Professional Nursing Image

Amy L. Bradley

Ferris State University

NURS 450
Abstract

This paper examines the professional image of nursing by giving a brief synopsis of its history and the influences that affect the public’s perception of nursing. The purpose of reflecting upon the nursing image is to explore how it impacts the future of nursing and healthcare.
Professional Nursing Image

The image of nursing has always been an area of interest for the people in the profession. The nursing image has varied greatly over the decades and has led the public to view nursing in many different ways. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical images of nursing, the impact these images have had on the nursing profession, and how they ultimately affect the future of healthcare.

**Historical Images**

Throughout the decades nurses have been portrayed as angels, handmaidens, heroes, and harlots; even though these images do not portray the modern day nurse they are still common representations of nursing seen in the media and are beliefs tightly held onto by the public (Price & McGillis Hall, 2014). One of the most familiar depictions of nursing is that of the angel. This representation implies inherent virtues such as being “a caring, comforting female servant of God” (Price & McGillis Hall, 2014, p. 1505). While this image is not obviously negative it does not incorporate a true and complete concept of nursing, which compromises the professionalism that nursing has struggled for. The virtuous imagery used when describing nurses as angels disregards the critical thinking skills and knowledge base that is required for nursing. It emphasizes nursing as a vocational calling and stresses the importance of self-sacrifice; perpetuating an atmosphere that nursing work has to involve long shifts, increased workloads, and high stress, with limitless amounts of acceptable sacrifice. Another all-too-common portrayal of the nurse is that of the handmaiden; ready to take orders and serve as the doctor’s sidekick, which too takes away the autonomy of nursing care. Then, probably one of the most memorable is that of Nurse Ratched, the unfeeling, careless, and vindictive personification of nurses made popular by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Howett, 2011). And Finally, the image of the harlot or naughty nurse. One does not have to venture far to see this concept of nursing. Every Halloween this image is used as costumes for women and was even portrayed in one of the most iconic TV shows in history, *M*A*S*H*, which was exemplified by “Hotlips” Houlihan as the head nurse (Howett, 2011).
These portrayals of the nursing profession are hindering the recruitment of new nurses. It is important that nurses be seen as highly-skilled, autonomous professionals that are dedicated to the development of nursing theory, nursing research, and nursing practice (Ten Hoeve, Jansen, & Roodbol, 2014). College students are describing the nursing field “as having less attractive on-the-job independence than physicians, physical therapists, and high school teachers” (Cho, Jung, & Jang, 2010, p. 185). These are significant realizations considering that a study in 2009 was published in Health Affairs that estimated by the year 2025 the nursing shortage will grow to an unprecedented 260,000 with an estimated 7,000 people turning 65 every day (Howett, 2011). With this challenging era approaching there is opportunity to recruit new people into this dynamic profession that utilizes critical thinking skills by improving the professional nursing image.

**Theoretical Framework**

The first theorist that focused on the image and professional course of nursing was Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). She struggled to take nursing away from the image of immorality and build it into a respectful career (Cabaniss, 2011). One of her most influential contributions was creating the distinction between the physicians work and that of the nurse. She believed the physicians worked with the illnesses of the human body while nurses were concerned with the patients overall health (Chitty & Black, 2011). With this theory she pushed for nursing to be recognized as an independent profession; not to be subordinate or oppressed by physicians, but to work together, collectively as peers (Ten Hoeve, et al., 2014). Even though Nightingale’s work propelled nursing closer toward a professional realm nursing’s professional image continues to struggle to this day.

According to Willets & Clarke (2014) the nursing profession currently meets all defined criteria for being categorized as a profession, these include: “a systematic body of theory, professional authority, the sanction of the community and a regulative code of ethics, and the existence of professional bodies/associations that control and monitor conduct and performance within the profession” (p.164). Despite the fact that these specialized standards have been obtained, nursing seems to continue to dispute its own professional identity. Willets & Clarke
(2014) propose that by using the Social Identity Theory (SIT) nursing can clarify its identity within a professional context in order to give proper recognition to the uniqueness, skill and knowledge base required for nursing practice. SIT is centered on group membership and how this membership contributes to self-esteem, confidence, and professional cohesiveness (McLeod, 2008). This theory has the capability to further influence the way the public understands the nursing profession by describing the diversity and obscurity within nursing; it would provide a way for which recognition can be given to a difficult to define profession. This lack of clarity that has surrounded nursing has led to the continued debate regarding professionalism within the nursing community itself and in turn has steered the public’s devaluation of the profession (Willets & Clarke, 2014).

