



Personality and professional commitment of students in nursing, social work, and teaching: A comparative survey



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ABSTRACT

Background: Nurses are often portrayed as possessing specific traits and dispositions associated with care and empathy. The assumption has been that possessing these traits makes nurses competent, engaged, and well suited to their job. This proposition has been mostly normative, and few studies have investigated how this plays out empirically.

Objective: The aims of this study were to investigate (a) whether possessing a personality trait related to empathy and care was more common among nursing students than students in teaching and social work programs and (b) whether nursing students possessing an affirming personality trait judged themselves to be more suited to their future work – understood as commitment to the profession – than students in teaching and social work.

Design: A cross-sectional survey design was used.

Participants and setting: All first-year students attending seven Norwegian universities and university colleges were invited to participate in the study. Of the 1675 students who participated in the survey, 527 were nursing students, 668 were students in teaching, and 480 were social work students. A response rate of 65 percent was achieved.

Methods: The survey was conducted by Oslo and Akershus University College in the autumn of 2012. Data collection methods included both a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and an online survey. Instruments used included Blau's Career Commitment Scale and Orlinsky and Rønnestad's Interpersonal Adjective Scale. Analysis of variance and regression analysis were performed on the data.

Results: Nursing students did not differ from students in teaching and social work programs in terms of the degree of affirming personality trait. Furthermore, the regression analysis revealed an equally strong association between having an affirming personality trait and being committed to the profession among all these student groups.

Conclusion: The results of this study indicate that the narrative of nursing students as individuals who possess a special personality characteristic does not entirely reflect reality.

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What is already known about the topic

- Nurses are often portrayed as possessing specific traits and dispositions associated with care and empathy. The

assumption has been that possessing these traits makes nurses competent, engaged, and well suited to their job.

- The list of nursing tasks has grown over the past few decades to include more complex medical and technical tasks.
- The discussion has been mostly normative with regard to the necessity of individuals who are interested in becoming nurses to possess specific character traits.

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What this paper adds

- Nursing students do not score higher on an affirming personality scale compared with students in teaching and social work programs.
- The relationship between an affirming personality and professional commitment is not stronger among nursing students compared with students in teaching and social work programs.

1. Introduction

Recruiting individuals who are “right” for a particular profession means recruiting individuals who identify with its goals and values and possess the potential to become dedicated and productive members. For the nursing profession, recruitment is a pressing issue. Because a nursing shortage is predicted in countries like Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States in the coming years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014; Cappelen et al., 2013; National Health Service [NHS] Employers, 2014), recruiting committed individuals will be of great benefit. Research has shown that nursing students are often motivated by a desire to help (Price, 2009; Rognstad, 2002), which resonates with the core professional values in nursing such as care and empathy (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 1998; Weis and Schank, 2009). Nurses are often viewed as possessing not only a helping motive but also specific traits and dispositions associated with care and empathy (Gordon and Nelson, 2006). However, there is a paucity of studies investigating personality in relation to nursing recruitment and professional commitment (Eley et al., 2012). This gap in the research prompts the following questions: Is the possession of a personality trait associated with empathy and care more prominent among nursing students than other professional students? Is this trait associated with being more committed to the profession? The present study explores these questions by comparing Norwegian nursing students with students in social work and teaching programs. These questions are relevant in an international context, as the narrative of the empathetic and caring nurse is found across countries, like Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

1.1. Background

There is an ongoing debate in the nursing literature about the importance of possessing a certain type of disposition in becoming a good nurse (Begley, 2010; Nelson and Gordon, 2006). Begley (2010), for instance, suggested that possessing certain personality traits like compassion, empathy, and kindness is important in becoming a good nurse. Although “good” nursing obviously involves mastering technical skills and acquiring knowledge, some scholars uphold that the *essence* of a good nurse is described not by skills and knowledge but by the practitioner’s character traits (Sellman, 2011). This debate has a tendency to be theoretical and normative in character. However, empirical investigations have also shown that nurses themselves emphasize personality when describing the “good” nurse. For example, Smith

and Godfrey (2002) found that in their sample of registered nurses, a good nurse was judged to be a caring and compassionate person. This finding was supported by Catlett and Lovan (2011) in a replication study. The authors of that study suggested greater focus on to the personal appropriateness of those applying for nurse training, both by the applicants themselves and by the institutions. Tveit (2008) found that at the beginning of their nursing education, Norwegian nursing students considered the ability to care to be a necessity in becoming a successful practitioner. The students participating in the latter study viewed the ability to care as a trait that individuals bring with them to the program, not as a trait that is learned. Interestingly, empirical investigations indicate that patients have a tendency to emphasize nurses’ practical and technical skills to a greater extent than do nurses themselves when reflecting on what makes a good nurse (Kvåle, 1999; Rchaidia et al., 2009; Van der Elst et al., 2012).

Although the narrative of the good nurse remains valid, the profession has changed over the course of time. Nursing is not the same as it was several decades ago. In many places such as Scandinavia, Great Britain, and the United States (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 1998; Gobbi, 2011), nurses’ training is now considered higher education. In addition, nurses are expected to perform certain complex medical and technical tasks, which, in some instances, used to be performed only by doctors (Mackay, 1998). In light of the fact that the nursing profession is undergoing change, it is relevant to investigate whether nursing students possess specific empathetic traits and whether these traits differ from those of other student groups where similar traits are seen as important. In this study, nursing students are compared with students in social work and teaching programs. The seemingly shared similarities among these professional groups make it interesting to investigate whether nurses differ in relation to personality. Is personality as important in other helping professions as it is in the nursing profession, or is this something specific to the nursing narrative?

Nurses, social workers, and teachers are similar in many respects. For example, in Norway, the education programs for these professions are at the same level and of the same length, and the individuals who are employed in these professions enjoy approximately the same status and salary. The main employment of these professions is in the welfare sector. Furthermore, the core task of these professions is related to helping or assisting other human beings. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) stated that one of the core similarities of these professions is that they use “the self as a method of change” (p. xv). Some scholars use the collective terms *helping professions* and *caring professions* when referring especially, but not exclusively, to teaching, social work, and nursing (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2011). Studies have also shown that students in these three professions often have idealistic motives for embarking on these career paths (Csikái and Rozensky, 1997; Guarino et al., 2006). The nursing profession, however, is often presented as the prototypical and “true” caring profession. In their book titled *The Sociology of the Caring Professions*, Abbott and Meerabeau

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