such nursing scholarship activities as nursing research, teaching, or other professional activities.
The term "appliance nurse" has not been used as a positive description. It appeared to imply that working for financial reimbursement was not an appropriate motivation for a professional nurse. It made one think about the reasons that nurses become actively employed. Do they work for completely altruistic reasons, i.e., service to fellow men, maintenance of bedside skills, opportunity to teach students and peers, opportunity to do research? Do they work because nursing provides sufficient funds to satisfy ones financial desires or needs? Is it a combination of the two?

**Conception Framework**

The conceptual framework was a combined framework of work and service. In a conceptual framework of service proposed, but not yet published, by Rae Jean Memmott (Brigham Young University College of Nursing) key elements of service are 1) the presence of a spiritual component built on a connectedness to one=s fellowman and to God, 2) a sense of caring or love, and 3) an element of sacrifice. These concepts applied to the desire of nurses to care for their fellowman. Professional registered nurses worked because they wished to participate in all of the altruistic activities listed above and more. However, the principle investigator of this research believed that registered nurses were also responsible persons who needed to make a living to support themselves and their families. They chose the profession of nursing to meet both needs, and the length of time they worked, short or episodic or an entire professional career, did not affect service or temporal motivations.

**Literature Review**

Kelly (1979) commented on the conversion of nursing leadership from older, unmarried
nurses to married nurses with family obligations. She heralded this change as an important one in creating a new model for nurses in general and nursing leadership specifically. Kelly said, "Goodbye, appliance nurse; it’s time for a new model."

In a study examining the generation gap in nursing, Brewin-Wilson again mentioned the term "appliance nurse". She defined the term similarly to Kelly as "...those who work only when something is needed for the house or children". She noted that older nurses felt that younger nurses, "think of their paychecks first, then patient care." Brewin-Wilson stated, "Yet younger nurses are no more likely than older ones to have entered the profession for the money. And they, along with all of the other survey respondents, believe that helping others is of far greater importance than salary."(p.27)

**Study Question and Goals**

The question to be addressed in this study was "Why do actively employed professional registered nurses work?" The goal of the study was to determine what factors, temporal or altruistic, influence nurses to maintain active employment in the profession.

**Method**

**Subjects**

The subjects for the study were registered nurses employed at Veterans Administration Medical Center. Ages ranged from 26 to 65, 30% between 30 and 40 years old and 39% between 40 and 50 years old. Four percent of participants were between 60 and 65. Eighty percent were female, 20% male. Sixty seven percent were married, 33% single. Fifty one percent had Bachelor’s degrees, 24% Master=s degrees and 1% doctoral degrees. Seventy eight percent were employed full time, 22% worked part time. Seventy percent worked as staff nurses, 13% as
advanced practice nurses. Forty four to 51% of the participants had been registered nurses, and
had worked as registered nurses for 20 to 40 years. Fifty six percent were primary wage earners.
Sixty seven to 80% belonged to no specialty organization.

Procedure

Besides the demographic data described above, the questionnaire asked three additional
questions. 1) What is the primary reason you chose nursing as a career? 2) What are the top three
reasons you are currently employed? 3) What are the three most important factors in motivating
you to do your best work?

The questionnaire was distributed to 10 registered nurses to establish validity and
reliability of the tool. The questionnaire was then distributed to registered nurses employed at the
Veterans Administration Medical Center. Nurses were asked to complete the questionnaire and
return it in a pre-addressed stamped envelope to the researcher within one month of its
distribution. The questionnaire contained no identifying information, and therefore, was
completely anonymous. The return envelopes were numbered to monitor representation from
each area of the hospital. However, the envelope and questionnaire were separated on return,
ensuring anonymity of the participant. Return of the questionnaire signified consent for use of
the contained information on the part of the participant.

Data Analysis Methods

Frequencies were measured on responses to the questions concerning motivations for
choosing nursing as a career, motivations for current employment and motivations for
performing best work. A Chi-Square test of independence was used to compare the items noted
on the questionnaire. Statistical significance indicated that items are in some way related to each other. The motivations expressed for nurses to work were examined in relation to age, gender, marital status, education, position held, length of experience in nursing, and involvement in professional activities.

**Results**

Questionnaires were distributed to 326 registered nurses. One hundred ninety four questionnaires were returned and were evaluable. Results demonstrated that respondents had been registered nurses and had worked as RNs from 1-40 years, with the largest group employed from 1-10 years. Sixty eight percent were employed from 1-20 years.

Table 1 reports the primary motivations for choosing nursing as a career. Forty one percent of the respondents indicated that *service* was the primary motivation for choosing nursing as a career. The second most common reason for choosing nursing was *wages*. The remaining respondents (19.7%) listed *other* as their primary motivation for choosing nursing as a career. Such reasons were listed as a 1)family member in nursing or other medical fields, 2)an interest in biological sciences, 3)interest in the lifestyle opportunities provided in nursing, 4)interest in nursing since an early age, but with no particular reason. One 44 year old nurse stated, *It=s been so long (since I went into nursing )I can=t remember the reason.* Another noted *It makes me feel good*.

The three most common motivations for current employment in nursing were *wages, service, and maintainence of nursing skills*. These are reported in Table 2 with percentages of each listed as primary, secondary, and tertiary motivations. Results are reported as percentages
of the 194 respondents. Note that some participants did not respond to this question.

Once a person had chosen a career, some factor or factors motivated them to continue in that career and perform well every day they work. Table 3 demonstrates the factors which motivated respondents to perform their best work when on the job. These factors were chosen from 17 motivational items.

