



The Intergenerational Impact of Management Relations on Nurse Career Satisfaction and Patient Care

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OBJECTIVE: This article provides insights into the role of management relations on nurses' career satisfaction across different career stages.

BACKGROUND: Managers and positive relations with staff are critical to improving job satisfaction, career development, and retention for new graduates to mid- to late-career nurses.

METHODS: Using a descriptive qualitative approach, we conducted a thematic analysis of 18 focus groups held in 8 Canadian provinces with 185 student, early-career, and mid- to late-career nurse participants.

RESULTS: Student participants expressed the need for a supportive environment to enable successful transition to practice. Early-career nurses expected effective leadership at the unit level, effective communication, and positive working relationships to enable best care outcomes. Mid- to late-career nurses were most dissatisfied with management interactions and relationships.

CONCLUSIONS: Management relations are important across all career stages, affecting patient care and job satisfaction. Findings provide insight into

how nurse-manager relations can be enhanced from new graduate support to guidance in career development and ongoing recognition and respect for nurses throughout their careers.

The threat of a nursing shortage in Canada as a result of an aging workforce has motivated extensive research examining job satisfaction, retention, and recruitment of nurses.^{1,2} Previous research has focused on generations as defined by oversimplified age cohorts,^{3,4} whereas this study⁵ explored similarities and differences in perceptions of nurses by career stage: students, early-career, and mid- to late-career. This approach captures how concerns and expectations shift in relation to on-the-job nursing experience. Nursing is increasingly a 2nd or subsequent career,⁶ with older individuals new to the nursing workplace. Moreover, it is not youth but rather recent graduation that predisposes graduate nurses to the reality shock of transition to practice.^{7,8} New graduates seek supportive environments in which to build their competency and skills.^{9,10} In the early years of a career, nurses continue to expect guidance for their ongoing career development with ready access to management support. Mid- to late-career nurses are often motivated by a positive work environment and respect for their experience.¹¹

Despite recognition in the literature for a continued focus on retention and recruitment within the profession, there is a gap in our current understanding of the career needs and expectations of nurses throughout the career span. The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of Canadian nurses across all career stages, with a focus on their needs as they relate to management relations.

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Design and Methods

This qualitative descriptive study¹² used thematic analysis¹³ to explore the experiences of student, early-career, and mid- to late-career nurses as they relate to career satisfaction and patient care. Data were collected through focus groups held with nurses across 8 Canadian provinces at regularly scheduled provincial labor union meetings between January and May 2015 and the annual Canadian nursing student association meeting.

Data Collection

This study received approval from the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) research committee. The CFNU provincial bodies provided members with an invitation to participate in focus groups for early-career nurses, defined as being employed 0 to 5 years, or for mid- to late-career nurses, defined as being employed for 6 or more years. During each meeting, the researchers facilitated 1 focus group for each career cohort, after obtaining informed consent from participants.

The research team conducted 18 focus groups, for a total sample of 185, in 8 different provinces: 2 focus groups with student nurses, 7 with early-career nurses, and 9 with mid- to late-career nurses. Focus groups were 60 to 90 minutes in length; a semistructured interview guide with questions that explored the nurses' career experiences and expectations was used. Sessions were audiotaped, and detailed notes of the focus groups were taken. Participant demographic information (Table 1) was collected, including age, gender, the number of years in the workplace, their work setting, employment status, and if nursing was their 2nd career.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach¹³ was used to analyze the data from each focus group. The lead investigator and research assistant coded the data into basic concepts that captured intended meaning. Additional team members participated in code verification and data triangulation to enhance methodological rigor. Data were 1st analyzed by cohort and comparisons across the groups made before grouping into common themes. This article presents findings from the theme related to management relations, which was central to career experiences across all cohorts.

