

Identity of the Nursing Profession: A Review

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Abstract

Identity, including professional identity, is a dynamic process shaped by societal engagement and contextual factors. In nursing, the historical, social, cultural and political dimensions mold professional identity, with recent advancements emphasizing autonomy and collaboration. However, there still remains a gap in our understanding of how evolving roles impact nursing professionals' identity and healthcare outcomes.

Professional socialization is crucial for nursing professionals, extending beyond technical skills to include soft skills, ethics and responsibilities. This lifelong process, influenced by education, mentorship and societal expectations, defines nursing's professional identity. Ethical standards and values are foundational, shaping interactions with patients and colleagues. Policy implementation prompts role shifts, reflecting changing healthcare needs, such as the expansion of nurse practitioner roles. Education, ethical practice and leadership are vital for shaping the future identity of nursing.

Nursing's identity evolves with education, experience, societal needs and policy changes. Nurses are increasingly engaging in leadership and advocacy, impacting patient care and policy development. The future of nursing hinges on its adaptability to healthcare challenges and societal expectations. Scholarly works on professional socialization, nursing identity, policy implementation and the future of nursing provide insights into this evolution.

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Introduction

The construction of identity is a dynamic process facilitated through societal engagement. It aids in the perception of self and subjectivity, encompassing elements of psychological understanding. Identity is typically represented within societal contexts, through which it attains its meaning. Professional and social identities are linked by various forms of knowledge acquired through continuous socialization processes. The dynamic interaction between the presentation of identity and societal interpretation endows it with significant depth and importance (1).

The nursing profession, which occupies a unique position within the spectrum of professional identities, is supported by a broad range of social science disciplines. The identity of nursing is influenced by a convergence of historical, social, cultural, political and relational dimensions. These facets, incorporating both material and symbolic elements, sculpt the professional identity within the nursing sector (1). Recent literature has increasingly emphasized the dynamic nature of the nursing identity, highlighting shifts toward more autonomous roles and the integration of advanced practice models. For instance, advancements in nursing education and a greater focus on interdisciplinary collaboration have begun to reshape nurses' professional identity, blurring traditional boundaries and fostering a more holistic approach to patient care (2,3). Moreover, the impact of global health challenges has further underscored the adaptability and resilience of nurses, spotlighting their critical role in healthcare delivery and policy advocacy (4).

Despite these advancements, there remains a notable gap in the understanding of how these evolving roles and expectations impact the core identity of nursing professionals and how this, in turn, affects healthcare outcomes. By integrating recent empirical findings with a nuanced discussion of theoretical perspectives, this study aims to provide a balanced review that situates the nursing profession's identity within the broader academic and healthcare

contexts. Through this lens, we explore the implications of these identity shifts for professional practice, healthcare delivery and policy formulation, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of nursing's key role in the ever-changing healthcare system.

Professional socialization

Professional socialization represents a crucial process in the development and adaptation of individuals within their chosen occupational spheres. This is not merely about acquiring the necessary technical knowledge and skills; it extends to assimilating the nuanced norms, values and behaviors that are integral to a specific profession. At the heart of this process lies the objective of transforming novices into adept professionals, capable of navigating and excelling in their respective fields (5).

The inception of professional socialization is typically rooted in formal education and training, laying the foundational groundwork for the practical application of job-specific skills. This phase is crucial as it sets the tone for the individual's future engagement with the professional world. However, the process of professional socialization is far from linear or confined to the initial stages of education but rather a dynamic interplay of various influences and experiences.

As individuals step into the real-world context of their professions, they embark on a continuous path of experiential learning. In the context of nursing, competence becomes an important covariate of professional socialization trajectories. As nursing professionals navigate through their experiential learning phase, their growing competence not only enhances their ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical situations but also plays a critical role in their professional socialization, shaping their journey toward becoming fully integrated members of the nursing community (6).

Crucially, professional socialization transcends the acquisition of technical prowess. It encompasses the cultivation of essential soft skills, such as effective communication, leadership, teamwork,

problem-solving and decision-making. These skills are indispensable in navigating the complexities and interpersonal dynamics of the modern workplace (5).

Moreover, an integral component of professional socialization is the understanding and internalization of ethical standards and professional responsibilities. This aspect underscores the importance of adhering to legal frameworks, ethical codes, and prioritizing the welfare of clients, patients and service recipients.

In the rapidly evolving context of professional environments, characterized by technological advancements and changes in practices, professional socialization is identified as a continuous process of learning, adapting and evolving, ensuring that professionals remain not only competent but also relevant and effective in their respective fields.

