NURSING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF NURSING

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Abstract

The enduring debates about the public image of nursing have intensified as the nursing shortage increases focus on the nursing profession. Though the present shortage is created and sustained by multiple factors, image seems to surface in any of these discussions. Today, much about nursing and its practitioners has changed, but many negative stereotypes remain. The purpose of this study was to investigate nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing and the extent to which these perceptions impact these students’ self-concept and academic performance in nursing school. A convenience sample of 2 classes of Associate Degree nursing students ($n = 63$) participated in this quantitative descriptive study. Participants completed 2 questionnaires: Images of the Nurse Survey–1 to measure their perceptions of the public image of nursing; and Images of the Nurse Survey–2 to measure their self-concept. Participants’ nursing school grades were accessed for comparison with survey data. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation. Hypothesis 1, which predicted a positive relationship between participants’ perception of the public image of nursing and their self-concept, was supported by the data. Hypothesis 2, which predicted a positive relationship between participants’ self-concept and grades earned in nursing school was not supported. Overall, these participants viewed the public image of nursing as positive and they indicated positive self-concepts. Findings from this study have implications for practice and they support recommendations for future research. Since the public image of nurses and nursing can have a critical impact on nurses’ self-concept, it has the potential to have a critical impact on whether nursing is chosen as a career as well as the effective functioning of nurses in a wide array of situations. It follows that whatever improves and enhances the public image of nurses and nursing should be embraced and fully utilized.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my immediate family – my husband, Willie B. Wallace, Jr., my daughter Courtney Elizabeth and her daughter Sydney Elizabeth, my son Willie, III and his wife Trina, my four sisters, Willie Mae Galley, Emily Good, Josie Buckner, and Maryam Zaidi, and two brothers Joe Roberson and Emmitt Roberson. Each and every one of these individuals extended to me a level of patience and support to enable this achievement. I am truly grateful to them for understanding my mental and physical absences from family and social affairs and my diminished contributions to activities and issues that affected all of us. It pleases me to know that they all accepted that this was important to me simply because it was.

Second, I dedicate this study to my nursing colleagues and all of those who will join us later in the continuing definition of the concepts “nursing” and “nurse.”
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

Both historically and currently, nurses have assumed responsibility to society for providing health care to patients and families. Prior to nursing’s recognition as an organized occupation in the mid-19th century, need drove the development of the nurse role and societal mores determined who the practitioners were. Despite the lack of structural organization, the issues of image and shortage in environments where health care was needed and provided were present. One needs to go no further back than the mid to late 18th century to find records indicating that nursing remained in the hands of the uneducated and sometimes undesirables who were largely women and whose numbers were not sufficient to meet the needs of all requiring care (Brook & Kleine-Kracht, 1983; Chitty, 2005; D’Antonio, 2004; Ellis & Hartley, 1992; Hughes, 1990; Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004).

Prior to the 18th century, the image of nursing was that of “an inferior, undesirable occupation” (Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004, p. 24). Modern nursing or organized nursing had its beginnings in the Victorian era while the negative image persisted. The expectations of Victorian era women did not include educational training nor employment outside the home. In fact, Victorian era women were regarded as physically and intellectually inferior to men. They were also regarded as unsuited for educational development beyond that needed to make them useful as wives and mothers (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1987). Consequently, the task of nursing the sick was relegated to women, paupers, prisoners and those of similar classes of society, though they too lacked education and other positive traits.
Nursing has developed, grown, and changed along with the enormous social and technological changes of the times. Image and shortage have been issues in most, if not all, of the changes though the exact terms have not always been evident. The work of Florence Nightingale in Europe initiated the change in the image of nursing. Some of her initiatives that generated a change in nursing’s image were education, discipline and selection of trainees on the basis of good character. Charles Dickens’ (1910) writings that exposed the horrific working conditions and workers who cared for the sick in *Martin Chuzzlewit* through the characters of Sairy Gamp and Betsy Prig and their work setting provided a strong impetus for positive change (cited in Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004).

Following the establishment of nursing as a respectable occupation (though not yet a profession) and a needed service to society, indications of shortage were articulated in several ways and during various eras in society. World War I was one of those eras. Nurses were included in the U.S. resources, along with money and material, which had to be mobilized for military purposes. The Army and Navy Nurse Corps expanded due to needs of the military as well as to serve the needs of some individuals who joined the Corps for the romanticism of war and the adventure. As the military requirement for nurses continued to rise, shortages in the civilian sector became evident (Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004).