Results

Participants across all career cohorts expressed the importance of positive management relations and work environments on job satisfaction and provision of quality patient care.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Student Nurses	
Total	27
Gender	
Male	4
Female	23
Age	
19-29	23
30-40	4
Preferred work setting	
Acute care	17
Long-term care	2
Combination of settings	4
Other	4
Preferred contract status	
Full-time (FT)	23
Part-time (PT)	1
Casual	2
FT/PT/casual	1
2nd career	
Yes	6
No	21
Early-Career Nurses	
Total	58
Gender	
Male	6
Female	52
Age	
20-39 y	47
40-54 y	10
Not stated	1
Preferred work setting	
Acute care	41
Community/home care	6
Long-term care	8
Other	3
Preferred contract status	
FT	35
PT	19
FT/PT	1
Casual	2
Not stated	1
2nd career	
Yes	12
No	45
Not stated	1
Mid- to Late-Career Nurses	
Total	100
Gender	
Male	4
Female	96
Age	
25-49 y	34
≥50 y	62
Not stated	4
Preferred work setting	
Acute care	52
Community/home care	14
Long-term care	23
Other	7
Not stated	4
Preferred contract status	
FT	73
PT	18
FT/PT	3
Casual	4
Not stated	2

(continues)

Table 1. Participant Demographics, Continued

Mid- to Late-Career Nurses	
2nd career	
Yes	16
No	78
Not stated	6

Students

Student participants described a need for a supportive environment upon graduation to aid their transition to practice. Students identified aspiring to start work in an environment where they would be supported to continue to learn and develop skills and competency. As 1 participant explained,

I feel so self-conscious all the time. There is so much I don't know; there's so much I don't know how to do, and I have to say that. When you feel just accepted and wanted despite that, it's really nice.

To develop and refine their skills, the student participants believed that they needed management support to enable a thorough orientation and ensure an environment that was conducive to new graduate transition. As 1 participant shared,

It's a lot about the workplace culture, and as new grads, you need to be in a culture that will support your learning and support your journey to still figuring out what kind of registered nurse (RN) you want to be, because if you're transitioning into your career somewhere where the culture is not positive or not encouraging, it can put up a lot of barriers, and that's not something that you need as a new grad.

Student nurses believed that a supportive environment included mentorship from senior nurses and inclusion as part of the team. They wanted an environment in which mentorship, collaboration, and teamwork were emphasized.

Part of it is the team—I'm talking the team nursing versus the non-team nursing. I think that changes the culture in the workplace too, and when they work together as a team and are constantly, you know, "what do you think of this, this is happening to my patients, X, Y & Z"... I think they're more inclusive of students too, because they already come from a place where "I share with my co-worker all the time"...

Students believed management contributed essential support to nurturing the team dynamic and were pivotal to successful transition to the workforce. As 1 participant described,

I think the best support you can have is that team environment, and that environment has to start

with the floor manager...the person who's always there to be asked questions, always willing to be helpful, walks around and checks on their staff. I think when that person's put in a management position it really helps to foster a collaborative type of environment...

Students expressed a preference to apply for positions in areas where they were confident they would be supported in their transition through dedicated programming and supportive personnel.

Early-Career Nurses

Early-career nurses expected to have strong leadership on their units. They believed that communication and constructive working relationships were necessary to foster a positive workplace environment. They also emphasized how effective management made a significant difference in their work lives. As 1 participant shared,

We had a manager that wasn't an effective manager, and it was not a good place to be, but now we have one who, she worked on that ward for 20 years...what a world of difference. It just feels amazing, like it feels so good for everyone to be there. You know she's going to advocate for us as her nurses on the ward...

However, many participants described being disconnected from managers and disappointed by the lack of support they received from management. One participant explained,

The thing that surprised me was the lack of help from managers. That was my biggest thing. I thought they would be more helpful, but they really aren't; it's basically "yeah, there you go, sink or swim."

