



## **Challenges to Good Work in Nursing: A Cross Cultural Comparison of Factors Influencing Quality of Care in a Health Related Profession**

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### **Abstract**

Good work is defined as work that is effective, ethical, and engaging. The purpose of this review is to explore the meaning of good work and the strategies used to sustain commitment to quality care among nurses in different cultures. Guided interviews were conducted to examine the meaning of good work among nurses from the United States, Iran, and Hong Kong. Nurses in all settings associated good work with quality care. Teamwork and a positive work environment supported nurses' commitment to quality care. Conflicting values, staff shortage resulting in long hours and undesirable nurse-to-patient ratios, fragmented care, and lack of autonomy contributed to the distress nurses experienced across cultures. Other obstacles to good work were unique to a particular culture. Role ambiguity, lack of recognition, limited equipment and medications and poor professional relationships and were problematic for nurses in Iran. Unclear future development of the nursing profession and conflict among health professionals were impediments to good work in Hong Kong. Competencies required to sustain good work and promote quality care included team building, self-reflection, goal setting, and communication skills. Across cultures nurses expressed the need for greater emphasis on the core values of the nursing profession to ensure development of performance competencies necessary for the fulfillment of nursing's commitment to quality care in a global world. To achieve this end, a multi-site pilot study was conducted to evaluate the usefulness of a toolkit in promoting professional development and the competencies required to perform good work in nursing. This review points to the need for development of a common understanding of nursing's core values and the competencies needed to support nurses' commitment to quality care across cultures.

### **Background**

In 1995, a team of researchers from the Good Work Project at Harvard University embarked on a study of the concept of "good work," "... work that is both excellent in quality and responsible to the broader society" (Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan, & Gardner, 2004). Researchers interviewed young



and veteran professionals from a variety of disciplines, including journalism, genetics, theater, and business, to learn more about the strategies individuals use to sustain their good work at a time when market forces and greater emphasis on productivity and profit make commitment to quality work difficult. They have found that most workers take pride in what they do and that they aim to do work that makes a difference and serves society well. They also learned that good work is influenced by professional standards, mentors, peer behavior, internal values, and social values. Difficulty arises when conflict arises among forces making good work challenging.

### ***Defining Good Work in Nursing***

Good work in nursing is defined as caring for and assisting persons in achieving a level of wholeness and health that would enable them to achieve their desired goals for their life plan (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 1996). To the extent that professional caring is essential to helping persons achieve their desired life goals, nurses committed to good work must be skilled in professional caring. Most nurses enter the profession seeking to do good work. However, once they enter the workforce, they are expected to cope with rapid change in a complex health care system that values the 'bottom line' and efficiency. Nurses struggle to maintain their commitment to excellence in nursing practice as they cope with challenges, such as diminished resources, time constraints, perceived threats to quality of care, and the ever increasing emphasis on the business of health care. Good work is more likely to occur when the core values of the nurse are aligned with the core values of the profession.

In a study examining the concept of good work in nursing in the West, both entering and experienced nurses described providing quality care for patients as the primary purpose of their work (Miller, 2006). When asked to identify sources of support for good work in nursing, participants in the study cited formative influences, such as role models or mentors. Parents often served as role models, particularly for young nurses. One young nurse remarked, "I watched my mother take care of people before they had to go for tests. They were anxious and she made them feel better. My mom was my role model." Experienced nurses were more likely to report the enduring influence of mentors. A nurse executive recalled the influence of a mentor with whom she worked early in her career. Miller (2006) reports the comments of this nurse executive:

She was a nurse leader in the organization who had very strong patient care qualities, always made sure that we were doing the right things for the patients. She was very up front, honest, and instilled in me that whatever you do, always be true to yourself. (p. 476)

In addition to role models and mentors, nurses reported that a supportive work environment was essential for the performance of good work. Team building, cohesiveness, and shared values were among the leading characteristics of a supportive work environment. Frequently cited obstacles to good



work in nursing included the nursing shortage, demands on time, and concerns about patient safety. Entering professional nurses reported distress associated with conflicting values among team members, particularly when value conflict influenced quality of care.