Nurse training was initiated in the United States in the mid-19th century and it flourished as the need for nurses to support home care, public health, and hospital care grew. Increases in the number of schools, hospitals, models for nursing practice, and the development of diverse patterns for nursing education reflected the growing need for nurses and/or the shortage of nurses. History specifically notes that there were shortages of nurses in civilian hospitals when
large numbers of nurses joined the military during both World War I and World War II (Brooks & Kleine-Kracht, 1983; Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004; Leddy & Pepper, 1993).

Statistics from the United States Department of Health and Human Services’ (HRSA) 2004 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses indicate that the United States has approximately 2.9 million registered nurses living in the United States and employed in nursing, yet there is a nursing shortage nationwide. Of these 2.9 million registered nurses, it is estimated that 30 to 40 percent are working in areas other than nursing (HRSA, 2005). Claims have been made that registered nurses who work in areas other than nursing are part of the shortage problem. Image and the reality of the nursing environment have been identified as reasons why some nurses do not work in nursing (Goodin, 2003). The current shortage has been identified by multiple descriptors such as crisis, serious, critical, unprecedented, and enduring (Goodin, 2003; Pedersen, 2002; Sigma Theta Tau International, 2006; Sochalski, 2002). Though the shortage is said to have peaked in 2001, there is still the added prediction that increased future needs will also go unmet. This prediction of increased need and shortage is due to a number of factors including a registered nurse (RN) work force that is aging, shortfalls in the number of students graduating, a decrease in the number of qualified nurse educators, and a multifaceted change in nurses’ work environments. The compounding issues in these general areas, include the multitude of new career opportunities for women in general, increased complexity of patient care required, and increased work loads due to the shortage of nurses (Goodin, 2003).

Collectively, the data on nursing’s image and the nursing shortage suggest that causes of the shortage are numerous and varied. However, the data are unequivocal in identifying that nursing’s image continues to play a pivotal role in the enduring nursing shortage. There are
reports that many career seekers see nursing as a poor career choice for reasons that include, the career’s lack of prestige and defined career ladders, too little financial compensation, and the sub-servant image of nursing’s role (Goodin 2003; Hemlsey-Brown & Foskett, 1999; Hoke, 2006; Tomey, Schwier, Marticke, & May, 1996). All of the previously stated problems associated with nursing can easily be seen as causes of the shortage and some can rightfully be identified as consequences.

Background of the Study

According to historical documents, nursing has in its past an era that was rightfully designated “the dark age of nursing” (Ellis & Hartley, 1992). The image of nursing during this period was captured in two characterizations in Charles Dickens’ (1987) book *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Sairy Gamp and Betsy Prig are the names of Dickens’ characters. Sairy Gamp was an old, short, fat, woman with a thick nose, a course voice, and a small body build. She was described as a drinker of spirits and a snuff dipper on and off duty. Over her dirty black garments, she wore aprons and shawls. A bonnet with ruffles framing her face completed her work and leisure attire. Betsy Prig was but a smaller version of Sairy Gamp (Dickens, 1987). These fictional characterizations are but representatives of women hospital workers during this period when care of the sick was left to prisoners, prostitutes, and drunks. These workers were collectively referred to as “uncommon” women (as cited in Ellis & Hartley, 1992, p. 27).

“Nurses” of the “dark age of nursing” (middle to late 1800s) worked in the most negatively challenging conditions, performing what was then called a domestic service. They had minimal or no education and they earned meager wages, leaving them to steal from their charges where there was something worth stealing. They were said to be dirty in their person and in their
work. They were unreliable and lacked any semblance of being caring or genteel. Dickens’ (1936) fictional characters were supposed to be accurate portrayals of nurses in England in 1844 (as cited in Ellis & Hartley, 1992, p. 27; Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004, p. 24).

Modern nursing evolved primarily through the work of Florence Nightingale. Miss Nightingale was practically the opposite of Sairy and Betsy and much, much, more. She was educated and she had a desire and a passion for entering the nursing field. The establishment of the Nightingale School and Home for Nurses in 1860 was considered the birth of nursing education as well as the birth of modern nursing (Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004).