Professional socialization represents a critical, lifelong process of acquiring and internalizing the norms, attitudes, behaviors, skills, roles and values intrinsic to a chosen profession. It commences with academic instruction at the university level and seamlessly extends into the professional work environment. The essence of this process lies in the cultivation of a professional identity, a composite that integrates into the nurse's personal and professional self-conception (7).

The concept of professional socialization transcends mere academic learning; it is an intricate interplay between early educational experiences and subsequent real-world practice. This transition, often marked by a "transitional shock" as individuals shift from a structured academic setting to the dynamic work environment, underscores the importance of effective mentorship and guidance during the formative stages of professional development.

Socialization, in its broader sense, encompasses the myriad influences exerted by society and its institutions on an individual. It is through this process that a person is groomed to assume various social roles, thereby shaping their personality and individuality. This process can be bifurcated into primary socialization, occurring within

the family during childhood, and secondary socialization, taking place within educational systems, professional settings and social circles.

Professional socialization, in particular, is often conceptualized as a subconscious process wherein individuals assimilate and internalize the behavioral norms and standards of their chosen field (5,8). This process fosters a deep sense of identity and commitment to their profession. The ultimate aim of this process is the internalization of a professional identity that aligns with the ethos of the profession.

In this complex interplay of societal and organizational expectations, individuals learn to navigate and fulfill these demands to gain acceptance within their professional community. Socialization is not a passive absorption of information; rather, it is an active, dynamic process wherein individuals engage critically and self-critically, utilizing their educational experiences to forge their own beliefs, attitudes and behaviors within the framework of their professional environment.

The process of professional socialization in nursing presents a challenge for the individual, the healthcare institution and the educational institution (9). A meta-study on professional socialization and career choice considers ten studies in the regions of Canada, England, the USA, Australia, Japan and Sweden, highlighting the importance of multiple factors at the beginning of professional socialization, as well as the role of mentors, role models and peers in shaping expectations of the future profession. The meta-analysis identifies professional socialization as "redefining role expectations in transitional shock" (10), as pre-formed attitudes and expectations change under the influence of socialization. The beginning of socialization is strongly influenced by ideals and the traditional image of the nurse based on caring, compassion and care, transitioning into a more realistic and deeper understanding of the demands of the nursing profession. In every study analyzed for the review, it is acknowledged that the process of professional socialization is significantly

shaped by the influence of others, particularly by mentor nurses. Professional socialization is recognized as a crucial process in learning skills, attitudes and behaviors.

The professional identity of nursing

Nursing theories support the fact that the identity of the nursing profession is composed of activities that provide effective care, which are standardized into a unique activity distinguishing nursing from other medical professions. Therefore, care or nursing is the basic and fundamental function that justifies all activities and competencies. In practice, the provision of care goes beyond its nominal boundaries. With developments in science and technology, particularly in the field of medicine, there is an increasing emphasis on care consisting of “people caring for people” (1). In 2012, Johnson, Cowin, Wilson and Young introduced a conceptual framework for the professional identity of nursing, presenting it as a collection of measurable concepts that can be adjusted (11), highlighting the need for the development of a professional identity. The characteristics of professional identity in nursing change, depending on the time of observation and theories of the historical period, but develop over an individual’s lifetime, entering into nursing education, years of study and clinical experience, and continue to develop throughout one’s career. Education plays a crucial role in the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that distinguish nurses, as professional healthcare providers, from the general public. The characteristics of such an identity can change over time, while the professional identification of the nurse remains a strong force that affords her recognition in the public eye. In short, history suggests that the pursuit of professional identity imparts meaning to life and work (11). Healthcare policy influences the shaping of the identity of the professional role of the nurse. Changes in the health status of the population affect the changing role of the nurse in the community (12).

Ethical standards and values are the foundation of nursing practice. Nurses adhere to the high moral standards defined

by their professional ethics, such as confidentiality, empathy, respect for patient rights and providing care without prejudice. These principles help nurses build trust with their patients and colleagues, which is crucial for their identity.

