From the Inside Out: A New Approach to Teaching Professional Identity Formation and Professional Ethics

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Professional identity formation is a dynamic process that begins in undergraduate nursing education and continues to develop throughout one's professional career. In recent decades, nursing educators emphasized the social dimension of professional identity formation in which professionalization is achieved through following rules, codes, and standards set by the profession. Character or psychological development and the proper use of virtues like integrity, compassion, or courage are often part of the hidden curriculum. The purpose of this article is to introduce a recently developed conception of professionalism that is grounded in virtue ethics and integrates both social and character development into a professional identity that is dynamic, situated, and lifelong. The conception is operationalized through the Framework for Nurse Professionals (FrNP) and the Stair-Step Model of Professional Transformation. The FrNP and the Stair-Step Model promote a robust and morally resilient professional nursing identity that will foster professional growth throughout one's career. (Index words: Approach; Professional identity formation; Professional ethics; Virtue ethics) J Prof Nurs 30:376–382, 2014. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

IN THE NEXT decade and beyond, educating nurse professionals to maintain a high level of moral excellence in practice will be challenging. The most evident threat to professional integrity relates to economically driven changes. Productivity and outcomes of care (Sellman, 2011) and changes from government health care reform will dramatically impact health care professionals' practice in the future (Cantor, Monheit, DeLia, & Lloyd, 2012; Johnson, Cowin, Wilson, & Young, 2012; Perkins, 2013).

In addition, many professions have experienced a decline in public trust, and educators have linked this decline to a failure in professional education (Godfrey & Crigger, 2011). Some educators and scholars claim that professional education in many disciplines should be strengthened and that education on character development should be re-instituted into the educational process (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011; Dall'Alba, 2009). Whatever the reasons, many professions have revisited professional education in their respective disciplines and have implemented changes in professional development education, or what is now commonly called *professional identity formation* (Johnson et al., 2012; O'Brien & Irby, 2013).

Professional identity formation and its relationship to moral excellence and moral resiliency in practice have not been well conceptualized or researched in nursing literature (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011). Therefore, a more robust and comprehensive conception of professional identity that includes both social and psychological elements and addresses the application of professional ethics throughout one's practicing career is a valuable addition to nursing education.

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The current interest in professional identity formation has led us, the authors, to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework for professional identity formation and professional growth applicable to all levels of education. This article is a presentation of a two-part conceptualization of professional identity formation and growth that is operationalized through the Framework for Nurse Professionals (FrNP), a structural model, and the Stair-Step Model of Professional Transformation (Stair-Step Model), a process model for communication to others. The FrNP and the Stair-Step Model described herein are condensed from a more complete published description (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011).

Background in Professional Identity Formation

Landmark Research

Contemporary research in nursing education offers direction for future professional education. A landmark study by Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, and Day (2010) recommended four essential shifts in nursing education based on their extensive multisite research on professional undergraduate nursing education. Three of these recommended changes—increasing salient and situated learning, integrating classroom and clinical approaches, and improving clinical judgment—address cognitive elements of education. The fourth recommendation addresses the moral element of nursing. Benner et al. (2010) advocate a shift from a focus on socialization and a role view of professionalism to one that embraces identity formation (Benner et al., 2010).

Benner et al. (2010) concluded that although evidence of professional identity and moral development was seen in undergraduate clinical settings, formation of professional identity was notably absent in laboratory and didactic environments. Further, other scholars claim that professional identity formation may progress little beyond basic education in many professions (Dall'Alba, 2009; McCammon & Brody, 2012). Professionals, as graduates, may be superficially rather than deeply committed to professional ideals (McCammon & Brody, 2012). A superficial commitment to professionalism can set a professional up for future failure. Just as with any skill or knowledge, one's professional identity and moral resiliency, if not nurtured, can erode and lead to a diminution of quality in practice, compromised thinking, and even wrongdoing (Martin, 1999).

Early and Profound

Professional identity formation originates in basic nursing education. Educators begin the process of converting a lay person into an individual whose values are consistent with those of the profession and who will act consistently on these values in professional practice (Benner et al., 2010; Clouder, 2003; Johnson et al., 2012; Kaiser, 2002). Kaiser (2002) has termed the process of becoming a professional as a breaking down of individuality or a "denying of uniqueness" that replaces the student's nonconformed, nonprofessional identity with a professional ideology (p. 95). Successful professionalization results in radical change in self-identity.

From a practical perspective, seasoned educators bear witness to the profound change that beginning nursing students undergo during their educational journeys. If successful, fledgling students, who enter nursing school with a naive outsider view of the professional nurse, will be transformed into professional insiders who are of good character, have internalized the discipline's values, and will continue to maintain a level of moral excellence throughout their careers.

The Two Paradigms of Professional Identity

Professional identity is comprised of two distinct professional paradigms: social and psychological. The socialization process is characterized by *doing*. Nurses are good professionals if they value and follow the rules, standards, and codes of the discipline and of society. The psychological professional is characterized by *being*. Nurses are good professionals through developing their character. Virtues like courage, humility, forgiveness, integrity, and compassion are developed and internalized. One without the other presents an incomplete conception of professional identity (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011; McCammon & Brody, 2012).

Professional identity, used herein, refers to an individual's perception of himself or herself, who, as a member of a profession, has responsibilities to society, recipients of care, other professionals, and to himself or herself. With this conceptualization of professional identity, the ethical aspect of a professional becomes paramount; it is the fundamental basis on which professional identity rests (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011). Ethics broadens from the idea of solving the occasional and sometimes profound ethical practice dilemma to a compass that guides the many decisions made in everyday practice.

A Lifelong Process

Professionalization begins with the educational process but does not end there. Just as practicing professional nurses keep up with new knowledge in their field through continuing education, nurses are also growing as professionals through practicing their profession, reflecting on practice and improving their professional sense of self throughout the process. The term *life-long learning* is commonly used in professional organizations, institutions, and schools of nursing. Life-long learning, in its truest sense, addresses cognitive aspects of knowing what to do in practice but also the ethical knowledge of what should be done.

Why Revisit Professional Identity Formation in Nursing Education

If the educational method of teaching professional identity and development of ethical behavior in clinical undergraduate nursing education is generally considered a strength, as Benner et al. (2010) suggest, then why should educators invest more resources or instructional