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EXPLORING FACTORS AFFECTING ATTRITION OF MALE STUDENTS FROM AN UNDERGRADUATE NURSING COURSE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a qualitative study that investigated the factors influencing both the academic and clinical practice performance of undergraduate male nursing students at a regional Australian university. The impetus for the study evolved from the recognition that, despite increasing numbers of males choosing to undertake nursing as a career, attrition by males from nursing courses continues to be problematic. In a profession that is hallmarked by critical staff shortages, it was viewed as important to investigate reasons contributing to the attrition of male nursing students enrolled in undergraduate nursing courses. The informants for the research were eight male nursing students enrolled internally in the Bachelor of Nursing course at a regional university in Australia. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and written narratives in the form of a diary. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, the findings revealing that male nursing students face particular challenges from an academic and clinical practice perspective during their university experience. For example, themes identified from interviews and narratives highlighted the fact that there is a tendency for male nursing students to feel isolated and excluded from an academic and clinical perspective. As well as this, the informants in this study clearly highlighted their preference for engaging in the technical aspects of nursing. The implications for nurse educators are emphasized and from this, educational strategies are suggested to facilitate the retention of male nursing students in undergraduate nursing courses.

Key Words: Male nursing students, attrition, educational challenges and strategies
INTRODUCTION

Recently, Australian Government campaigns aimed at recruiting nursing students to nursing degree programs have been successful in that there has been an increase in the number of applications to nursing courses. This success is attributable to the fact that Higher Education Institutions have responded to the recommendations set down in the National Review of Nursing Education (2002). Specifically, Australian universities have recognized that nursing students come from a range of backgrounds and experiences and as such demand greater flexibility in terms of their educational experience. As a result, the delivery of nursing programs by distance education and the increase in the use of technologies has meant that student enrolments in nursing courses are up by at least 20% (Heath 2002). It is well documented that nursing has traditionally been viewed as a predominantly female profession however it is apparent that positive media portrayal of males in nursing as well as recruitment strategies aimed at attracting males to consider nursing as a career have been fairly successful. This is evidenced by information released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005) stating that in that 2001 there were 19,085 male nurses and in 2003 this had increased to 20,434.

Although encouraging, the fact remains that the challenge for those involved in nurse education is to retain students. Recent Government changes in the form of less funding being provided to Australian Universities has meant that pressure is placed on Higher Education Institutions to be more efficient. This means that Faculty now has to demonstrate efficiency in terms of the retention of students. It is therefore of concern that there is evidence to suggest that between 40% and 50% of male students who enter nursing courses, either drop out, fail or transfer to other courses (Villeneuve 1994; Poliafico 1998; Wilson 2005). A literature review by Brady and Sherrod (2003) postulated that although factors contributing to student attrition from nursing courses may not necessarily be gender specific, in other words both males and females have work and family responsibilities, there may be additional challenges contributing to attrition of male nursing students. For example, issues to do with the feminine stereotyping of nursing as a career provide evidence that male nursing students must cope with specific challenges and barriers during their educational experience.
The topic of attrition, defined as ‘the number of students beginning the course minus those completing the course’ has promoted much interest in nurse education (Gallie 2005, p.70). Deary, Watson and Hogston (2003) conducted a longitudinal study that investigated the relationship between stress and attrition in nursing students. The findings revealed that stress in nursing students increased during the course and aspects of individual personality such as being ‘less conscientious and agreeable’ (p, 79) were related to attrition. This research was useful in that it added to nurse education’s body of knowledge in understanding factors that may impact on a student’s decision to complete their course. However, from a gender perspective, the study had several limitations the most salient being that male nursing students were vastly under represented in the study.

Very recently, Wilson (2005) using a phenomenological approach, investigated among other things, Australian male undergraduate nursing students’ experiences during a Bachelor of Nursing course. Wilson (2005, p.226) found that there were several factors “hindering” male nursing students continuation in the course. For example, low self-confidence was a significant theme to emerge in that the informants felt fearful and apprehensive concerning their ability to complete the degree. Wilson (2005) shared Brady and Sherrod’s (2003) prudence in acknowledging that reasons for low self-confidence may not be gender specific due to the fact that like their female counterparts, many had been away from study for a considerable amount of time. However the findings did reveal that the male students in the study reported feelings of role conflict as having a negative impact on their progression in the course. Additionally lack of support by the university faculty was highlighted as problematic and conflict from female peers regarding competition for grades.

