

Masculinities and men in nursing

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Introduction

Despite women entering male dominated professions in the past 10 years, men have been less active in crossing the occupational gender barrier¹. Nursing is predominantly a female profession where men account for 8.1% of registered nurses in NSW, a 1-% increase from 1988 to 1998. Working in a predominantly female profession, perceived to be doing domestic work, and the perception of nursing to be attuned to feminine personality characteristics brings into crisis relations of power, cathexis and production for men in nursing. The aim of the project is to investigate social practices in which relationships between male nurses and others are constructed. This project, which is currently in progress, is the second stage of a PhD thesis. This study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

How do male nurses describe their gender relationships within the institutions of the family, work and other social networks?

What are the social practices that construct gender relations between male nurses with others?

What are the issues for male nurses that place their construction of masculinity under pressure?

What strategies do male nurses employ to overcome these pressures placed on their construction of masculinity?

Methods

Focused interviews (semi-structured) are used to examine 7 key areas: personal/social background; professional history; daily interactions with patients, other health professions, administration and the public; image of men in nursing; difficulties/disadvantages for men in nursing; advantages for men in nursing; and their view of how the profession is changing ie, the future gender dynamics.

At the time of submitting this mini-poster, five interviews have been conducted and transcribed. The study population will comprise of 20 male nurses registered on list A of the NSW Nurses Registration Board. A combination of passive network sampling and quota sampling is being used to recruit the 20 participants. All participants have more than 10 years post registration experience in nursing.

Data analysis consists of the identification of patterns of social response. A progressive-regressive method of analysis is used where individual conversations (interviews) provide the personal and are linked to wider issues of history and culture². In the first phase of analysis, transcripts are indexed and each interview is written up as a case study. In the second phase, the case studies are reanalysed in groups to explore the similarities and differences in the trajectories of male nurses in social locations and to understand their collective locations.

Results/Discussion

After conducting five interviews there are clear patterns of social practice described by the participants that impact upon the construction of gender relations. These are only some of the findings of a study that is still in progress. Generally male nurses believe that one of the major images which brings into question their masculinity is one of sexuality. All of the participants believe that they are at times stereotyped as being gay. Male nurses are often the brunt of jokes or at times confronted directly, bringing into question their sexual orientation. The heterosexual male participants have described a need to make a heterosexual stance and at times use homophobic strategies to do this. One participant describes the use of violence when propositioned by another colleague. Such strategies are used to combat the antihomosexual bias implicit in society. A gay participant describes how he was branded a paedophile as a result of his sexual orientation.

It is also clear that there is a gender division of labour in nursing where bodies and bodily practices are used along gender lines. The participants have all described the burden of doing heavier work practices such as lifting, patients or heavy objects. Male nurses are often allocated the violent and aggressive patients. An oncology nurse describes how he is given the duty of administering chemotherapy to patients whose nurse is pregnant or attempting to fall pregnant. These are not the final conclusions but form a starting point from which to examine gender relations. Presenting findings from a study like this one is problematic in this format and therefore selected themes are presented here.

1. Kauppinen-Toroparison and Lammi in *Doing Women's Work: Men In Non Traditional Occupations*. (ed Williams C) (1993)

2. Plummer K. *Documents of Life 2: an invitation to a critical humanism*. (Sage Publications, London, 2001)

Extremely limited research has been conducted to investigate social practices in which relationships between male nurses and others are constructed. In times of a nursing shortage and a call to decrease the gender disparity in nursing, it is imperative that social practices that subordinate men, because they are nurses, are examined.