

Living on the cutting edge: (The compelling culture of OR nursing)

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Introduction

Operating room nursing is a unique, challenging, and often satisfying career. Operating room nurses like the feeling of "living on the cutting edge." They like the challenge of a highly skilled and coordinated atmosphere. They like the respect they engender in their colleagues for their mastery of the skills inherent to operating room nursing.

The purpose in conducting this study was to identify variables that attract, maintain nurses' interest in, and foster work satisfaction within the operating room setting.

Significance

The need for patient safety, coupled with the highly skilled nature of operating room nursing, demands that a consistent flow of new graduates learn the intricacies of this specialty. In order to enhance the image of the nursing profession as a whole, and more specifically operating room nursing, it is imperative that we be able to articulate the rewards, and the sources of these rewards not only to prospective nurses, but to those already in the profession. This study is significant for the following reasons:

- Operating room nurses and operating room nursing are under-researched areas;
- Although work satisfaction has been extensively studied in other areas of nursing, few studies have been conducted in the operating room setting;
- No investigations to date, have addressed what attract nurses to the O.R. and why they stay.

Method

Because the elements of the attraction to, and satisfaction with a career in operating room nursing are relatively unknown, the constant comparative techniques of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used to generate a conceptual framework from the data. Observational and in-depth interview data were coded for substance, categorized and linked to form an integrated framework. Data was collected in the form of unstructured interviews with ten OR nurses. All participants were women whose ages ranged from 25 to 48. Years of experience as an operating room nurse ranged from 11/2 to 20. At the time of the interviews, three nurses were employed on a part-time basis, while the remainder worked full time. Collection sites were from four separate hospitals of varying size in Eastern Canada.

Findings

In the compact, cultural configuration of the operating room, nurses are expected to practice on the cutting edge of their craft. Operating room nurses gain this cutting edge through the central process of *mastering*. In order to become effective, operating room nurses must master the technological skills and unique nature of the work, the compact culture of the operating room, and the isolation from others.

The attractions of OR nursing

The attraction of operating room nursing was found to be dependent upon the participant's basic education. Those nurses fortunate enough to have

an operating room practicum of 4-6 weeks were attracted by the nature of the work, which they described as "exciting, challenging, fast-paced and highly complex." The technical nature of the work was an attraction in itself. Those nurses without the benefit of this type of exposure were willing to take a chance in the operating room in return for full-time employment. One nurse with very limited exposure stated: "I thought the O.R. was going to be monotonous, but it's not; it's anything but."

(Larsen & Brown, 1984), in a study of nurses' work satisfaction found that accurate expectations play an important role when entering a job, in order to avoid unrealistic work expectations and the resultant work dissatisfaction. How can a nurse with only two days exposure have a realistic expectation of what it's like to be an operating room nurse?

Becoming an OR nurse

The process of becoming an operating room nurse is arduous. New operating room nurses describe the first months as "terrifying and extremely stressful." The data tell us that a neophyte operating room nurse must practice her/his craft for 1-2 years before feeling comfortable. Feeling comfortable means not being worried about what might be facing them the next morning when they get to work. As put by one experienced operating room nurse: "God be with you girl...until you get some experience and confidence."

An effective monitoring system where skilled, experienced O.R. nurses act as "grey gorillas" to the novice can help these nurses gain the "tools of the trade" required to be an effective team member.

Work satisfaction

Work satisfaction is a complex concept. Affected by many variables, it can be defined simply as obtaining gratification from one's chosen career or work. Needs that are individual to the differing personalities found within a setting must be met in order that the employees feel good about the work they do and about themselves. One nurse interviewed indicated this by saying: "You need to feel that the work you do is valued; that this work and you are worth something." There is not one simple prescription for making an environment, or a job satisfying. Nor does the task of enhancing work satisfaction rest entirely with management. Individual operating room nurses must reflect upon their needs, and the sources of work satisfaction that are significant to them.

The operating room nurses participating in this study reflected upon how their work meets individual needs, and have identified areas that enhance work satisfaction. The data indicate that mastering the nature of the work and skill such as scrubbing and circulating for complex operative procedures, help complete the role transformation needed to become an operating room nurse.

