



## Original research

## Evolving career choice narratives of new graduate nurses

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## ABSTRACT

This article describes findings from one stage of a longitudinal study of the professional socialization experiences of Millennial nurses as they prepared for graduation and transition to practice. This study employed an interpretive narrative methodology guided by Polkinghorne's theory of narrative identity. Analysis of face-to-face interviews and journal entries by Millennial nursing students uncovered the formal professional socialization experiences over four years of nursing education. Participants include six Millennial nursing student participants (born after 1980) interviewed approximately one-month after graduation. These six participants are a voluntary subset of twelve who were interviewed prior to beginning their nursing studies, the analysis of which is captured in Price et al. (2013a) and Price et al. (2013b). Narrative analysis of the post-graduation interviews resulted in three main themes: 'Real Nursing: Making a Difference', 'The Good Nurse: Defined by Practice' and 'Creating Career Life Balance'. Graduate nurses strive to provide excellent nursing care as they transition into the workforce and identify a need for ongoing peer and professional supports to assist their ongoing professional socialization. Ongoing formal socialization and professional development is required to support the transition and retention of new nurse graduates in the workplace and the profession. Millennial generation nurses seek opportunities for career mapping, goal setting and formal mentorship by role models and peers to actualize their professional aspirations.

## 1. Introduction

The shortage of Registered Nurses (RNs) in the health care system is a global concern (World Health Organization, 2006). Nurses are the largest group of regulated health professionals in Canada, and comprise one third of the Canadian health workforce (Canadian Institutes of Health Information, 2013). Key nursing reports indicate that Canada will experience a critical shortage of nurses by 2022, with a projected shortfall of 60,000 full-time equivalent RNs (Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), 2009). Nursing recruitment and retention are national priorities in Canada and many developed countries (Buchan and Aitken, 2008). The immediate growth and sustainability of the nursing profession depends on the ability to recruit and retain the Millennial generation (born between 1980 and 2000). The nursing literature lacks substantive investigation of the professional socialization experiences of Millennial nurses. The Millennial generation are confident, technology-oriented team players who have non-linear learning styles, and are accustomed to constructive feedback and positive reinforcement (Montenery et al., 2013). To attract and retain Millennial nurses, employment and educational nursing institutions must develop understanding of their professional socialization experiences, career interests

and employment expectations. This paper presents an investigation of the formal socialization experiences of a cohort of nursing students on graduation in comparison to pre-entry themes. It is part of a longitudinal research study that examines early professional socialization among Millennial nurses in Eastern Canada.

Professional socialization is recognized as the dynamic process of coming to know a professional role. It is influenced by a variety of experiences over time (Davis, 1975) and affects career outcomes such as satisfaction and retention (Mackintosh, 2006). Professional socialization involves the formal process of learning the values, attitudes and behaviors necessary to fulfill a professional role (Dorcy, 1992). Most of the professional socialization research in nursing focuses on experiences during nurse education programs (Mackintosh, 2006) and transition to professional practice (McKenna et al., 2010; Newton et al., 2015). However, professional socialization starts before entry into training programs. The concept of early, or anticipatory, socialization acknowledges that individuals gain knowledge about professional roles informally through experiences prior to professional education (Price, 2009a). Recent research in organizational psychology establishes a link between early socialization and organizational outcomes such as career satisfaction and retention (McKenna et al., 2010). This link has not been

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well explored within nursing. There is a gap in our understanding of early professional socialization of the Millennial cohort of nurses, a group hypothesized to have more diverse socialization experiences and expectations in comparison to previous cohorts (i.e., Boomers, Generation Y) (Boychuk-Duchscher and Cowin, 2004).

A growing body of research finds notable differences between the Millennial generation and earlier generational cohorts with regards to both career aspirations and expectations (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Leiter et al., 2010). Understanding early professional socialization of the Millennial generation of nurses can provide insight into how to best support the professional development and retention of this growing cohort of nurses (Price, 2009b).

This article describes findings from one stage of a larger longitudinal study that explored the professional socialization of Millennial nurses from time of admission into a nursing program (pre-entry) to one-year post-graduation. Specifically, this article describes themes that emerged immediately after graduation. The larger study began by exploring the career choice influences of a cohort of 12 Millennial students who were interviewed twice before entering nursing school (Price et al., 2013a, 2013b). Findings from the pre-entry stage demonstrated that career choice was initially framed around a traditional and stereotypical understanding of nursing as a virtuous profession: altruistic, noble, caring, and compassionate. As the students moved closer to entering nursing school, their stories evolved to reveal a desire for autonomy, respect and quality of life and they emphasize pragmatic considerations such as lifestyle, job security, salary and social status (Price et al., 2013b).