It is significant to note that modern nursing had its beginning in the midst of England’s Victorian environment in the mid-nineteenth century. Added to the undesirable traits associated with nursing from the “dark ages of nursing” would be traits of altruism, paternalism, and servility. Altruism is associated with putting others before oneself or virtually living for others. Paternalism espouses a patriarchal philosophy which is easily reflected in many nurse/doctor relationship situations. Some of these undesirable traits have continued down through the years to become a part of the enduring image of nursing (Ellis & Hartley, 1992, p. 27).

Kalisch and Kalisch (1987) chronicle the image of nursing through various eras of society. There is ample evidence that nursing has evolved and advanced significantly, since its inception and humble beginnings in the 1860s, to meet the complex challenges of today’s health care settings (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1987, 2004). Of the groups of health care professionals caring for patients in health care facilities, nurses comprise the largest group and nurses provide the leadership and organization for much of the high quality care in these facilities (Hassmiller & Cosine, 2006). The United States’ 2.9 million registered nurses make it the nation’s largest...
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health care profession and nurses are involved in the provision of the majority of the nation’s health care services to its citizens. The U.S. occupation with the projected largest job growth for 2002-2012 is nursing (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2004). The preceding is a validated prestigious picture. Today, the nursing profession is meeting the challenge of accountability for helping the nation meet its health care objectives. The profession is trusted and respected by society (The Gallup Poll, 2006). The American public trusts nurses to advocate for them, to be honest about illnesses and health care and to help them to adapt as necessary.

Despite all that it is, nursing continues to retain an image as a peripheral or menial occupation. It is an occupation without prestige in general. Nursing remains a sex-typed or gender-based occupation which may be more associated with the name rather than the functions. Though nursing’s image has changed over the years, some negative traits and influences have remained with nursing through these changes. Stereotyped characterizations associated with the image of nursing include, lack of occupational prestige; the gender issue; the nursing shortage; low pay; lack of autonomy; and the patriarchal philosophy of paternalism (Buerhaus, Donelan, Ulrich, Norman, & Dittus, 2005; Chitty, 2005; Donley, 2005; Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004; Steinbrook, 2002).

Paternalistic influences persist in some instances and can be seen in passive deference to doctors, divisiveness, and intra-group conflict. Other displays of paternalistic influences include the expectation of subservience by those in authority and the withholding of collegiality where it should be the professional overture or response (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1987; Leddy & Pepper, 1993). One nursing leader, discussing nursing’s image, described nursing as suffering from negative nursing affectivity – viewing nursing or parts of nursing from the perspective of deficits
(Donley, 2005). Addressing nursing’s negative working conditions, Steinbrook (2004) referred to nursing as an “embattled” and “troubled” profession. Collectively, nurse leaders, analysts, and others have linked negative aspects of the nursing image to the nursing shortage (Bream, Bran, Bantle, & Krenz, 1992; Buerhaus, Donelan, Ulrich, Norman, & Dittus, 2005; Chitty, 2005; Dworkin, 2002; Kalisch & Kalisch, 1987, 2004). Image has been associated with many of the nursing profession’s problems.

Both anecdotal and research evidence exist to suggest that negative stereotyped images of nursing and nurses have negatively impacted the nursing profession and its practitioners. The Woodhull Study and the Media (1998), published by Sigma Theta Tau International is a case in point. The purpose of the study was to examine the portrayal of nurses in printed news media. It was reported that nurses were cited less than five percent of the time in pieces about health care. This scarcity of nurse citations led to the finding that nursing is “Health Care’s Invisible Partner” (The Woodhull Study, 1998). The fact that so many nurses, researchers, and writers have documented approaches to halting this tide of negatives images attest to the existence of problems (Aber & Hawkins, 1992; Berry, 2004; Coffey-Love, 2001; Donelan, Buerhaus, Ulrich, Norman, & Dittus, 2005; Dworkin, 2002; Goodin, 2003; McPeck, 2004; Wilson & Mitchell, 1999).

There is some research evidence that nursing’s image impacts nursing and nurses in tangible and personal ways. The findings from Takase, Kershaw, and Burt’s (2002) investigation of the impact of nursing’s stereotypical image on graduate nursing students’ self-concept, self-esteem, job satisfaction, and performance suggested a relationship among these variables. Overall, according to the researchers, “The results suggest that nurses’ perception of the public
stereotyping of nursing is related to the development of their self-concept, collective self-esteem, and job satisfaction, all of which are associated with their performance” (p. 196). There was also the suggestion that nurses should be cognizant of the need to develop counteractive measures “to ward off the negative influences of public stereotypes on nursing practice” (p. 196). In more general terms these findings have suggested that self-concept plays a significant role and impacts recruitment, retention, and performance of nurses.