A Chi-Square Test was performed to correlate demographic items on the questionnaire with employment motivational factors. A p value of .01 was considered significant. Correlations significant at the .01 level were as follows:

1. Educational level to membership in a specialty organization
2. Work position with membership in a specialty organization
3. Belonging to one specialty organization to belonging to another specialty organization

Though not statistically significant, other correlations demonstrated interesting trends. The primary reason for employment (wages) correlated with working full time and the number of years as an RN at a .084 level and .037 level respectively. Number of years working without a break correlated with the second reason for working (service) at a .086 level. Belonging to a specialty organization correlated with several factors.

Sharing nursing knowledge (teaching) and contributing to the body of nursing knowledge (research) were not significant motivations for working in nursing. The effect of gender, age, marital status, and educational status on motivation to work were not significant.

**Discussion**

The results of this study indicated that participants chose nursing as a career in order to serve their fellow men. Results also indicated that the nurses in the study stayed employed in
order to support themselves and their families. The second major reason for staying employed was to provide service. Maintaining nursing skills was the third major reason for being currently employed as an RN.

While the RNs were at work they were motivated to do their best work when they were respected. Other major reasons for doing their best work were opportunities for self-development and improvement and knowing the job is important.

The nurses in the study may have worked full time because of the financial necessity of earning a salary. Working without a break and working to serve correlated because nurses enjoyed serving their patients. They were committed to nursing, as a profession. They seem to have enjoyed this form of service or they might have chosen another form of wage earning, one with probably higher financial benefit. These statistics seemed to indicate that the registered nurses in this study were very concerned with providing the best care possible in serving their patients and with earning sufficient wages to support themselves and their families.

The study results indicated statistically that there was a correlation between age, education, work status, and the number of years working as a registered nurse and being a member of a specialty organization, that those who were older, had a baccalaureate or master=s degree, those that worked full time, and those who had worked a long time without a break in service were more inclined to belong to a specialty organization. Also, those who belonged to a single specialty organization were more likely to belong to more than one, particularly the ANA and Sigma Theta Tau. These results seemed to demonstrate that registered nurses who were committed to their job, were also committed to contributing to the profession through their
membership in nursing organizations.

It seems reasonable that, though a profession is chosen out of desire to participate in that profession, sufficient salary must be earned to make the individual independent and free from the concern of being financially solvent. The fact that the nurses in this study continued to work to earn a salary demonstrated that they were responsible citizens, interested in taking care of their own and their family’s needs. It speaks to the importance of health care agencies paying good nursing salaries, allowing registered nurses to be independent. Good salaries allows RNs to work in a profession where they also are motivated by the desire to serve their fellow man.

The nurses in this study were dedicated to their patients. They were also interested in contributing to their profession, which is demonstrated by their length of service and their participation in nursing associated organizations. Though research and teaching were not principle motivations for entering nursing or for working in nursing while they are employed, it should be noted that the Veterans Administration Medical Center used in this project is a teaching and research institution associated with university medical school. It is the site for clinical experience for over 600 medical, nursing and para-health care providers a year from four universities and colleges. It sponsors a very active research department. The nurses who participated in this study are frequently the preceptors for students and participate in the data collection for numerous research projects.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study are that the sample was a small (194), nonrandomized convenience sample enlisted from a single institution.
Conclusions

The nurses who participated in this study are motivated to work by two forces. First, they are motivated to be employed in order to contribute to the financial support of themselves and their families. Second, they are motivated to work by a desire to serve their fellow men. They are motivated to do the best job possible when they are respected as individuals.

The term "Appliance Nurse", as previously defined, would not appear to apply to the nurses who participated in this study. These nurses worked for a salary because they were responsible citizens. They worked to serve their patients because they cared about their patients. It seems they worked for long periods without a break. However, if they should choose to leave for a period to care for family or pursue some other avenue of employment, they should be encouraged to return whenever they are able to do so. They should be encouraged to share their knowledge with students and peers when possible. They should be provided with the mentorship that will allow them to develop research interests if they wish.

Today's professional registered nurses spend a great deal of time, money, and other resources acquiring their various degrees in nursing from the basic degree, either associate or baccalaureate, to an advanced degree, masters or Ph.D, often in a specific area of specialty. It seems they should be compensated for that personal investment in a way that will allow them to take care of themselves and their families and remain in the profession. As a colleague of this researcher stated, "I'm not making enough to keep food in the cupboard and a roof over my head in this job. It seems to me you shouldn't have to budge the underwear."
Recommendations for further study

1. This study should be extended to a larger population of nurses site to further validate the findings of this small group.

2. The study might be extended to compare nurses from more than one institution.

2. It might also be interesting to carry out the same type of study with other health care providers such as physicians and physician’s assistants.
References


3. Memmott, RJ. Unpublished theoretical framework. Brigham Young University College of Nursing
### Tables

**Table 1: Primary Motivation for Choosing Nursing as a Career**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Reason</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>37.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.7</td>
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Table 2: Motivation for Current Employment as an RN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Tertiary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nursing skills</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
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Table 3: Factors Motivating Nurses to Perform Best Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation:</th>
<th>Factor:</th>
<th>Frequency:</th>
<th>Percentage:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Respect for nurse, as a person</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>34.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Opportunities for Self-development and improvement</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect for nurse, as a person</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Knowing the job makes a difference</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for self-development and improvement</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12.8</td>
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Table 5: Correlations of Belonging to a Specialty Organization

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age for nurses between 40 and 50 years old</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working full time</td>
<td>.014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years as an RN</td>
<td>.012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belonging to the American Nurses Association</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to Sigma Theta Tau</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to specialty organizations other</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than those listed in the tool</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Table 1: Number of Years Respondents had Worked as RNs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>38.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>22.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>31-40+</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.8</td>
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