# Developing resilience: Stories from novice nurse academics

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SUMMARY

*Background:* It is acknowledged that novice nurse academics face many challenges on commencement of their new role. Most are recruited from the clinical arena, with little understanding of the academic triumvirate of teaching, research and service. They struggle with role expectation and experience feelings of isolation and anxiety.
*Aim:* The aim of this paper is to report on an exploration of 14 new nurse academics from two major nursing education institutions as they utilised and developed resilience building strategies.
*Method:* The paper is drawn from a qualitative study that sought to see the world through the eyes of the participants through storytelling. Data was collected using semi-structured, conversational style interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and revealed themes that captured resilience strategies.
*Results:* These themes were: Developing supportive collegial relationships; Embracing positivity; and Reflection and transformative growth. The first theme, developing supportive relationships, provides insight into the mentoring process and the relationships developed with peers and colleagues. The second theme, embracing positivity, describes the factors that assisted them to face the adversity and challenges in the new role. The final theme, reflection and transformative growth, demonstrated participants' reflecting on difficult situations and demonstrating the ability to learn from the experiences and move forward.
*Conclusions:* The strategies utilised by the participants in this study were key factors in the development of resilience which assisted in the transition from clinical nurse to academic. These strategies were often tacit and it is imperative that in a time of acute nurse academic shortages where retention is paramount, that employing organisations support employees and contribute to resilience development. Education on resilience building strategies is fundamental for all new academics and is essential in the transition from clinical nurse to academic.

## Introduction and Background

Discussion surrounding resilience has been addressed by social workers, psychologists, educators and many others over the past few decades (Mansfield et al., 2012). However, the study of resilience in nursing only began in the mid-to late 1980s, with a particular focus on individual and family strengths (Haase and Peterson, 2013). More recent work has explored resilience within the context of nursing education (McAllister and McKinnon, 2009); nursing leadership (Jackson and Daly, 2011), the clinical workplace (Jackson et al., 2007; Tusaie and Dyer, 2004) and the clinical practitioner (Turner, 2014; McDonald et al., 2015). There is, however, limited discussion of the concept related

to everyday work contexts (Glass, 2007), particularly nursing academia. When attempting to define resilience in nursing, the nursing literature parallels that of other professions in that there is no agreed upon definition. For the purpose of this paper, resilience is the ability to overcome and adapt in the face of adversity (Jackson et al., 2007; Hart et al., 2012). (See Table 1.)

The transition of clinical nurses to academia has received some discussion in contemporary literature. Anderson (2009) presents a metaphorical representation of the academic fairy tale where nurses transitioning from the clinical setting to academia are positioned as mermaids 'drowning' and 'treading water'. McAllister et al. (2014) also recognised transition difficulties of new nurse academics and provided a model designed to build professional connections and capabilities. Further difficulties for new nurse academics include lack of preparedness and workload issues (Dempsey, 2006), a lack of skills in teaching, and understanding of the academic triumvirate of teaching,

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**Table 1**
Participant characteristics.

| Female | Male | Age range | Post-graduate qualifications (clinical) | Enrolled in doctoral program | Doctoral qualification |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13 | 1 | 35–55 | 15 | 3 | 0 |

research and service (McDermid et al., 2013; Shanta et al., 2012). This current study reflects the findings of a qualitative study that identifies challenges and difficulties and explores the development of resilience in clinical nurses transitioning to academia.

New nurse academics are introduced to a complex and unique environment, which is often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, loneliness and isolation (McDermid et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2010; Anibas et al., 2009; McAllister et al., 2014). The development of resilience is significant in this population as it has been associated with increased quality of life, better health and effective use of coping strategies and may contribute to workforce retention (Glass, 2007; Hart et al., 2012). Resilience in nursing and teaching is receiving increasing attention in the literature with Tait describing resilience as "one of the most important strengths for novice teachers" (2005, p.12). Despite teaching being a substantial component of the multi-faceted nurse academic role, the concept of resilience has received little exploration in this context.

