The influence of authentic leadership on newly graduated nurses' experiences of workplace bullying, burnout and retention outcomes: A cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Retaining skilled and engaged nurses is critical during a time of shortage, however growing reports of workplace bullying threaten nurses' health and wellbeing, especially the transition of newly graduated nurses entering the profession. High rates of burnout and turnover among new nurses puts additional strain on limited financial resources in healthcare organizations and can compromise the quality of care provided to patients.

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to test a model linking authentic leadership to new graduate nurses' experiences of workplace bullying and burnout, and subsequently, job satisfaction and intentions to leave their jobs.

Methods: This study employed a cross-sectional survey design with 342 new graduate nurses (defined as less than two years of practice experience) working in acute care hospitals in Ontario, Canada. Participants completed a questionnaire with measures of authentic leadership, workplace bullying, burnout, job satisfaction and turnover intentions. The model was tested using path analysis techniques within structural equation modeling.

Results: The model fit indices suggested that the original hypothesized model did not adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 33.59$, $df = 5$, $p = .000$, $\chi^2/df = 6.72$, IFI = .937, CFI = .937, RMSEA = .130), thus an additional theoretically justified direct path from authentic leadership to job satisfaction was added, which improved the fit substantially ($\chi^2 = 5.26$, $df = 4$, $p = .261$, $\chi^2/df = 1.32$, IFI = .997, CFI = .997, RMSEA = .030). Authentic leadership had a negative direct effect on workplace bullying, which in turn had a direct positive effect on emotional exhaustion. Authentic leadership also influenced job satisfaction indirectly through bullying and emotional exhaustion. Authentic leadership, workplace bullying and emotional exhaustion all had significant direct effects on job satisfaction, which in turn, was related to lower turnover intentions.

Conclusions: The findings from this study demonstrate the fundamental importance of authentic leadership in creating supportive working environments. An authentic leadership style may reduce the probability of a unit culture of workplace bullying developing, contributing to a nursing workforce that is less burned out, more satisfied with their job, and ultimately, less likely to leave their position.

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What is already known about the topic?

- Newly graduated nurses have an alarmingly high rate of burnout and turnover in their first few years of practice.
- Workplace bullying is a threat to the successful transition of newly graduated nurses to the workforce, as nurses exposed to these detrimental behaviors are more likely to have lower job satisfaction and increased intentions to leave their job.

What this paper adds

- This study is the first to report evidence to suggest that unit manager authentic leadership practices may reduce the probability of new graduate nurses' experiences of bullying in their first two years of practice.
- The findings demonstrate that nursing leaders' authentic leadership practices promote healthy workplace conditions that positively influence factors that encourage new graduate nurse retention.

1. Introduction

Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified the worldwide increase in workplace bullying as a serious threat to nurses' health and wellbeing and has identified the need to eliminate workplace violence as a high priority (WHO, 2010). In nursing, several studies have reported increasing levels of workplace bullying in the general nursing population (Hutchinson et al., 2008; Quine, 2001) and more recently among new graduate nurses (Laschinger et al., 2010; McKenna et al., 2003; Simons, 2008). Previous research has demonstrated a link between bullying and workplace psychosocial factors, such as role conflict, social climate, and work control (Einarsen et al., 1994; Vartia, 1996). This phenomenon poses a threat to the successful transition of new nurses to the graduate role and may increase attrition from the nursing workforce, adding to the current shortage of nurses.

New graduate nurses are particularly vulnerable to negative workplace behavior that negatively impacts their job and career satisfaction and their mental and physical health. Worklife issues that threaten new graduate retention are a concern for nurse administrators (Beecroft et al., 2008; Kovner et al., 2009) given reports of turnover rates as high as 60% in the first year of employment (Beecroft et al., 2001; Bowles and Candela, 2005; Brewer et al., 2011). Researchers have expressed concern that many new graduates may actually leave the profession altogether as a result of stressful working conditions (Griffin, 2005; Scott et al., 2008). As a large cohort of the nursing workforce approaches retirement, a cadre of new nurses who find their work fulfilling is essential for sustaining the nursing workforce and for ensuring that nursing resources are available to provide high quality patient care in the future. Thus, every effort must be made to create working conditions that are welcoming to newcomers and support the positive transition from the student to graduate role.

Successful new graduate transition is facilitated by positive work environments, characterized by constructive working relationships among nurses and respect for learning needs of newcomers to the profession (Scott et al., 2008). Yet, increased demands of current workplaces are stressful for nurses who report high levels of burnout and absenteeism (Greco et al., 2006; Laschinger et al., 2004). Even more alarming, Cho et al. (2006) found that 66% of new graduate nurses reported severe burnout, and Rudman and Gustavsson (2011) found that 50% of Swedish newly graduated nurses experienced a significant increase in burnout and subsequent intentions to leave the profession in their second year of practice. The cost of replacing a new graduate nurse is high, both in financial and organizational productivity terms (Beecroft et al., 2001; Brewer et al., 2011; Lindsey and Kleiner, 2005). Indeed, Brewer et al. (2011) estimated the system cost of the 15% first year new graduate turnover rate found in their study of American hospital nurses to be approximately $728 million in 2007.

Effective strategies for preventing bullying are dependent on the quality of working environments that are created by nurse leaders. Organizational effects on employees are influenced by the behaviors of leaders as a result of the way they manage the job context and job content (Leka et al., 2010). Research in the general management field has shown that leadership, particularly a negative or nonsupportive leadership style, is an important factor in the prevalence of workplace bullying (Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004; Hauge et al., 2007, 2011; Skogstad et al., 2007). On the other hand, authentic leadership, a relationship-focused style of leadership, has been found to be related to outcomes not likely to occur in bullying environments, such as, organizational citizenship behaviors (Walumbwa et al., 2008), a supportive work group (Wong and Cummings, 2009), and group spirit or 'esprit' (Henderson and Hoy, 1983). However, few studies have examined the relationship between leadership behaviors and the prevalence of workplace bullying in nursing (Tomey, 2009). Given the key role of nursing leaders in creating positive work environments that promote retention and job satisfaction (Duffield et al., 2009; VanOyen Force, 2005; Weberg, 2010), a study that examines the relationship between nursing leadership behaviors and the prevalence of workplace bullying and its effects is warranted. The purpose of this study is to test a model linking authentic leadership to new graduate nurses experiences of workplace bullying and burnout, and subsequently, job satisfaction and intentions to leave their jobs.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Our theoretical framework integrated Avolio et al.'s (2004) authentic leadership model, Einarsen et al.'s (1998) notion of workplace bullying, and Leiter and Maslach's (2004) burnout model to examine workplace factors that influence new graduate retention outcomes. Authentic leadership is a positive relationship-focused leadership style that emphasizes self-awareness, honesty and transparency, behavioral integrity, and consistency (Avolio et al., 2004). In fact, authentic leadership has been posited