Early-career nurses expected frequent contact and positive working relationships with their managers. They assumed that managers would offer guidance, reassurance, feedback, and opportunities for continued education and professional advancement, which often did not occur. As 1 participant expressed,

More performance reviews...to check in with your manager to say "Am I doing okay?"; "What can I change?"; 'cause that hasn't happened... It would confirm for me like "yes I'm doing fine," 'Cause as a new grad, you question yourself a lot.

Early-career nurses described how managers were not visible or in touch with the reality on the floor and that management added workload without consultation and understanding of the frontline impact.

It's all of the new things that management keeps putting on top of us. One more thing we have to do in the day, 1 more flow sheet we have to fill out, 1 more checklist...there seems to be a new thing every

week, and management doesn't come in to see how it actually works.

Participants were disappointed not to be included in unit decision making and believed that management at times imposed policies and practice changes that did not reflect patient-centered care and did not align with what they had learned about teamwork and leadership in school.

Management will push things down the pipe, and we are required to do those things, and patient safety and patient-centered care aren't a priority... It's especially hard coming out of school, because you have all these ideas of how things should go, and you have the textbook in your head.... Actually that's not what we're hired for. We're hired for speeding up patient flow and for LEAN initiatives and things like that, and so that's been pretty hard to push through and stay positive...because we're just starting; we have decades to go.

Early-career participants emphasized the critical importance of manager presence and communication for positive patient and workplace outcomes. The incongruence between their expectations of management in training and the reality on the unit created a strong sense of dissatisfaction at an early stage in their careers.

Mid- to Late-Career Nurses

Mid- to late-career nurses expressed strong dissatisfaction with relationships and interactions with management. Reflecting on their careers and experiences, participants believed that positive relationships with management contributed to a better work environment and experience and, consequently, to lower turnover.

I've worked in many places and I find the places I enjoyed my work the most is where there was a good employer/union relationship, where they worked together...those are also the places that have the most senior staff, the most longevity of staff; they stayed...

Mid- to late-career participants did not feel supported by management to advocate for better patient care and described being discouraged to initiate or suggest changes.

What I find frustrating with my job that makes me rethink what I'm doing is the lack of support... I see some really lousy care—I mean just pathetic, and then you go and you try to be that patient advocate...and you don't get that support [from management]; in fact, if anything—you get punished for it.

These participants described feeling “on their own” to manage unit-level and patient care concerns without manager or team support and describe how important it is to problem solve issues by working

together, with the manager, as a team. This cohort also described not feeling appreciated or respected by management for their commitment to the profession and patients. Participants described wanting respect and verbal commendation over financial remuneration.

I think respect and retention are almost the same thing, and we're not getting it, and it doesn't have to be bonuses financially but bonuses like “here we'll give you lunch today 'cause you guys have been great...” The thoughtfulness is not being put in, and I think that's respect to your nurses. They're not putting the thought into the lifestyle...just the little things. It doesn't have to be financial...

Participants expressed how positive management relations contributed to a positive teamwork environment and reciprocal respect between managers and staff. As 1 participant shared,

When I 1st started my nursing career I worked for a very good employer. She would be short for a night shift, and I would be working an evening shift, and she would say “[name], I don't have anyone. Would you go home and sleep and come back?” and I would do it, and the next day, when I would come back for an evening shift, she would phone up and say “Did you get enough sleep? Was that okay? Thank you very much for doing that.” That meant the world to me. I would have worked anything for that woman and I did actually...

Participants described a change in management visibility over time. As 1 nurse described,

They're not on the floor; they're in an office. That doesn't work. For me, when I found things started changing with management is when they took them (management) off the floor and put them in an office. They need to be there; they need to see, feel, hear, firsthand.

Some mid- to late-career nurses believed that the disconnect between management and nursing staff also stemmed from the increasing presence of non-nurses in nursing management roles.

Many managers are not nurses now. I don't think they realize how to manage a nursing unit or issues related to patient care when their background has nothing to do with healthcare...

