



Finessing incivility: The professional socialisation experiences of student nurses' first clinical placement, a grounded theory



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SUMMARY

Background: Clinical practice is where student nurses are socialised into a professional role and acquire the distinct behaviour, attitudes and values of the nursing profession. Getting it right at the outset can maximise the development of a professional identity and the transmission of robust value systems.

Objectives: To explore the impact of the first clinical placement on the professional socialisation of adult undergraduate student nurses in the United Kingdom.

Design: Data of a longitudinal qualitative nature were collected and analysed using grounded theory.

Settings: First year student nurses in hospital ward placements comprising a rural District General Hospital and a large inner city Hospital kept daily unstructured diaries for six weeks.

Participants: A total of 26 undergraduate adult student nurses were purposefully sampled between 2008 and 2010 before undertaking their initial clinical placement.

Methods: Data collection and analysis used grounded theory and the key question asked of the diarists 'tell me what it is like to be a first year nurse on a first placement' was theoretically adjusted during constant comparison and as the theory emerged. Ethical approval and consent was obtained.

Results: The theory of finessing incivility comprises a conceptual framework depicting how student nurses deal with professional incivility during their initial clinical placement and sustain a student identity. Being disillusioned with their role as worker rather than learner yields a sense of 'status dislocation'. Despite needing professional benevolence, they remain altruistic and seek recompense from significant others to negotiate for learning opportunities and relocate their student status.

Conclusions: Despite the stressful transition into clinical practice rather than 'fit in', the student nurses want to belong as learners. His or her own resilience to learn nursing and be a professional student maintains their resolve, their altruism and strengthens their existing values to be benevolent towards an indifferent profession. This behaviour ultimately mirrors the social nature of the practice community.

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Introduction

Student nurse education in the UK is normally a three-year undergraduate course where students can take professional qualifications in adult, child, mental health or learning disability nursing. Students spend half their time in a university and half in clinical practice. Programmes vary but normally students undertake their initial clinical placement in the first few months of their course. Standards for pre-registration nursing education include a competency framework of achievement required of UK student nurses in order that they can register with the [Nursing and Midwifery Council \(NMC, 2010\)](http://www.nmc-uk.org). These standards include; professional values, communication and interpersonal skills, nursing practice and decision making and leadership,

management and team working. Achieving these standards is by a process of professional socialisation and therefore, successfully socialising 'neophytes' into the profession and imbuing them with professional realism of the nurse's role is the supreme aim of professional nursing programmes.

However, previous phrases used by student nurses such as 'not rocking the boat' and 'just another pair of hands' ([Clouder, 2003:217](#), [Bradbury-Jones et al., 2011:370](#)) continue to resonate and similar anecdotal comments made by student nurse to me, were the impetus for this doctoral study the aim of which, was to gain further understanding of the early clinical experiences of student nurses and redress the paucity of research in this area ([Thomas, 2013](#)).

Background/Literature

The term socialisation has a history of varied use and various definitions of the term exist. [Dimitriadou et al. \(2013\)](#) suggest that the

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term generally refers to the processes by which people selectively acquire their personal values and attitudes, identify interests and develop skills and knowledge base.

Professional socialisation is a component of adult socialisation and a process by which individuals acquire the distinct behaviour, attitudes and values of a particular profession (Brennan and McSherry, 2007). An early study in the UK (Melia, 1984) focused on British student nurses construction of occupational socialisation. Melia's seminal work developed a 'compartmentalisation' model of the theory/practice divide. This discrepancy was believed to lead to a theory: practice divide in traditional pre-registration nurse education programmes in the UK. Melia (1987) also found that student nurses worked to 'fit in' and became 'two faced' as they actually did not see their training from either a service or educational perspective, just a series of hurdles to overcome in order to pass exams and achieve satisfactory ward reports from the ward sister.

In the intervening decades since Melia's original study there have been a number of pre-registration curriculum revisions in the UK aimed at lessening this theory: practice divide. (See for example, the accounts of Wilson and Startup (1991), Elkan and Robinson (1993), Gray and Smith's (1999) for project reforms (the change in programme where the training moved from hospitals to being taught in Universities) and Andrew et al. (2009), Melling (2011), and Leducq et al. (2012) for post curricular reforms). Nevertheless, some authors continue to report that student' experiences of the ideals of clinical practice still fall short of the academic content of student's programmes (Astin et al., 2005).