Statement of the Problem

The paucity of research that investigates nursing students’ perceptions of the image of nursing and the impact of these perceptions on students’ self-concept and classroom performance was the rationale for conducting this study. The public image of nursing and nurses has been discussed and debated for years and these discussions have intensified as the nursing shortage has brought increased focus on the nursing profession (Takase, Kershaw, & Burt, 2002). Though the present shortage is created and sustained by multiple factors, image seems to surface in any discussion of the nursing shortage.

There is ample evidence that nursing has advanced significantly since its inception and humble beginnings in the 1860s to meet the complex challenges of today’s health care settings (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1987, 2004). Yet, public stereotypical images persist and are fueled by misconception, misinformation, and in some instances by the actual realities of the profession (Cowin & Hengstberger-Sims, 2005; Jinks & Bradley, 2004; Meier, 1999; McPeck, 2004; Schweitzer, et al., 1994). It has been suggested by Takase, Kershaw, and Burt (2002) that nursing students’ perceptions of nursing might have an impact on their self-concept, self-esteem, recruitment, retention, and performance. A small number of research studies that addressed the
impact of nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing was found (Chamberlain, 1984; May, Champion, & Austin, 1991; Kersten, Bakewell, and Meyer, 1991; Madsen, 1986; Mendez & Louis, 1991; Williams, 1994; Wilson & Mitchell, 1999).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing and the extent to which these perceptions impacted these students’ self-concept and academic performance in nursing school. Kalisch and Kalisch (1987) chronicled approximately 100 hundred years of nursing’s stereotypical image in their book, The Changing Image of the Nurse, detailing multiple images of nurses and nursing primarily associated with television, motion pictures, novels, and other media. While none of the images captured an accurate picture of the profession and its practitioner, they reflected the public’s interest in and fascination with nursing and nurses. Though nursing’s image has changed over the years from the caring and devotion images of the 1960s to the handmaiden images of the 1970s to the images of individual sexuality and other negative attributes of the 1980s, it has retained its image as a female-based career that serves a subordinate and peripheral role in the health care arena. More recently, other negative attributes, such as low professional prestige, negative environmental working conditions, flat wages, and lack of a professional identity have become a part of nursing’s image (Aber & Hawkins, 1992; Dworkin, 2002; Steinbrook, 2002 Wilson & Mitchell, 1999).

With the current and protracted nursing shortage, nursing’s image has come to be portrayed as a primary cause of the shortage (Bream, Bram, Bantle, & Krenz, 1992; Buerhaus, Donelan, Ulrich, Norman, & Dittus, 2005; Chitty 2005; Dworkin, 2002; Kalisch & Kalisch,
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1987, 2004; McPeck, 2004). Collectively, data from researchers, analysts, and others have suggested the need for all concerned about nursing, nursing’s image, and the nursing shortage to increase efforts within their power to facilitate the recruitment and retention of nurses. Therefore, continuing to seek answers to the question of what impacts nursing student retention should be an imperative.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The primary research question for this study was: what are nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing, and do these perceptions impact the students’ self-concept and academic performance in nursing school? The more specific questions that this study aimed to answer were:

1. What are nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing?
2. Do students with more positive perceptions of the public image of nursing have more positive self-concepts?

These research questions were the basis for the following two hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis 1. Nursing students surveyed for this study who perceive the public image of nursing as positive will reflect more positive self-concepts as student nurses, conversely, those who perceive the public image as negative will reflect more negative self-concepts.

2. Hypothesis 2. Nursing students surveyed for this study who report more positive self-concepts will achieve higher academic performance in nursing school as identified by academic grades during nursing school, conversely, those who report more negative self-concepts will achieve lower academic performance.

Nature of the Study

A quantitative, descriptive study was used to investigate nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing and the extent to which these perceptions impact students’ self-concept and academic performance in nursing school. Descriptive research is appropriate for
investigations that aim to summarize the status of phenomena (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). More specifically, the quantitative, descriptive approach is described as appropriate to serve a confirmatory role in describing phenomena as they present at one point in time or as they change over time. Manipulation of variables was not a part of the process and dependent and independent variables were not issues, since no attempt was made to establish causality (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). In this instance, the goal was to measure and report the characteristics of one sample at one point in time.