Similar to early-career nurses, this cohort described feeling resentment when nonnurse managers introduced policies and practice changes focused more on budgetary considerations than best patient care. One participant stated,

I find in the last few years, there's a “make it look good”—I like to call it that. It's like the system

isn't good, but if you look at our stats, if you look at our policies, if you look at our procedures, everything is lined up... But if you come on the unit, we don't have the staff to look after people. People are getting hurt.

Mid- to late-career nurse participants wanted to be included at the decision-making table and valued because of their experience and central roles as patient advocates but often felt excluded from decisions. The lack of respect, consultation, and consideration of mid- to late-career nurses' expertise in unit decisions strained their relationships with management and decreased job satisfaction.

Discussion

This study identifies the unique management relationship needs of nurses at different stages in their careers and the importance of positive relationships with management and a positive working environment to nurse retention, recruitment, job satisfaction, and patient care for nurses across the career span. Although there is a wealth of intergenerational research, including a recent emphasis on transition support for new graduates,¹⁴⁻¹⁶ there has been little exploration of student experiences and relationships with management. Our study found that students are anticipating supportive managers and work environments to aid their successful transition. A recent systematic review of strategies to support transition emphasizes the responsibility of hiring organizations to proactively offer new-graduate support.¹⁷

Our research found that nurses early in their careers had high expectations of leadership and for support of their continued growth but expressed disappointment with the reality they encountered. New nurses developing leadership roles have described feeling "stranded" and disassociated.¹⁸ For mid- and late-career nurses staying in the profession and returning to the profession after an absence, they were motivated by positive work environments.¹⁹ Participants in this study expected their experience and commitment to the profession to be valued and for management to actualize that respect by seeking their input before implementing changes. Unlike the early-career nurses who hope for more guidance and support, the late-career nurses are disappointed that their expertise and knowledge are not valued in decision making. Despite the rhetoric of teamwork in nursing, top-down and authoritarian models of nursing management communication persist.²⁰ Engagement, visibility, and communication are required from management to ameliorate management-staff relations. Making connections is crucial to gain staff nurse confidence and commit-

ment.²¹ Staff nurses must not only be allowed "seats at the table" but also be encouraged and incentivized to participate in leadership roles throughout their careers.

Limitations

This study was conducted with attendees of the CFNU Provincial member organizations' meetings and student members of the Canadian nursing student association. Participant responses may be impacted by their engagement with these organizations. This study was conducted across 8 provinces/territories in Canada; thus, findings may not be considered representative of other populations or countries. In addition, mid- to late-career nurses were combined in the present study and represent a vast range of years of experience (95 years). One area for future research may be to explore the experiences of each separate cohort to explicate unique experiences in each cohort.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants across all career cohorts expressed the importance of management relations on their career satisfaction and their ability to provide quality patient care. Student participants expressed a lack of confidence as they transitioned into the workplace and a preference for supportive environments where they would feel comfortable asking questions, making mistakes, and continuing to learn. Early-career nurses expected strong leadership on their units and were disappointed to find that management was not in touch with the realities of staff and not supportive of their growth or participation in decision making. Mid- to late-career nurses felt that their meaningful perspectives were excluded and devalued, that patient care suffered when disconnected managers made policy and practice changes with inadequate or absent consultation, and that their commitment and experience was unappreciated.

Management relations are essential to a positive work environment and quality nursing care. Understanding nurses' expectations of managerial support across the career span is an important 1st step toward enhancing the relationships between nurses and management. Having opportunities between managers and nurses to explore needs and clarify roles is essential toward managing expectations. Management-staff contact can be improved through active engagement of frontline nurses, especially as it relates to unit level decision making, that is, financial, policy, and practice. Enhancing management relations with nurses of all career stages focuses on ongoing communication to meet the needs of staff

toward ensuring quality patient care. Having managers that are nurses who are present to support the provision of resources and who ultimately respect the

contribution, expertise, and leadership of all nurses contributes significantly to positive experiences for both nurses and their patients.

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