It is apparent that studies to date focusing on factors affecting the attrition of male students from nursing courses are diverse as well as weighted in terms of exploring the phenomenon from a quantitative, gender-neutral perspective. Given the significant attrition rates of male nursing students from educational courses and recognizing the fiscal demands placed on Higher Education Institutions to be more efficient, investigating further factors that may contribute to male nursing students’ decision to leave an educational program is viewed as important. The purpose of this study therefore is to explore, from a qualitative perspective, the factors that may impact on male nursing students’ decision to complete their course. The findings may provide
suggestions for implementing educational strategies to facilitate the retention of male nursing students in undergraduate nursing courses.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Design**
The design chosen for this research project was a descriptive, qualitative design. Descriptive studies are designed to gain more information about characteristics within a particular field of study. Their purpose is to provide a picture of a situation as it naturally occurs. A descriptive design is useful for the purpose of developing theory, justifying current practice or as in this case, identifying problems in current practice (Burns & Grove 2001).

**Sample**
The type of sampling method chosen for this study was purposive sampling. There are no firmly established rules for sample size in qualitative research rather, the sample size is largely a function of the purpose of the inquiry, the quality of the informants and the type of sampling strategy used (Polit et al. 2001, p.248). In qualitative research, an important feature of sampling is achieving saturation. This means that rather than sampling a specific number of individuals to achieve significance, the researcher is looking for repetition of salient themes (Streubert & Carpenter 1999, p.23) which ceases when the saturation of a theme has been reached, in other words, “nothing new emerges any more” (Flick 2002, p.65). In this study, interviewing was stopped when eight male Bachelor of Nursing students were interviewed. The age range was 21 to 53 years. Participants were selected according to their willingness and desire to commit time to the research and their willingness to share their experience of being a male nursing student.

**Ethical Considerations**
In this research, several measures were adopted to ensure that there were no breaches of ethical principles. Initially ethical approval was sought from the University Ethics Committee. When approaching individual male nursing students for inclusion in the research, an information sheet explaining the nature of the research was provided. Emphasis was placed on the informants’ right to withdraw and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Prior to commencement of the in-depth interviews, informants were provided with a consent form and no data was collected until a completed consent form was received.
**Methods of Data Collection**

In this study, method triangulation was used in an attempt to capture as complete a picture of the male nursing students’ experience as possible (Streubert & Carpenter 1999). Methodological triangulation is the use of two or more research methods in a single study and it is frequently used when complex concepts are being examined (Mitchell 1986). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that there are two different types of methodological triangulation, these are: within-method triangulation and across-method triangulation. The type chosen for this study was within-method triangulation. This is used when the phenomenon being studied is multifaceted. For example, in this case, it was deemed appropriate to investigate male nursing students’ experience using two different qualitative data collection methods. These were the in-depth interview and the written narrative in the form of a diary.

**Procedure**

The male nursing students in this study were invited to select a time and day for the interview to take place. The setting was a quiet, comfortable meeting room within the school of nursing and health science. Prior permission was sought from the participants to tape-record the interviews. The initial guiding question posed was “Tell me about your educational experience of being a male nursing student at university”. This type of question was chosen specifically because it is an ‘experience’ question. These types of questions are often used to begin interviews encouraging participants to describe and discuss their experience in a non-threatening way. In other words, the researcher is not probing for specific answers to specific questions rather they are enabling the participant to take control of the flow of the conversation (Holloway & Wheeler 1996, p.57). During the interviews, a series of prompts or probing questions were used. For example, “how did you feel about that?” or “can you tell me more about that”. Minichiello et al. (1995) informs us that such questions help to reduce both researcher and participant anxiety. In addition, their purpose is to clarify and provide detail to the meanings attached to statements. When the participants had finished describing their experiences and no further clarification was needed, the interview was considered complete. Interviews lasted from fifteen minutes to one hour.

At the completion of the interview, the participants were provided with blank booklets and invited to keep a diary for one month. Their instructions were to write down their thoughts and feelings in relation to their experience of being male nursing students.
Some time was afforded to this and examples and clarification as to what was required was provided. Streubert and Carpenter (1999) state that when using written narratives it is extremely important that the researcher provides clear instructions to informants regarding the focus of the diary notes because the researcher is not present when the actual writing takes place. The diaries were collected in the week prior to the student’s mid-semester break.