This study investigated nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing and the extent to which these perceptions had an impact on their self-concept and academic performance in nursing school. Findings from this study may provide information and insights for nursing education administrators and faculty regarding nursing’s image and its short-term and long-term impact on nursing students, the college, and the nursing profession. These findings may lead to nursing school curricula enhancements with potential to impact student performance, satisfaction, and retention in school.

Data collection methods included the use of two questionnaires and participants’ nursing school records. One questionnaire was used to measure participants’ perceptions of the public image of nursing and a second questionnaire was used to measure participants’ self-concept. Student records provided data regarding academic performance in school. A convenience sample comprised of two classes of nursing students in an Associate Degree nursing program in a community college located in the Southeastern United States provided data for this study.

Data from this research were primarily numerical. Therefore, descriptive statistics were used to analyze and summarize the data. Frequency distributions, measures of central tendency,
and measures of dispersion were the primary measures used to summarize the data. To address the study hypotheses, the Pearson correlation was used.

Significance of the Study

Given the extended and critical shortage of nurses nationally and internationally, it is imperative that everyone concerned with health care in the United States assume rightful roles in decreasing the shortage. Nursing schools and educators are in pivotal positions to be vigilant in identifying and working with measures and elements that will ensure student success.

It has been noted that image is an issue in recruitment of nursing students as well as in retention of nurses in work centers (Takase, Kershaw, & Burt, 2002). The purpose of this study was to investigate nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing and the extent to which these perceptions impacted these students’ self-concept and performance in nursing school. It was conceivable that nursing students’ perceptions of the public image of nursing might be one of the causes of this enduring and significant nursing shortage; however, this assumption was not supported by the findings. The findings did lead to the inference that the nursing shortage might be more directly linked to other issues.

Definition of Terms

Terminology for the purpose of this research included the following definitions:

Academic performance. The grade point average of the nursing student survey participant for the period of enrollment in the participant’s current Associate Degree Nursing program. Participants were enrolled in a three-semester program. One class of participants had completed one semester at the time of data collection and their grade point averages were calculated with
semester one grades. The other class had completed three semesters and their grade point averages were calculated with semester one, two, and three grades.

*Associate Degree Nursing Student.* A student enrolled in an institution of higher learning based nursing program that is approximately two years in length and will, upon graduation, provide the individual academic eligibility to take the national examination for licensure as a registered nurse.

“*Image of Nursing.* The sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of nurses and nursing” (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1987, p. 2).

*Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) – Associate Degree Nurse (ADN) Mobility Program Student.* The student enrolled in an associate degree nursing program that admits only LVNs and whose curriculum has been modified so that the student can meet the requirements for graduation in approximately one year.

*Nursing students’ self-concept.* Scores obtained by rating adjectives on a Likert scale ranging from one to seven, with lower scores indicating a more positive self-concept (Porter & Porter, 1991)

“*Perception.* The experience of sensing, interpreting, and comprehending the world in which the person lives” (Wilson & Kneisl, 1992, p. 134).

*Perceptions of the public image of nursing.* Scores obtained by rating adjectives on a Likert scale ranging from one to seven, with lower scores indicating a more positive image (Porter & Porter, 1991).
Self-concept. The totality of beliefs and feelings that one person holds about oneself at a specific time. Individuals’ behavior is believed to be directed by these feelings and beliefs that are formed from perceptions particularly of the reactions of others (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).

Stereotype. “A simplified standardized conception of image that is invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group” (Fortinash, Holoday, & Worret, 2000, p.3).

Assumptions and Limitations

The following assumptions were made based on the elements of this investigation as described above:

1. Nursing students in the Associate Degree Nursing program surveyed will have reached a level of maturity and personal development that will enable the development of a self-concept as a professional nursing student.

2. Nursing students in the Associate Degree Nursing program surveyed will report their perceptions with honesty and integrity.

3. Participants in this investigation will have experienced different influences, resources, and exposures from which their perceptions of the public image of nursing will be derived.

For the purpose of this investigation, the limitations were as follows:

1. The investigation was confined to one Associate Degree Nursing program which resulted in the use of a small sample.

2. The research project time constraints did not allow for data collection from multiple schools nor for data collection over a longer period of time.

3. For the reason stated in limitation number one and the fact that participants were not randomly selected, the results of this study are not generalizable to Associate Degree Nursing students in other programs or to nursing students in general.