Six of the original 12 participants volunteered to be followed longitudinally through to 1-year post graduation. This paper presents the findings from the participant narratives approximately one month after graduation, before they started employment. These interviews provide insight into their ongoing professional socialization as they begin to transition from education to practice. The qualitative longitudinal approach and narrative analysis enables an understanding of how participants' perceptions and expectations of nursing as a career change over time. The findings provide insight into how we can best recruit, support and retain future Millennial nurses in the profession.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Study design

This research employed an interpretive, narrative methodology, guided by the philosophical and theoretical tenets of interpretivism, hermeneutics and narrative theory (Ricoeur, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1997). Polkinghorne's narrative theory recognizes that life is not simply stories turned into text, but requires interpretation (Price et al., 2013a). Narrative is a fundamental schema for the linking of individual actions and events into an understandable whole within the wider context of our lives (Polkinghorne, 1997). Narrative theory brings attention to context, temporality and language to explain the dynamic process of how individual events and influences are linked together (Ricoeur, 1997). As the literature reveals, there are myriad factors and roles across a life span that influence one's story of coming to know and choose a profession (Price et al., 2013a, 2013b; Price, 2009a; Price, 2009b; Beck, 2000). Narrative theory provides a useful framework to explore early professional socialization and gain an understanding of the experiences, influences, events and interactions that inform perceptions and expectations of professional practice.

### 2.2. Study area

This research setting is a large university in Eastern Canada that offers a four-year English-language Bachelor of Science program, and several accelerated options, with approximately 200 BScN graduates per year.

### 2.3. Sample size

Six of the original twelve participants (Price et al., 2013b) volunteered for the longitudinal study. The sample size of six aligns with the interpretive, narrative and longitudinal nature of this research and results in a wealth of data for each participant (Morse, 2000; Sandelowski, 1995). The sample size is also justified as the analysis of follow-up interviews employed Polkinghorne (1995) narrative case study analytical approach, which requires a sample size of three to six participants. Sample size in narrative analysis is dependent on use of narrative approach and in this case, six narratives are sufficient in a longitudinal study to provide in-depth understanding of the evolution of career narratives over time. Within a narrative study, the emphasis is placed on the development of narrative texts that are thematically organized by plots. The notion of a "theme" within the context of this narrative inquiry does not represent something that was stated repeatedly or saturated but instead reflected a plotline and understanding derived from interpretation. Analysis concludes with examination within and across narratives for common thematic characterizations.

### 2.4. Study population

This study included Millennial generation nursing students (born 1980 or later) who, when first interviewed prior to entering their first year of nursing, identified nursing as their preferred career choice. The original twelve study participants were recruited upon acceptance into the BScN program. All participants at the time of initial study recruitment (2009) agreed to be contacted upon graduation (2013) and at that point were invited to participate in the longitudinal and six participants responded to the request for the follow-up interviews.

All six participants were female and had completed secondary education in Canada. Three of the six participants had partial or complete post-secondary education before entering nursing school and 3 were direct-entry students from high school. All 6 participants were exploring employment opportunities within a tertiary care setting upon successful completion of their licensure exams. Additional data on race or cultural background or on family commitments was not formally collected. However, the personal narratives provided insight into additional details that were shared when relevant i.e. experiential knowledge of healthcare and nursing.

### 2.5. Data collection

The interview is the most basic source for narrative understanding and configuration in narrative research (Polkinghorne, 1995). In this study, data collection methods included face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, participant journals and investigator field notes. The principal investigator and research assistant interviewed each participant in person within one month of graduation. The principal investigator (PI) and the research assistant (RA) worked at the same university as the participants attended, however they were not in direct positions of authority over any of the participants as professors or teaching assistants. The semi-structured interview questions included: As you reflect on our last interview, as you were starting nursing school, can you describe how your experiences compare to your expectations? What are your thoughts about nursing today? What is important to you in your career, and has this changed over the past four years? What comes to mind when you think of entering practice/becoming a nurse?

All interviews were audio-recorded, coded for anonymity and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. At the pre-entry stage of the study, each participant was provided a small journal to chronicle emerging thoughts and any additional information they wished to document in terms of their nursing school experience throughout the entire study period. The research team provided open-ended questions as prompts, such as: What people, experiences or events have influenced your experiences in nursing school? What are

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