Following each interview, the researcher listened to the tape-recording and then typed the transcript verbatim. The transcripts were then returned to the participants so that they could examine them for accuracy. To establish credibility in a study, researchers must ensure that those taking part in the research are identified and described accurately. One way of doing this is through member checking (Holloway & Wheeler 1996, p.164). None of the participants in this study made any changes to their transcripts.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was the method chosen to analyse the data, a technique whereby the researcher identifies themes or patterns in the data thought to reflect the participants’ experiences (Munhall 1994). Data obtained from the interviews and the diaries were handled using the manual method of colour coding where the researcher worked through the text marking in colour those words, ideas or nuances which appeared to be connected to the research topic (Roberts & Taylor 1998). Each interview transcript and diary was compared to previous and subsequent narratives a number of times until the researcher was satisfied that no significant statements had been overlooked.
FINDINGS

Figure 1 highlights the categories and subcategories that are derived from the research question.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Are there aspects experienced from within the educational context that male nursing students enrolled in an undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing Course perceive to be particularly challenging and if so, what are the implications of such challenges?

1. Isolation
2. The Nursing Role
   • Caring
   • Role models
3. Traditional Gender Roles
   • Technical Aspects of Nursing

Figure 1: Categories and sub-categories derived from the research question

Isolation

A central theme to emerge from the data was the sense of feeling isolated or excluded from the academic and clinical setting. It was during this time that a number of informants explicitly stated that particular experiences caused them to reconsider their decision to continue in their nursing course. It was especially evident when it came to actively engaging in the learning process or asking questions in front of their female counterparts and appeared to arise from a fear of appearing silly or less academically able in a female dominated context. For example, Alan (not his real name) stated that:

“As a male in uh the female area again, I felt uh sometimes suppressed ... in regards to asking questions. You learn to bite your tongue in a group of women.”
In a similar vein, Simon wrote in his diary:

“Sometimes I feel like I’m being discriminated against. I know I’m not but such instances as when on practicum, males rarely, if ever, get to go to maternity or children’s (sic) wards. Even at university there are times when you feel left out of the activities because the girls don’t confide in you.”

Jeff voiced his experiences very clearly:

“You learn to bite your tongue because you don’t want to be shot down in flames by a group of women ... they’re like a pack of wolves ... they can be very, very intimidating in some respects.”

Some participants described clinical situations where they felt embarrassed at being picked out to perform tasks purely as a result of being male. For example, Tim described a scenario where he was in a group situation being taught electrocardiograph (ECG). This procedure requires the removal of the patient’s shirt or blouse and the subsequent attachment of leads to the chest that then record electrical activity in the heart. He said:

“I was the only male in the class and they said ... oh ok Tim, you can take your shirt off. I mean it’s just as bad for me ... I’m still shy, just cos I’m a male doesn’t make me feel proud that I’m taking my shirt off.”

This problem was also highlighted by Jeff who told me:

“Last year they needed urine specimens and they said OK guys, you can put in a urine sample and I’m thinking ... well what’s the difference? I mean ... in regards to whether you’re male or female ... it’s still a urine sample.”

These negative comments are similar to findings by Wilson (2005) who reported male nursing students were singled out by female academics as well as other female students to role-play the patient, particularly when it required the removal of clothing. This reinforces the notion that there is a tendency for educators to treat male students differently, particularly in the clinical scenario. This finding is useful in that it strengthens the argument that educators must
make an effort to provide a teaching environment that is neutral in terms of its gender expectations (Brady and Sherrod 2003).

Of particular note and central to the issue of attrition, was the self-doubt in relation to career choice that many of the informants alluded to. For most, this appeared to surface in the second year of the course. It appeared to be attributable to a number of factors involving the challenge of being a male in a female dominated profession and gave rise to feelings of ambivalence in terms of the suitability of choosing to undertake a nursing course. For example Patrick said:

“I've had my doubts whether I should be doing it or not, especially in my second year ... uh the girls seemed to get it a bit easier.”

This was reiterated by Jeff who stated:

“I think that’s a part of where my doubts came from this year. A lot of guys had gone to the pre-hospital care course and I had been throwing that up to begin with.”

The student’s also described feeling isolated in relation to academic performance. Several of the participants indicated that they felt the need to be perceived as independent in their academic work. For example Tim described the pressure on male students to be seen as independent:

“Men will be more inclined to battle through a book and try to find the page where a girl might say ‘what page is that on?’”

