



The impact of gender, culture, and sexuality on Mauritian nursing: Nursing as a non-gendered occupational identity or masculine field? Qualitative study



Oddvar Hollup

Telemark University College, Faculty of Health and Social Studies, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Background: International studies have generally defined nursing as a female-dominated occupation. The almost absence of male nurses seems universal, except as a privileged minority occupying positions within nursing specialties ('islands of masculinity'). Nursing is associated with relatively low status owing to gender and income, and is also influenced by cultural perceptions of social status, the nature of the work and sexuality.

Objective: This study aims to describe and analyse how gender and cultural perceptions influenced the development of nursing in Mauritius. This paper examines why nursing in Mauritius became gendered in different ways due to the impact of gender equivalence in the work force, the gendered segregation in clinical practice and the absence of caring feminisation in nursing.

Design and setting: This qualitative study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews and convenience sampling. The sample includes nurses working at five hospitals. They all come from the central and southern part of Mauritius. The data were collected over a five-month period during 2006.

Participants: Individual qualitative interviews were conducted with 47 nurses, both men (27) and women (20), of different grades, ages, religions and ethnic backgrounds.

Results: Nursing practice is gender segregated, influenced and supported by cultural traditions and perceptions of gender relations, sexuality and touch in nursing. However, the professional identity and role is considered non-gendered, implied by the title of 'nursing officer' and the presence of male nurses who constitute almost 50 percent of the work force. Male nurses do not face similar barriers deterring them from entering nursing profession. Nursing did not develop the image of women's work and a low status job in Mauritius.

Conclusions: The nursing profession in Mauritius has been shaped by a different 'history of origin', social, cultural and societal conditions on the basis of the absence of gender imbalance in the work force and caring feminisation in nursing. Moreover, the increase of men's presence in nursing influenced its name, status and perception, shifting nursing into a masculine sphere with advantageous impacts on nursing.

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What is already known about this topic?

- Nursing in most developed and industrialised countries is largely defined as women's work and a female-dominated occupation.

E-mail address: oddvar.hollup@hit.no.

- Nursing is strongly gendered and reproduces stereotypical perceptions of caring, feminine attributes and masculinity.
- Nursing faces difficulties in recruiting and retaining men in the profession other than as a privileged minority escaping into nursing specialties referred to as ‘islands of masculinity’.

What this paper adds

- Nursing in Mauritius is differently constructed due to other histories of origin and social and cultural conditions.
- Nursing in Mauritius is perceived as a non-gendered professional identity and work that is equally suitable for women and men. Nursing in Mauritius did not develop the stereotypical image of a ‘female’ occupation and caring profession.
- Practical nursing is gender segregated and determined by cultural and religious perceptions related to gender relations, the nature of the work, sexuality and the issue of touch in nursing.
- The gender balance in the workforce and the increase of men’s presence in nursing had an impact on the name and the grade ‘nursing officer’, the perception of nursing towards cure-orientation and the status of the profession, shifting nursing into a more masculine field and making it gendered in different ways.

1. Introduction

In most industrialised countries in Europe, Australia, and North-America, as well as in many countries in Asia and Africa, the nursing profession is characterised as a female-dominated occupation with the presence of relatively few men in nursing. The proportion of men in the nursing population in most countries ranges between 5 and 10 percent, with the exception of southern Europe (such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal with more than 20 percent male nurses) and some countries in West Africa which have an even higher proportion of male nurses (Purnell, 2007). In Mauritius, men constitute almost 50 percent of all nurses working in all fields of nursing (Hollup, 2012).

However, whereas women increasingly choose education and a career within occupations that were previously considered male-dominated, the sex imbalance in the nursing workforce has largely remained. Several studies have stressed the importance of gender structures and the existence of different barriers in nursing education and practice, its history and its language, which have adversely affected the recruitment of men into the profession (Meadus, 2000; O’Lynn and Tranbarger, 2007; Villeneuve, 1994).

A pertinent question within research on the nursing profession concerns why nursing became a female-dominated occupation and was labelled as women’s work. Many international studies have argued for the close relationship between nursing and womanhood and the stereotypical ‘feminine’ image of nurturing, caring and gentleness as opposed to masculine attributes, wherein

nursing has been perceived as the extension of the domestic role of women (Harding, 2005; Meadus, 2000; O’Lynn and Tranbarger, 2007).

Within this close connection between nursing and perceptions of womanhood, which was considered as yet another social and cultural construction, men nurses became regarded as ‘the others’, anomalies and ‘a matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966). Numerous studies confirmed the existence of powerful stereotypical views of male nurses who have been portrayed as somewhat suspicious, effeminate, or as homosexuals, and therefore not ‘real’ men (Evans, 2002; Harding, 2005; Williams, 1995).

On the other hand, stereotypical assumptions of masculinity have either deterred men from being recruited into nursing or have facilitated the escape of the minority of male nurses into specialised fields where they benefit from hidden advantages (Evans, 1997; Williams, 1995). The minority of male nurses either quit the profession or find themselves concentrated within nursing specialties such as psychiatry, anaesthetics, emergency and intensive care, surgery and administration. Egeland and Brown (1989, p. 265) noted that men nurses preferred and showed a propensity for seeking out these nursing specialties ‘islands of masculinity’, where tasks and responsibilities were considered more congruent with the male sex role, and hence tended to minimise role strain. At the same time, men in these roles could escape from an image of nursing that was associated with the body and caring, and thus associate this more strongly with women. Given that male nurses represent a scarce resource, they tend to be treated as a token value and allocated a privileged position within the patriarchal structure in the health sector (Evans, 1997; Simpson, 2005).

How valid are such findings and postulations if applied to other countries, such as Mauritius, where men nurses are not few or constitute a minority, and where the nursing profession is shaped by other histories of origin and by other cultural and social conditions? In Mauritius the nursing profession is not considered a female-dominated occupation or exclusively women’s work associated with caring and feminine attributes. Rather, nursing in this context is not a low-status job but an attractive career. This is due to government employment, job security, good income, social mobility and the prospects of international migration (Hollup, 2012). Gender is at work when stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity and gender relations are allowed to determine where nurses of different sexes should be allowed to work and with which kinds of patients. A gendered division of labour exists in the government hospitals, where male nurses look after male patients and female nurses work with female patients, except for operating theatres and emergency and intensive care units where patients and nurses are not separated according to gender.

1.1. The purpose

The aim of this study is to describe and analyse how the nursing profession in Mauritius was shaped by a history other than the one based on the tradition of European and

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