



Increasing gender and ethnic diversity in the health care workforce: The case of Arab male nurses in Israel

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite recent attempts at increasing health care workforce diversity, a measure that was found to reduce health disparities, men remain a minority in the traditionally female occupation of nursing. One exception to this observation is the Arab ethnic minority in Israel that includes numerous male nurses. **Objective:** Determining the percentage of Arab male nurses in the Israeli health care system and understanding how they perceive and negotiate their masculinity.

Methodology: We used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative statistics were obtained from the 2011 to 2013 Labor Force Survey conducted by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and qualitative data derived from 13 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Arab nurses working in Israeli public hospitals, conducted during 2014.

Findings: Nursing constitutes a prominent employment path for Arab men in Israel and is more prominent as an employment path for Arab men than that for Jewish men. A total of 38.6% of all Arab nurses were men and only 7.5% of Jews and others. Quantitative data thus reveal that men do not constitute a minority among Arab nurses. Similarly, qualitative findings show that Arab male nurses do not manifest marginal masculinity but rather demonstrate many elements of hegemonic masculinity. Arab male nurses distinguish themselves and differentiate their roles from those of female nurses, expressing their motives for choosing the nursing profession in terms of hegemonic gender roles for men in Arab society in Israel.

Conclusions: Although nursing is a traditionally female occupation, it offers an opportunity for Arab men to demonstrate their masculinity. Arab male nurses choose nursing as a means rather than an end, however, meaning that many of them might not remain in the profession. This observation is significant because of the importance of retaining men from ethnic minorities in nursing, especially in multicultural societies.

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Introduction

Men account for a small minority of the nursing profession primarily because nursing is traditionally considered a predominantly female profession demanding qualities perceived as feminine, such as sensitivity, supportiveness, congeniality, and empathy (Cottingham, 2014). Consequently, male nurses negotiate contradicting gender perceptions and face the disparity between working in a perceived feminine occupation and the hegemonic model of masculinity accepted in their culture (O'Connor, 2013). Male nurses who belong to ethnic minority populations cope with dual marginality—as men in a predominantly female occupation and as a minority in a hegemonic majority population.

In Israel, it is surprisingly common for men from the Arab ethnic minority population to work as nurses. Arab male nurses are prominent in Israeli public hospitals, community health centers, and first aid services. As Arabs in the predominantly Jewish State of Israel and as men in a principally female occupation, Arab male nurses find themselves negotiating complex and at times contradicting perceptions of marginal and hegemonic masculinity.

In this pioneering study, we examine the prominence of Israeli Arab male nurses, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. We seek to present and analyze the percentage of Arab male nurses in the Israeli public health care system and to understand how they perceive their occupation in light of prevailing gender roles in Arab society in Israel.

Male Nurses: A Contradiction in Terms

The history of nursing is almost exclusively a history of women's endeavors, actions, and deeds, and the relevant research literature includes only few references to the role played by men (Evans, 2004). Evidence from ancient civilizations (such as Greece and Rome) suggests nevertheless that men were often involved in caring for the sick (O'Lynn, 2007). With the advent of Christianity and promotion of the charitable ethos, men became involved in caring for the sick, the wounded, and the dying as members of various religious orders (Mackintosh, 1997; Evans, 2004). On the dissolution of monasteries in the 16th century and the disappearance of the plague, we have virtually no record of organized nursing activities in Europe until the 18th century when large-scale charity hospitals began to develop (Mackintosh, 1997). Nursing work at that time was carried out by both men and women, with men caring mostly for male patients, alcoholics, violent persons, and the mentally ill (Evans, 2004).

Florence Nightingale is credited as the driving force in founding the modern profession of nursing in the

19th century. She first became famous for taking a group of nurses to the Crimean War battlefield, where she approached the care of wounded soldiers in a revolutionary manner, by making improvements in hygiene and the creation of modern nursing as a suitable occupation for young women. This has led to the modern distinctly feminine view of nursing as an occupation based on compassion and cleanliness (O'Connor, 2013). The subsequent development of the nursing profession and nurse training in Europe mirrored Nightingale's model and practically dismissed men from the profession (Evans, 2004; Mackintosh, 1997; O'Lynn, 2007). This feminization of nursing stemmed from Nightingale's belief that men were not suited for nursing and that young women (particularly those of good character and social standing) were naturally inclined to be nurses (Mackintosh, 1997; Miers, 2000).

Nightingale's efforts to professionalize nursing as a white, middle-class, and predominantly female occupation broadened the gap between "caring" and "curing." Women were seen as naturally adept at caring, whereas men were assumed to be better suited for curing (Evans, 2004). The professional traits often put forward as valuable and essential to nursing are strongly associated with characteristics identified as a predominantly female, such as caring, compassion, and nurturing (Evans, 2004). Nursing is thus deeply embedded in the public's mind as a female profession, a perception mirrored in the media as well (O'Brien, Mooney, & Glacken, 2008; Stanley, 2008). This perception perpetuates the notion of men in nursing as anomalies; as "a contradiction in terms" (Bradley, 1989, p. 195).

The portrayal of nursing as a career for women, along with the lack of male nurse role models and the failure of career guidance to promote nursing among men was identified as obstacles to men's choice of the nursing profession (O'Lynn, 2004; Whittock & Leonard, 2003;). Nursing continues to be traditionally dominated by women in common perceptions and demographic profiles alike. Slow legislative changes, academization of the nursing profession, the increase in number of women entering occupations associated with men, concern for diversity in health care systems, and staffing shortages, among other factors, facilitated matters for male nurses but did not result in attracting numerous men to the profession. In most developed countries, the proportion of male nurses is approximately 10% (Chan et al., 2013; Cottingham, 2014; LaRocco, 2007; O'Connor, 2013; O'Lynn, 2007; Whittock & Leonard, 2003;), notwithstanding fluctuations at certain periods and in certain places.

Men in Nursing—Advantages and Challenges

Gender relations and the perception of nursing as a women's occupation have excluded, limited, and conversely advanced the careers of male nurses (Evans, 2004). Female nurses' leaves of absence and

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