This was echoed by Jeff who said:

“I'll usually try and figure it out for myself...before I'll ask someone else.”

Previous research indicates that it is important that educators are aware of gender differences in learning styles. For example, in the context of nurse education, Paterson et al (1995) reported that, consistent with male values of power, competency and achievement, male nursing students prefer to be independent and self-directed in their learning. More recently Clump and Skogsbergboise (2003) conducted a study which
found that male students prefer a deep processing style of learning characterized by using logical and hierarchical information organizing techniques and that there was a significant relationship between deep processing and academic achievement. These authors also concluded that it is possible that the teaching techniques and academic environment provided by universities directly influence the learning techniques students employ. The findings from this study reinforce the fact that nurse educators need to be cognizant of gender differences in learning styles and facilitate an environment to enhance this.

**The Nursing Role**

Another salient theme to emerge was the informants’ concern with their ability to fulfill the nursing role. Within this category, a number of subcategories were evident, two are discussed here: **caring** and **role models**. With regard to caring, a number of informants described the inner turmoil they felt regarding their ability to demonstrate and carry out effectively a behavior typically associated with nursing and being female. For example Alan said:

> “Am I able to compete with the caring side of nursing? I mean there’s emphasis put on that females are more caring.”

Tim went further:

> “The science sorta clicks for me ... but I think it’s ... they talk about that bedside manner that you learn in practical. I think that’s when it comes more naturally to the girls and I find myself a bit nervous at times.”

Jeff wrote in his diary:

> “Since the beginning of second year I’ve been worrying about whether I’m going to be a good nurse. I think my bedside manner may need a little work”.

From these statements it is obvious that the male students recognize that nursing is a caring profession and that the notion of caring is strongly identified with being female. It is apparent that they feel concern in their ability to fulfill this aspect of the nursing role. The findings here are interesting in that they support assumptions put
forward by Ekstrom (1999). This study found that in a nursing context, there was a
gender difference in terms of the expectation of being able to exhibit caring behaviour
in that male nurses’ expectations were significantly lower than female nurses. What
was interesting however was no significant differences were found between the male
and female nurses’ perceptions of actions thought to represent caring behaviour.
Ekstrom (1999) argues that the findings may be a sign that stereotypical views are
changing with respect to caring and the nursing role and may be attributed to the fact
that there are growing numbers of male students in nurse education programs. This
view is shared by Whittock and Leonard (2003) who found that when interviewing a
sample of nursing students and Registered Nurses of varying ages and ethnicities,
males were viewed to be just as caring as females.
This notion is reflected in Michael’s diary entry:

“I enjoy the idea of nursing as a caring profession and was largely
attracted to it on this basis. Men can care too!”

Within the category of The Nursing Role, the participants expressed a need to interact
more often with male role models, both from within the university and industry
setting. It was apparent that these participants felt that there was a lack of male role
models to support and inspire them during their course. For example, Jim said:

“I’d like to see more male lecturers. I actually was thinking about this
the other day where you can call in some of these guys from the
hospitals. I think it would have been invaluable last year to have had
some male nurses give a different aspect to it … you know … to see how
they think … you know … what is helping them through it”

This comment was supported by Alan:

“There needs to be a little bit more emphasis on what it’s like to be a
male nurse in what is predominantly a female dominated profession.”

These findings may reflect the fact that at the time when this research was conducted,
there were no male nurse educators in the Faculty. However prior research has
highlighted that, like other minority students, male nursing students benefit from
professional role models. (Streubert 1994; Kelly et al. 1996; Brady & Sherrod 2003 &
Wilson 2005). The importance of regularly exposing male nursing students to positive male role models both in the academic and clinical context cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Wilson’s (2005) informants revealed that by virtue of prior exposure to excellent male nurse professionals this actually motivated them to consider nursing as a career. It can only be assumed that such exposure during academic experiences will be useful in motivating male nursing students to complete their course.

**Traditional Gender Roles**

A common experience shared with the researcher was the fact that many of the male nursing students were very much aware of the influence of traditional gender roles and what society expected in relation to normal male and normal female roles. It was apparent that such stereotypical views, at times, caused difficulties in the practical context for the male nursing students. For example, Alan voiced his awareness of patients’ expectations regarding gender roles in the clinical context:

“Stereotyping could be a problem in terms of what people identify as being normal male roles and I think some people, especially some of the older patients are still a bit surprised to have a male nurse attending to intimate care and so on …”

This was echoed by Jeff who stated:

“You’ve got your first wash and shower and um ... some old ladies, elderly ladies I should say ... would rather a lady do it ... only every now and then they’ll get a male and it probably makes them feel a bit embarrassed.”