Another great nursing theorist that understood the power of having a positive professional image in nursing was Imogene King (1923-2007). In 1981, she published *A Theory for Nursing: Systems, Concepts, Process*. “This complex theory focused on persons their interpersonal relationships, and social contexts with three interacting systems: personal, interpersonal, and social” (Chitty & Black, 2011, p. 312). King’s theory stated that the patient’s perceptions of their environment develop their reality and the interpersonal relationship between the nurse and patient is where the nursing process is primarily rooted. The care nurses give depends solely on the interactions with the patient and that can be highly influenced by the way the patient perceives the nurse. “Therefore, the patient’s perception of the nurse may influence the ability to establish a positive relationship and a successful outcome” (Thomas, et al., 2010, p. 490). King’s theory gives nurses the most power to change the public’s perception of nursing. It has been established that the public does not fully understand what nursing entails and the social media only causes more obscurity. Therefore, it is important that nurses maintain a positive professional image in order to create and maintain a sense of trust with patients, families, communities, and other medical professionals (Fogle & Reams, 2014).
Assessment of the Healthcare Environment

In order to dissect and show correlation between the influences affecting the nursing professional image this author performed a root cause analysis depicting the conceptual framework for the nursing image. This conceptual framework will take into consideration the factors and challenges involved with improving the professional image of nursing.

According to this model, many of the factors inhibiting the positive image of nursing are out of the control of the nursing profession, such as: the lack of nursing role models and the controversial media portrayal of nurses. One component of the root cause analysis that nurses have a great deal of influence over is the standardization of professional appearance. According to Fogle & Reams (2014), “the nursing uniform is a nonverbal communicator of professionalism and competent care” (p. 52). A number of nursing studies have supported the findings that patient’s perceptions of a nurse’s competencies, clinical skill level, trustworthiness, and professionalism are decided in less than a 10\textsuperscript{th} of a second and based solely on the appearance of
the nurse (Thomas, et al., 2010). It is important that the nursing profession values these findings and grasp the importance of the patient experience and what that means for the image of nursing and the future of the profession.

**Inference/Implications/Consequences**

The information presented in this paper should be used to substantiate the importance of a positive nursing image and the effects it can have on the nursing profession. If the representation of nursing to the public doesn’t change it can have devastating consequences for the future of nursing. Future recruitment tactics need to guarantee that the imagining used to express the principles of nursing practice provides a comprehensive representation of the nursing profession; one that emphasizes nurses’ skill, knowledge, research and autonomy (Price & McGillis, 2014). Not only would recruitment efforts fall short and lead to an unprecedented nursing shortage, but patient outcomes could suffer as well. Patient perceptions are formed by many factors including: education, experiences, goals, needs, socioeconomic status, and values. If patients form negative or misconceived perceptions of the nursing profession based upon misguided information this may hinder communication and interpersonal relationships between the nurse and patient, which will ultimately lead to poor patient outcomes and mistrust in the community (Thomas, et al., 2010).

**Recommendations for Improvement**

It is understood that there is little nurses can do to change many of the influences that shape the popular image of nursing; however the simplest and most effective method is to take control of our professional image and get involved. Focus on what can be done to influence patients, their families, and other medical colleagues in order to redirect their thinking and over-
come the misconceptions of nursing that have plagued its history. Nurses are ultimately responsible for their own image.

The American Nurses Association (ANA) has established standards of nursing development and practice that guide and direct the professional performance of every nurse. Each nurse is expected to conduct themselves by these standards with the purpose of improving patient outcomes and community health. Standard 9 states that “the registered nurse integrates evidence and research findings into practice” (ANA, 2010, p. 51). Ten Hoeve, et al. (2014) concludes that nursing research is one of the principal methods that nursing can utilize to improve its image and further its identity and urges nurses to consider participating in a cross-national study in order to examine nursing image in different countries.

Communication is another standard of nursing that is extremely important when shaping the nursing image (ANA, 2010). When respondents from an on-line survey were questioned about their perceptions of the nursing profession and asked what they thought nurses could do to shape the image of nursing, communication skills was among the highest attributes ranked (Cabaniss, 2011). Communication is key, both verbal and non-verbal. In that same on-line survey previously mentioned the answers included simple things like: “wear ID badge, stop wearing cartoon scrubs, do not dress like a slob, act professional, be aware of your audience, smile, use eye contact, speak intelligently, and speak in a caring manner” (p. 117). These are simple solutions to a complex problem that has been haunting nursing since the beginning.

Lastly, it is recommended that nurses become more political and outspoken both inside and outside of the healthcare forum. This can be accomplished in so many different ways; by perusing higher education, getting involved in organizations, participating in peer mentoring, embracing more active roles in their communities, and finding ways to further nursing autonomy
(Ten Hoeve, et al., 2014). It boils down to leadership, the twelfth standard in the ANA professional nursing practice (2010).

**Conclusion**

This discussion paper gives a brief synopsis of the history surrounding the image of nursing, the impact these images have had, and the recommendations that can be used to combat the misconceptions surrounding the profession. These negative perceptions can be overcome with tools that have been already been provided by the ANA Standards of Practice. Nursing is a challenging and rewarding profession that has undergone many changes since its beginnings with Florence Nightingale and will undoubtedly continue to transform the face healthcare while in pursuit of its own professional identity.
References