One of the key elements of socialisation is the transmission of a cultural value system. The transmission of nursing values was the focus of the formative work of Kramer (1974) in America who asserted that despite student nurses completing their education with raised professional values, they often lowered when beginning professional practice. Other seminal work was executed by Fretwell (1982) in the UK. The impetus for her study was one of personal tragedy and an awareness of patient helplessness. The importance of 'the little things' that Fretwell refers to as 'basic nursing' and what constitutes 'good nursing care' was a key finding.

Professional values of English undergraduate nursing students were also investigated in order to describe what it was they internalised (Kelly, 1991). Her findings revealed two perceived concepts as central to the undergraduate's professional values; these were 'respect for patients' and their autonomy and 'caring about the little things' including physical aspects of care such as care of dentures. Whilst they expected these values to be in conflict with common hospital practice, they also valued 'fitting in' and 'going along' whilst retaining their personal ideas and values until such a time that they could be implemented. However, some felt powerless to instigate these changes when newly qualified, as they believed the power remained within the hospital system and the nurse in charge (Kelly, 1991).

Summary

Despite a general benefit to the nursing profession of educational reform it is noted that many newly qualified nursing staff continue to be confined and restrained in their daily practice with negative aspects of professional socialisation including reduced morale, dissatisfaction and stress and worryingly, a reduction in the quality of patient care remaining (Mooney, 2007). Clearly, professional socialisation remains fundamental to the practice of nursing and therefore, if negative consequences occur during its process at the beginning of a student nurses journey, they may well impinge on their ability to nurse and to ultimately provide care. Understanding the processes involved will be of interest to readers in ensuring that student nurses are prepared to function in current and complex health and social environments, to contribute to the workforce and to avoid inappropriate socialisation and attrition.

Methodology

Design

The classic grounded theory perspective of Glaser (1978) was adopted for this study. Glaser' stance maintains a close affiliation with the original approach (Hall et al., 2013) where emphasis on objectivity between the researcher and the study foci reflects a need to trust in the emergence of findings from the data. Key to this approach is that the researcher does not formulate any hypothesis in advance but tries to approach the research area with as few preconceptions as possible (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is demonstrated in the broad aim of the study.

Participants and Data Collection

Those student nurses who were allocated to hospital ward areas for their first clinical placement were selected. Their first clinical placement lasted six weeks (30 days) offering exposure to a wide range of clinical experiences, nursing staff and other health care professionals, which was deemed to be an optimum environment to experience socialisation.

Unstructured, hand written, daily diaries were selected for optimal data collection and to enable freedom of response and the gaining of new and different perspectives. To obtain richness and in-depth detail, participants following the programme to become adult nurses were requested to tell the diary reader 'anything and everything' concerning their experiences of being a student nurse during their first clinical placement.

Recruitment of Participants

Under recruitment was a limitation and despite a complete return of 10 diaries from the first sample, non-compliance was evident from the last three samples. A total of 14 out of 30 failed to return their diaries although a solid combined word count from those who did gave a rich description of the student's experiences when constant comparison was made between the data.

In line with the aim of the study, grounded theory was chosen for its ability to focus on processes and the behaviour and perspectives of participants. The student nurses who were about to experience their first clinical placements were purposively sought out and sampled as they were considered to be able to provide rich meaningful and contextual data. Although the two hospital ward placements reflected diverse socio-economic areas their comparison was not the aim of the study.

All students training to become adult nurses were invited to participate in the study and attend a short presentation outlining details of the study. A further meeting for those interested in taking part took place and information sheets were given out and written consent to participate obtained by a staff member who was independent of the research team (Table 1).

Table 1
Characteristics of the diarists.

	Characteristics	Frequencies
Gender	Male	3
	Female	23
Age	Under 21	6
	22–30 years	8
	31–40 years	8
	Over 41 years	4
Previous healthcare experience	Yes	20
	No	6

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