An expectation regarding traditional gender roles was reflected in Tim’s diary where he wrote:

“Many People I met through university life were surprised when I told them that I was doing nursing. I don’t think they expect a male to be studying nursing and associate the female stereotype with the degree”

This was also echoed in Patrick’s diary:
It is interesting how when I was on prac, most patients assumed that I was a medical student just because I was male. I have also had a few people ask me whether I’m going to medicine after I finish my degree.”

In this category, a major subcategory to emerge that is directly associated with the retention of male nursing students is the focus given to the **Technical Aspects of Nursing**. For example, it was apparent in this study that the informants exhibited a strong preference exhibited for working in areas considered congruent with the male sex role. Patrick highlighted this by stating:

Indeed a number of the participants stated clearly that this was what motivates them to continue in the course and that they derive a great deal of satisfaction from “high pressure”, technically orientated areas of nursing. For example, Jeff said:

“I think guys are much more assertive and maybe it’s a power thing as well. I think more of myself if I’m doing more technical stuff. I mean, even though I like interacting with the patients. I think I feel better about myself if I can do more technical things.”

A reason for this was provided by Michael who said:

“Males will go in to specialised areas more readily because they feel comfortable and it is more of a challenge.”

These findings support previous research which states that males are typically attracted to the technical, high pressure areas of nursing (Tumminia 1981; Streubert 1994; MacDougall 1997; Lo & Brown 1999). However very little nursing research explores the reasons for why this is so. Given the focus on investigating factors contributing to attrition of males from nursing courses, further exploration of the issue is justified. From a traditional male occupational perspective, Klief and Faulkner (2003) presented empirical evidence on the pleasures experienced by men who work with technology. They explored the experience of two groups of males, the first were hobbyist robot builders and the second group was professional software developers. The findings were very interesting and the authors suggest that the reasons men gain pleasure from technology is “socially gendered” (p.296). For example, from an early
Age males are more likely to acquire skills in problem solving and building which affords them a degree of comfort when it comes to dealing with technical objects. However, Kleif and Faulkner (2003, p.310) expand on this concept and state that the pleasure men gain from engaging with technology is because it “provides a sense of mastery or prowess to men who often do not otherwise feel very powerful or competent, especially in emotional and social matters”. As mentioned, the issue of male pleasure and satisfaction with technology has been explored previously however much of this research has been in the realm of traditionally male gendered occupations. Further research is warranted within the nursing context as there is no doubt that, for male nursing students, gaining comfort, pleasure and a sense of mastery with the technical aspects of nursing is closely associated with retaining these students.

**Implications for Nurse Education and Recommendations**

In light of the critical shortage affecting the nursing profession currently, it is important that efforts are made to retain those males who choose nursing as a career. This research has highlighted that male nursing students face particular challenges during their educational experience. If the goal of retaining male students is to be achieved, then teaching staff must be made aware of these challenges. Heightening awareness will ensure that the educational context provides optimum learning experiences from a theoretical and clinical perspective. Specifically, some strategies for retention include:

- Teaching staff should be made aware of their tendency to isolate male nursing students, particularly in relation to asking male students to perform particular clinical tasks.
- Selecting textbooks and test items that are gender neutral in their content.
- Ensuring that adequate male role models are available in the teaching and clinical context.
- Recognising that because male nursing students are more likely to experience unique challenges, providing opportunities for discussing problems during their course would be beneficial. For example, the students in this study found the opportunity to discuss issues was a worthwhile and interesting one. It was apparent that the opportunity to share their experience was beneficial and as
such, using focus groups as a medium of supportive exchange is a positive practical recommendation to emerge from the research.

• The findings from this study reinforce the fact that nurse educators need to be cognizant of gender differences in learning styles and foster a learning environment that focuses on independence as means of promoting competency and achievement.

• Male nursing students obviously gain a sense of comfort and mastery when engaging with the technical aspects of nursing. In terms of reducing attrition of males from nursing courses, it is important that the educational context actively promotes this. Further studies are certainly warranted in this area.
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