Politics and the identity of nursing

The impact of policy implementation on the professional role identity of nurses in the community remains to be determined. Nursing is a profession with its own field of work, knowledge base and practice, where the professional possesses technical competence, the ability to reflect and critically analyze, based on their knowledge, and continuously acquire scientific insights. Given that nursing is a profession within the healthcare system, it is dynamic and subject to changes in contemporary society. Furthermore, nursing, like other professions in this field, primarily operates on interpersonal relationships, usually with multiple subjects. Interpersonal relationships from the perspective of professionals and users encourage continuous analysis of practice, as there are no ready-made answers to various life situations in everyday life. The development of analytical methodology using a reflective perspective aims for thoughtful critical thinking, understanding situations while respecting roles and timing in building professional identity. Nursing care is no longer limited to the application of equipment, materials and structured knowledge but is defined by the process of relationships, interventions and subjectivity. Nursing care focused on technical professional procedures leads to the mechanization of nursing, a “machine” and impersonality in the organization (13). Longer lifespans with the presence of chronic health conditions increasingly pose complex social and economic problems that require the restructuring of nurses’ roles. Community healthcare is increasingly subject to external and internal pressures for this reason (12). The restructuring of community nursing care policy is implemented in two ways: by developing the role of nurse specialists and universal general roles. The role of the specialist implies the expansion

of nurses' roles to include more clinical tasks than general practitioners. The scope of the nursing profession and practice depends on the country. Some countries allow nurse practitioners (NPs) full practice authority, while in other countries, NP practice legally requires a supervisory agreement with a physician (14). In the USA, autonomous NP practice was introduced in 1980 due to a significant shortage of doctors, especially in rural areas. The scope of the tasks, duties and responsibilities of NPs varies among the states (15–18). By 2017, twenty-two states across the USA had granted nurse practitioners full practice authority, eliminating the need for physician supervision, while thirty-eight states still required NPs to maintain a written collaborative agreement with a physician. In Canada, nurses often specialize in one of three areas: family practice, pediatrics or adult care, with recognition in both primary and acute care settings. Primary care NPs work in various environments such as homes and community health centers, focusing on health promotion, preventive care, and the diagnosis and treatment of acute or chronic illnesses. Acute care NPs, on the other hand, cater to specific patient demographics, including those in neonatal, nephrology and cardiology departments (19).

The universal role implies the development of a holistic approach to community healthcare as, for example, in Norway (20).

Framing nursing's future

Our study underscores the essential role of education and adherence to ethical standards in the development of professional identity among nurses. Beyond this foundation, we cover the expanding roles of nurses in leadership and policy advocacy, reflecting the adaptive response required by the shifting demands of the healthcare context. This expansion of roles signifies a departure from the traditional focus on caregiving, as emphasized by Virginia Henderson's influential work (21). Our findings suggest a broadening of the identity of the nursing professional to include significant elements of policy influence and leadership, indicative of a move toward an integrative healthcare

model. This progression mirrors the changing needs within healthcare, corroborating recent observations by scholars on the adaptability and resilience of nursing professionals, especially evident during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (22). The practical applications of our findings suggest a need for nursing education programs to integrate leadership and policy advocacy training, thereby preparing nurses for expanded roles in the healthcare system. This approach does not only align with the evolution of nurses' professional identity but also addresses current healthcare challenges by empowering them to take on leadership and advocacy roles effectively.

Our study emphasizes the evolving character of the nursing identity and its significant influence on healthcare, calling for further exploration into how it is affected by education, policy shifts and complex healthcare demands. Investigating the interplay among ethical practice, specialist roles and comprehensive patient care will highlight how nursing contributes to healthcare outcomes. This paper aims not only to deepen our understanding of nursing but also to enhance healthcare systems' responsiveness to community needs, emphasizing the importance of continuous adaptation and education in the profession.

Conclusions

The evolving identity of the nursing profession is a testament to the dynamic interplay among education, experience, societal needs and healthcare policies. Extending beyond traditional boundaries, the role of nurses now encompasses a spectrum of responsibilities that include leadership, advocacy and innovation. This expansion reflects a profound shift from a mechanistic view of task execution to a more holistic approach, where nurses are not only caregivers but also key contributors to healthcare policy and patient advocacy. The diversity of nurses' roles in different countries, influenced by varying levels of education and distinct healthcare policies, underscores the importance of a balanced

professional identity. This balance is crucial in order to navigate the complexities of the healthcare environment without succumbing to role confusion or identity instability. The nurse's identity, therefore, is not a static attribute but a dynamic construct that continuously adapts to healthcare demands and societal expectations.

As the profession moves forward, it is clear that the identity of nursing will continue to evolve, shaped by the ongoing interplay of educational advancements, ethical standards and the ever-changing dynamics of patient care. Nurses, as integral members of the healthcare community, will continue to redefine their roles, embracing the challenges and opportunities that come with being at the forefront of healthcare innovation and patient advocacy. The future of nursing, rich in potential and possibilities, is poised to continue to solidify the profession's impact on healthcare at large, reinforcing the nurse's role not merely as a caregiver but as a key architect in the realm of health and wellbeing.

Declarations

Authors' contributions

All the authors have contributed equally to this work and have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Competing interests

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