Transformers: Changing the face of nursing and midwifery in the media

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This paper reports an educational strategy designed to sensitise and empower students about the impact of media representations of nursing and midwifery on their public image.
Background: Numerous studies continue to reveal that stories about nursing and midwifery presented in the mainstream media are often superficial, stereotypical and demeaning. Inaccurate portrayals of nursing damage our professional reputation with the public and potential consumers. It also sends the wrong message to future nursing students. Images are a powerful conductor of misinformation, suggesting to others that nurses are not important agents for social change.
Methods: In 2012, a small team of academics designed a photography competition and judging process for undergraduate and postgraduate students of nursing and midwifery enrolled at a regional Australian university.
Results: The winning entries were photographs of high quality and conveyed rich meaning. They provide an interesting and positive counterpoint to derogatory images often propagated by mainstream media.
Conclusion: There is benefit in extending this project so that it: appeals to more students, builds leadership skills, leads to wider social change and benefits society. The intention is to develop the process of student engagement as an educational intervention, and explore experiences and outcomes with stakeholders.

Introduction

The study, and consequently the development, of nursing's professional identity is necessary and important, because it offers the possibility for health care transformation and improvement. Indeed, the influential US based Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2010) declared that:

> Nurses' identity [needs] …to change dramatically. Nurses are no longer cast in the metaphors of the handmaidens of physicians nor as members of the team led by the physician. Instead, nurses are identified as equal partners with all other healthcare team members.

Yet nursing continues to struggle with professional identity development, facing internal as well as external barriers. Benner et al. (2010) indicated in their landmark study of nursing education, that nursing education continues to emphasise a student's socialisation and role-taking as a way to learn nursing and while this is important (Chang and Daly, 2008), it is not sufficient. Formation of identity requires much more intentional learning experiences to encourage students to reach a personal and internalised self-understanding as they transition from the personal self to the professional self (Hanson, 2013).

Externally, nursing also faces barriers. Images about nursing presented in the mainstream media, are often and continue to be superficial and demeaning (Darbyshire and Gordon, 2005; Kelly et al., 2012; Gordon and Nelson, 2005; Summers and Summers, 2009). Negative and inaccurate portrayals of nursing can create significant risks such as the public failing to understand the work of nursing, as might do colleagues from other professions, potential future students and decision makers (Summers and Summers, 2009). If people believe that nursing work is menial it will seriously underplay the important role nurses have in saving patients' lives and in caring for their wellbeing. This can then lead to poorly thought out health policy planning, inadequate staffing of health services, inadequate higher education resources, and the education and recruitment of people unsuited to the demanding and responsible work of nursing.

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In Australia, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) requires that nursing and midwifery education include strategies that assist students to become critical thinkers while they learn about and apply professional values. Whilst students commonly learn how to use clinical reasoning to solve problems and to behave safely and responsibly, they are not sufficiently prepared to take a critical and questioning view of Nursing and Midwifery's historical and contemporary representations (Darbyshire and Gordon, 2005). As Benner et al. (2010) suggest, students are learning role-taking and socialisation behaviours, which are very necessary in transitioning into the culture of the clinical world (Chang and Daly, 2008) but of equal importance are the formative experiences, which will proactively build a professional sense of self and inspire students to identify when the image of their profession is being misunderstood or eroded (Hanson, 2013).

This is an important gap in learning and teaching practice because an authentic professional identity is developed by identifying and articulating values relevant to nursing's professional purpose and practice (Beattie, 2006). Public beliefs about the importance of nursing are shaped by the images people see. If nurses are silent in public debates about the status of health systems and the depiction of their work, they risk being marginalised when it comes to decisions about how health care resources are allocated and operationalised as well as how respected they are by consumers, colleagues and decision makers.

Some studies have indicated that students themselves hold stereotypical views about nursing, views that may have played a role in their selection of the program (Boscoe et al., 2005). In addition to biasing their learning experiences, such views may reduce and constrain their vision for the profession. Such conditions do not prepare students adequately for the realities of practice and it may contribute to an ambivalent professional identity and lack of commitment. Thus, it is important to design curriculum innovations that assist students to appreciate the importance of nursing's image for contemporary practice. Such curriculum innovations would strengthen professional identity (Hanson, 2013) and activate students so that they can become agents of change and produce their own images, rather than just be passive recipients.