Mastering the culture of OR nursing, with its norms and values built on the concept of teamwork and the interaction between team members is a source of satisfaction for OR nurses. The concept of teamwork, although not unique to the OR, is indispensable in this setting, as it is tantamount to getting the job done. A smoothly functioning team, with each member fulfilling his/her role, contributes greatly to OR nurses' work satisfaction. On the other hand, when the team breaks down for what ever reason, cohesiveness is threatened and the nurses in this study felt that dissatisfaction results. The tight working conditions of the operating room team tend to magnify the interactions of the various members. One nurse put it this way: "When the team doesn't work well, it becomes very obvious. You just have to look at the faces sometimes - faces that are long and drawn. Everyone is so glum." For example, team-work is highly valued among operating room nurses. A person who prefers to function alone and derives satisfaction from this, may find it difficult to work in a setting that is dependent upon effective team work.

Culture

The isolation from other sections of the hospital environment was found to be a key factor in the formation of the culture of the operating room. The operating room nurses participating in this study perceived little connection between themselves and nurses in other areas. One nurse described it this way: "We [operating room nurses] have different skills, different knowledge and use it in a different way. We perceive things in a different way. We have a whole different focus [from nurses in other areas]. Operating room nurses value their "differentness" and their isolation. They either consciously or unconsciously erect fences to preserve their uniqueness. Maxwell (1979) in a study of elder models and their proteges found that groups fence off their territory in order to protect model importances such as elements of a group culture. To the OR nurse, information about technical skills, "trade secrets," and interactions are factors that are symbolically associated with the specialty. One

nurse said: "I'm not just a nurse, I'm an operating room nurse." Operating room nurses erect fences to protect their turf from those who do not understand the essence of OR nursing.

Mastering

Mastering the stress intrinsic to operating room nursing appears to be linked to mastering of skills. The data indicated that as the OR nurse progressively masters the skills needed to do the enterprise, the perceived level of stress decreases. This development is seen as another origin of work satisfaction.

Two stages of the process of *mastering* were identified. The first stage is the gaining of the technical skills and procedures which are the heart and soul of OR nursing. The OR nurse knows that he or she is mastering the skills when "the big cases" are seen as a challenge rather than looked upon with dread and apprehension. The second stage of mastering is accomplished when the nurse acquires the knowledge and ability to act as a mentor to a protegee. This ability to act as "a grey gorilla" is cited as being a source of satisfaction to the expert operating room nurse.

The constant challenge and triumph of the process of *mastering* were found to be the variables that attracted and retained operating room nurses to the setting. The consequences of *mastering* are O.R. nurses who are confident in their abilities, respected for their skills and satisfied with their work. From this comes the power to work as an equal team member and to control and change their working environment in order to meet their needs.

Perhaps the most significant impact of work dissatisfaction on direct patient care is the depersonalization of the patient. The nurses interviewed felt that, when unhappy with their work situation, operating room nurses have a tendency to attend only to the technical aspects of their job.

Implications

Operating room nurses secure the majority of their work satisfaction from the doing of the work itself. Although the OR is an isolated and compact culture, the sources of work satisfaction may mirror those of nursing in other areas. Nursing, as a profession is continually striving to reach new pinnacles in the standard of patient care. In order to achieve this peak, mastery of the skills fundamental to nursing of all specialties is critical. The cultural importance of the workplace must not be overlooked. Each

nursing unit has values and norms unique unto itself. These need to be identified and made known, not only to new staff, but to seasoned veterans as well. If we, as nurses are able to combat the current nursing shortage, we must be able to verbalize the potential and realistic rewards that come with being a nurse. In order for this to transpire, we must help mold the workplace into an environment offering rewards and incentives for excellence in nursing care.

Recommendations

Recommendations to promote work satisfaction among OR nurses include expanding the traditional role of the OR nurse to include peri-operative nursing. This role may help dispel some of the myths that surround OR nursing, and increase the visibility of the OR nurse. The opportunity to work hours that enable the nurse to fulfill the desired commitment at home while remaining an active operating room nurse is significant. The cost of developing a highly skilled operating room nurse is substantial. It is not cost effective to have operating room nurses transfer to another area in order to gain suitable working hours.

The opportunity to form cohesive teams that function well as a unit should be explored. Because OR nurses work so closely, staff must be able to work well together. Conflicting personalities working on the same team detract from efficient functioning and lessen the perception of work satisfaction.

The reinstatement of the OR experience into basic nursing education would help to clarify the expectations of new graduates thinking of choosing OR-nursing as a career.

In conclusion, this study has provided insight into the sources of work satisfaction among OR nurses. Operating room nurses derive satisfaction from *mastering* the role transition as they acquire the complex skills required to do the work. They enjoy the nature of the work itself, even with the inherent stress. The OR nurse gains satisfaction from the integration of self into the unique culture of OR nursing. Living on the cutting edge provides the OR nurse with a feeling of satisfaction. This cutting edge is achieved through the process of *mastering*.

Author

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