### ***Global Perspectives of Good Work in Nursing***

Nurses in Iran are committed to protecting patients' rights through work that is accountable and patient-centered (Joolae, Tschudin, Nikbakht-Nasrabadi, & Parsa-Yekta, 2008). Honoring their commitment to patients' rights is challenging for Iranian nurses who often have a nurse-to-patient ratio in the one nurse to 38 patients range. Because of such nurse-to-patient ratios, Iranian families often stay with their loved ones in the hospital to help provide needed care, such as hygiene and other activities of daily living. Families experience financial hardship as a result of lost time at work as a result of staying in the hospital with their loved one. One nurse stated, "The patients' companions play a significant role in meeting the patients' basic needs and protecting their rights. We can never meet all the patients' needs, especially during night shifts. Sometimes I'm not even able to bring a glass of water to a patient. I'm working all night, but the workload is constantly high" (Joolae et al., 2008, p. 58).

Role ambiguity, lack of recognition, and poor professional relationships are also major obstacles to good work for nurses in Iran. Nurses stated that they often lack a formal contract for work. Despite these obstacles, nurses reported that it was unlikely that they would leave the profession. A core value is the call from God to serve others and to assure a good life on this earth and in the afterlife. The idea of never compromising one's commitment to God reflects the strong religious commitment of Iranian nurses. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2007), persons embedded in a strong religious culture often view the call to a profession as coming from God. In their study investigating spiritual aspects of the nursing profession, Ravari, Vanaki, Houmann, and Kazemnejad (2009) found that nurses view patients as gifts from God. Nurses who care well for patients experience a sense of spiritual satisfaction that helps them sustain their commitment to the profession despite challenges.

Nurses in Hong Kong cited the importance of being patient-centered, ensuring quality care, and managing work assignments well as characteristics of good work in nursing (Pang et al., 2009). Impediments to good work included unclear perceptions of the future of nursing, conflict in the work environment, and unrealistic expectations of patients. To overcome these impediments, nurses in Hong Kong stressed the importance of optimizing relationships with co-workers and participating in ongoing self-reflection. One new nurse stressed the importance of self-evaluation which involves considering ways one can improve care to become more effective and efficient while recognizing the importance of setting high goals for performance. Across cultures, nurses stressed the importance of professional development as nurses strive to achieve excellence.



### ***Meeting the Challenge: Preparing the Next Generation of Nurses***

To address the professional development needs of entering professional nurses, a multi-site pilot study to address good work in nursing was conducted (Miller et al., 2008). The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of a curricular toolkit addressing major themes associated with good work, such as beliefs, values, goals, responsibilities, excellence, ethics, and mentors or role models on students' perceptions of these themes and the role these themes play in supporting good work in nursing. This study is affiliated with the GoodWork® Project ([www.goodworkproject.org](http://www.goodworkproject.org)), a research initiative evaluating the usefulness of the GoodWork® Toolkit in promoting good work in a variety of professions.

Participants were students enrolled in three baccalaureate nursing programs. A total of 82 students participated in the study. Participants completed a survey and brief writing assignment addressing attitudes related to good work prior to exposure to the GoodWork® Toolkit. The GoodWork® Toolkit consists of eight chapters addressing themes associated with good work, such as beliefs, values, goals, responsibilities, mentors, role models, and excellence. Students received instruction related to each theme. They then reflected on cases about individuals who struggle to maintain a commitment to good work. Students maintained a reflective journal and they participated in focused discussion. In the first phase of data analysis, each researcher analyzed site-specific data independently. In the second phase of analysis researchers teleconferenced to discuss and reflect on analyses. The researchers have identified emerging themes.

Participants described "good work" as work that is satisfying and enjoyable. It is something that requires going beyond the expected. As one participant stated, "Good work is doing your best work. I think good work takes extra effort and a little more time but in the end it pays off." Several students stated good work requires dedication and commitment but it is rewarding and it holds meaning for the worker. After reflecting on a case addressing challenges to one's values in the workplace, students stated that perseverance, courage, faith, honesty, hard work, commitment to quality, and integrity are required to remain true to one's values. Accountability emerged as a characteristic of a good worker. Several students acknowledged the importance of recognizing the consequences of one's actions and learning from one's mistakes. To compromise one's values would be a threat to one's integrity. As one student put it, "Say 'no' to what does not feel comfortable." "It is important for YOU to know you are doing a good job". Students reported recognition, wealth, power, fame and success as least important when ranking values needed as a nurse. One student stated "What is important is to do things for the sake of helping, not seeking recognition."