Myths, tropes and stereotypes of nursing

The iconic image of Florence Nightingale watching over the patients of Scutari Hospital during the Crimean War began a long legacy of nurses being portrayed as self-sacrificing, devotional, altruistic, anonymous, and silent (Gordon and Nelson, 2005). While the public highly regard nurses, perhaps when they require health services, and begin to appreciate how busy nurses are and how complex the role is, that regard is quickly distorted and undermined by a projected image, drawn from enduring myths, tropes and stereotypes that do not reflect the real work of nurses (Summers and Summers, 2009).

Stereotypes of nursing are common within the media. Summers and Summers (2009) describe three prominent and recurring images: the virtuous self-denying female; the angel of the battlefield; and the handmaiden. Gordon (2005) argues that such old imagery persists because no significant attempt is being made by the public or any health professions to correct the misconceptions prevalent in the media. Such myths shape and constrain social practice, particularly in relation to class and gender. Nursing remains a working class job and a job for females, despite the historical evidence that the middle class and men have been involved in nursing for centuries (Evans, 2004).

Whilst media images of nursing can be degrading and diminishing, Gordon (2005) argues that the physician's handmaiden could be the most destructive and deceptive. The underlying assumption of such images is that nurses do not need to think critically or problem solve logically because it will be someone else's job to do so. This is a dangerous misconception — one that students would not benefit from internalising.

Another myth, or nursing trope within society is that the nurses worth remembering are iconic and almost always embodying ideals of goodness (Nelson and Gordon, 2006). Besides Nightingale and Seacole, there are several other iconic nurses, such as Bullwinkel or Osburn, who may be discussed in brief opportunities within the curriculum to learn about Australian nursing's professional development. But what is frequently unaddressed is that each of these figures is larger than life, and bear little resemblance to contemporary leaders or desirable leadership qualities for nursing (McAllister et al., 2010). Iconic representations of nursing perpetuate a myth that leadership is a quality that belongs to the heroic other, rather than the reality that everyday clinical nurses need to exercise fortitude, vision, determination and integrity. In this way such tropes not only mislead the public, but they fail to inspire nursing's future leaders. There are also complexities about nursing that could be featured in media representations to trigger deeper thinking, rather than reinforce taken-for-granted aspects about nursing. For example, diversity in gender, race, geography, sub-specialty, and nuances about changes in health service engagement could be more highly featured — such as that nurses work within the community, in remote areas, and as leaders in teams (Health Workforce Australia, 2013).

Despite these problems, there is now an organisation called "The Truth about Nursing" (2012), which provides a media-watch service and encourages members to protest inaccurate portrayals. The organisation has been successful in removing sexist advertisements and at least informing television and film producers. There is, however, a long way to go. Sensitising students in higher education on the issue of professional identity and providing them with opportunities to take action may be an effective way of creating healthy images of the profession, images that may have a positive impact on many levels.

As the makers of "The Truth about Nursing" website argue,

Health care decision makers — many of whom are sadly uninformed about what nursing really is — are less likely to devote scarce resources to a profession that has become degraded in the public's consciousness. This discourages talented men and women from entering and remaining in the profession.

Recently, Denise McGarry (2011) pointed out that the narrow perspective of nursing is actually perpetuated in the very sites where one would expect more forethought and critique — Schools of Nursing websites. All stereotypes contribute to a group's disempowerment. They cement in people's minds unhelpful and untruthful ideas about what people are not capable of, or how insignificant they are. For nursing, the consequences can be chronic underfunding of nursing research, education and clinical practice.

When inaccurate representations are combined with the realities of intense University-level training nursing actually requires, difficulties and stress encountered in nursing practice, it is no surprise that reality shock occurs and the profession remains in the midst of a global shortage driven by significant under-staffing. Given that nursing care and nursing have a richer and longer history than most other health professions it is disconcerting that it still struggles to project and update its professional image (Nelson and Gordon, 2006)).

The need for change

Benner et al. (2010) contend that the public need to learn about and appreciate the practical value of nursing beyond that of caring.