This paper is drawn from a larger study that explored transition experiences of clinical nurses to academia. Elsewhere, findings have been published relating to sessional staff and the transition into permanent nurse academic positions (McDermid et al., 2013). This paper contributes to an on-going body of work on resilience and focuses on the ways in which novice academic nurses adapt and implement resilience strategies. Understanding these strategies is essential to improve the experience of novice nurse academics, and potentially positively impact recruitment and retention.

## Method

A storytelling approach was selected to guide this qualitative study. It is based firmly on the premise that, as human beings, we come to understand, give meaning to and make sense of our lives through story (Wiltshire, 1995).This approach facilitated the sharing of the participants' accounts of events and experiences when transitioning from clinical roles to academic positions. It allowed participants to disclose information of their own choosing and empowered them through a process of imparting their story to an active listener (McDermid et al., 2014). While storytelling is known to be cathartic and beneficial, it also has the added benefit of enhancing resilience in research participants (East et al., 2010).

The findings from this paper were gathered using an inductive approach and through comparisons to the literature, were found to be consistent with resilience building strategies suggested by Jackson et al. (2007) in a paper on workplace adversity of clinical nurses. This included: building positive nurturing professional relationships, maintaining positivity, and reflection.

### Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling from two large providers of undergraduate nurse education.

Thirteen women and one man participated in the study which is consistent with gender ratios in these nursing faculties. All were employed as academics and had worked at their respective institutions for between 6 weeks and 5 years. They were aged between 33 and 55 years of age and all were experienced nurses with clinically relevant postgraduate qualifications. None were doctorally qualified; however, three were enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of data collection.

### Data Collection

Participants were asked to 'tell their story' about their experiences and the rewards and challenges associated with the transition from clinical nursing to academia in a semi-structured, conversational style face-to-face interview. Open-ended questions were used as a catalyst to elicit their stories. Interviews were between 35 and 90 min in duration and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow the collection of full and complete data (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was received from human research ethics committees at both participating universities. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected by the use of pseudonyms and personal details were redacted. This aimed to prevent the recognition of participants in their relevant organisations by deductive disclosure. The findings of this study were presented as collective themes, rather than individual stories, to further ensure confidentiality and privacy of the participants (McDermid et al., 2013). All participants signed a consent form and willingly contributed to the project without coercion.

The first named author of this paper conducted all of the interviews; and was an insider to this research. Being an insider allowed for familiarity, respect and rapport with participants, and ensured an understanding of the culture and environment in academia. However, ethical issues can arise when researching colleagues and peers including: disparities in power; potential for exploitation of participants; issues of coercion; and assumptions made by both participant and researcher (McDermid et al., 2013). These issues were avoided by adhering to the ethical principles of justice and beneficence, which facilitated fair and equitable treatment of all people, and by maintaining professionalism through strict boundaries that protected the rights of participants.

The participants in this project found that recalling challenges they had faced elicited strong emotion and were made aware that they could stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study without consequences. However, all participants chose to continue their interviews found the process of being able to 'tell their story' beneficial and cathartic which resonates with literature that suggests telling stories may also enhance resilience in research participants (East et al., 2010).

### Data Analysis

Individuals make sense of their world most effectively by telling stories, thus the purpose of storytelling in research is more about creating meaning from one's experience rather than presenting 'truths' (Bailey and Tilley, 2002). In order to understand the meaning of participants' experiences, extensive immersion with the data was necessary. This was initially achieved by repeatedly listening to the recordings whilst reading the verbatim transcriptions of the data. While searching for meanings and patterns and noting initial ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2006), multiple stories were identified within individual participants' transcripts. These stories were characterised by several features, namely: an abstract or plot summary, where participants provided a brief overview of the story; an orientation where the participants introduced the place, time, characters and situation; the complicating action or focus of the story; a resolution or results of the story; and the story