The majority of students stated that personal values and professional values are the same. Personal values guide one's work and serve as the motivation to do good work. Serving others and showing compassion and caring are values important in nursing. When responding to the question about



becoming closely involved in the lives of the people one serves, several students remarked that this is an acceptable practice but one should not cross the professional line. A student stated, "In nursing it is okay to become close to patients to better serve them." However, several students cited 'burnout' as a risk of becoming too involved. One student remarked, "When you get burned out, you are not able to do work effectively."

Students reflected on the concept of loyalty. They explored the idea of responsibility for self and for work and considered strategies that encourage responsibility. Again, students cited personal values as the primary source of understanding one's responsibility for self and for work. In nursing, students identified the risk for conflict among responsibilities to the patient, the institution, and self or family. They expressed concern about competing loyalties involving deep-rooted family values, social pressures, and pressure from those in authority. When asked about strategies they would use to resolve conflict among competing values, most stated they would not compromise their deep values "in order to succeed." Remaining true to self was cited as a major source of conflict resolution. Students also identified prioritization and reflection as strategies they would use to encourage responsibility in work.

When asked what kind of worker they would like to become, students responded that they wanted to be well-rounded workers who serve as "a source of hope" for the people they serve. They wanted to be passionate about their work and become someone "others can trust." After reflecting on the chapters in the GoodWork® Toolkit, students' perceptions of good work seemed to indicate a growing understanding of the impact of their work on others. They saw good work as work that is goal driven and adheres to high standards but it is also work that, "...does everything possible to help another person." A good worker, "...takes pride in the quality of work."

### ***Discussion***

Across cultures, good work in nursing is viewed as work that promotes the well-being of patients. However, nurses often experience impediments to the performance of good work. Nurses from the United States, Iran, and Hong Kong expressed concern about the influence of diminished resources and heavy workloads on quality of care. Nurses in Iran and Hong Kong cited lack of recognition and autonomy and conflict in the work environment as obstacles to good work.

Research has shown that most nurses enter the profession with traditional values, such as altruism and caring (DeCooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, DuBois, Caers, & Jegers, 2008). To sustain these values, entering professional nurses often seek expressions of gratitude and recognition for one's work (Cooman et al., 2008; Rognstad & Aasland, 2007). Greater satisfaction with one's work is associated with autonomy, professional practice, the ability to influence decisions, and a positive perception of the value of nursing (Horton, Tschudin, & Forget, 2007; O'Brien-Palla, Duffield, & Hayes, 2006).



Nurses aspiring to perform good work need support during their formative years. Nurse educators must seek ways to foster the moral development of students aspiring to achieve excellence and care well for those whom they serve. Student nurses who reflected on the meaning of good work in nursing expressed characteristics of good work that are consistent with findings in other studies (Bjorkstrom, Johansson, & Athlin, 2006; Smith & Godfrey, 2002). A caring attitude, strong moral character, and competency are seen as characteristics of a good nurse who performs good work. Having students critically think through case studies, self reflect, and engage in discussions, helps students identify ethical questions involved in practical problems which helps foster the soundness of nurses' ethical beliefs ( Allmark, 2005). This practical approach better prepares nurses for challenges they may face in practice. It is clear that educational tools are needed to foster professional development for students and nurses entering the profession. Interventions are also needed to enhance job satisfaction and retain nurses who have entered the profession committed to excellence.

### ***Conclusion***

Good work is most satisfying when nurses are able to provide quality care consistent with the core values of the profession. However, nurses confront challenges in the work setting on a daily basis. These challenges may be unique to one's particular culture. Research addressing good work in nursing across cultures must take into account the moral, religious, political, and cultural aspects of good work in nursing as understood in different cultures. Early research addressing the effectiveness of the GoodWork® Toolkit indicates that the toolkit is an effective means to prompt reflection and encourage high quality and meaningful work among student nurses. Additional research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Good Work® Toolkit in different cultures and among nurses at various levels of professional development.



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