

Career Motivation in Newly Licensed Registered Nurses: What Makes Them Remain

Zarata Mann Banks

G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi, USA

Jessica H. Bailey

University of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, USA

Despite vast research on newly licensed registered nurses (RNs), we don't know why some newly licensed registered nurses remain in their current jobs and others leave the nursing profession early in their career. Job satisfaction, the most significant factor emerging from the literature, plays a significant role in nurses' decisions to remain in their current jobs. This study examined the lived experiences of newly licensed registered nurses early in their careers. The researcher interviewed 14 newly licensed registered nurses to ask why they chose nursing as a profession and to determine factors that would influence their choice to stay in nursing as a career. Data were collected from newly licensed registered nurses through in-depth, face-to-face interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. Data analysis identified the emerging themes of altruism, self-fulfillment, challenging career, and the influence of role models as determining factors for nurses staying in the field. Findings suggest that those in positions of healthcare management should consider how they can create a workplace environment that provides newly licensed registered nurses the opportunity to fulfill these employment expectations. Key Words: Newly Licensed Registered Nurses, Career Choice, Motivation, Retention, and Qualitative Research

Introduction

Nurses around the globe represent the largest group of health professionals (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Nurses are described as veritable caregivers and the strength of our healthcare system (Gordon, 2005). However, the issue of recruitment and retention in nursing is a worldwide concern (Lai, Peng, & Chang, 2006). With a forecasted national nursing shortage that will intensify over the next decade, nursing leaders are looking for approaches that will attract and retain the newest generation of nurses (Halfer, 2007). Camerino, Conway and Van de Heijden (2006) suggest that new and creative ways of encouraging nurses to remain in nursing are urgently needed because of the increasing complexities of healthcare delivery, and the aging population.

One of the most perplexing healthcare retention issues is keeping newly licensed nurses from leaving after just a year or two of employment in the clinical setting (Zucker, Goss, Williams, Bloodworth, Lynn, Denker, et al., 2006). Kovner, Brewer, Fairchild, Poornima, Hongsoo and Djukic (2007) presented evidence that 13% of newly licensed

RNs had changed principal jobs after one year, and 37% reported that they felt ready to change jobs. Nurses leave the profession mainly because of low pay and poor job satisfaction (DiMeglio, Padula, & Piatek, 2005). Therefore, nurse leaders are faced with two challenges: to recruit sufficiently qualified nurses and to establish rewarding work cultures that promote retention. Recruiting a younger generation of nursing staff members and meeting retention demands of cross-generational nurses will be a challenge like no other previously seen in healthcare (Cordinez, 2002).

Newly licensed nurses' recruitment and retention into the workplace are fundamental strategies for ensuring that healthcare systems have the continued capacity to deliver patient care (Berliner & Ginzberg, 2002). Understanding why newly licensed registered nurses choose to remain in nursing is an essential component of recruitment and retention strategies. Despite a recent four year trend of increasing nursing school enrollment and graduation of qualified nurses (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2005), the latest data on the shortage of RNs in the United States is estimated to reach about 500,000 by 2025 (Buerhas, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2000). Hecker (2005) predicts that more than one million new and replacement nurses will be needed by the year 2014. The problem is that many of the newly licensed nurses will not remain in nursing and will choose to leave the profession within four years of graduation from a nursing program (Sochalski, 2002). In a study by Bowles and Candela (2005), 30% of newly licensed RNs left their first nursing position within one year of employment, and 57% left their first nursing position within two years of employment.

The nursing shortage and the high incidence of turnover among newly licensed nurses within the first year of employment need to be investigated. It is well documented that nurses are leaving the profession because they are dissatisfied with current working conditions and not because they are disenchanted with the ideal of nursing, which originally attracted them to the profession (Lynn & Redman, 2005; Strachota, Normandin, O'Brien, Clary, & Krukow, 2003). There is limited research that addresses newly licensed registered nurses' career choices post graduation. The future of nursing rests in the ability to recruit and retain upcoming generations to the profession. Currently, however, there is limited knowledge concerning what influences the decisions of newly licensed registered nurses to remain in nursing. Thus, the objective of this study was to identify factors that influence newly licensed registered nurses' decision to remain in nursing.

Review of the Literature

The shortage of people entering professional nursing, nurses' dissatisfaction, and high turnover of newly licensed registered nurses are issues of concern. The national shortage in the nursing workforce highlights the critical importance of encouraging nurses to remain in practice. Evidence suggests that a shortage of nurses is detrimental not only to quality of patient care, but also to staff morale, which in turn affects staff retention (Wilson, 2006). The socialization and assimilation of newly licensed nurses into the healthcare system is a pivotal event that influences the retention of nurses (Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalaski, & Silber, 2002). Professional socialization and work readiness are contributing factors to the retention of newly licensed registered nurses.

The transition from student to new nurse is a vital period in several ways. It is the quality of this transitional experience that is likely to influence new nurse retention (Clare & van Loon, 2003; Duchscher, 2001; Ewens, 2003). Professional socialization, a potential buffer to the effects of reality shock, includes the acquisition of knowledge, skills, identity, occupational traits, values, norms, and self-concept (Mamchur & Myrick, 2003). The process of professional socialization, from career choice to transition to enculturation to the practice setting is influenced by others, especially other nurses (Beck, 2000; Hinds & Harley, 2001). It is this initial professional socialization of nurses that will determine the success or failure of retaining new nurses in the healthcare workplace.

The increasing complexity of health services and the acuity of patient care create an expectation by the healthcare organization that the new nurse will “hit the ground running” (Cowin & Hengstberger-Sims, 2006, p. 61). Furthermore, Cowin and Hengstberger-Sims believe the workplace expects newly licensed nurses to quickly fulfill their potential as knowledgeable workers, but the health organization remunerates newly licensed nurses at the lowest possible pay scale. These researchers asserted that incongruencies such as high level of stress related to responsibility and high workloads paired with minimum pay compound the effects of reality shock of nurses new to the field.

The healthcare workplace demands work readiness from its newest nurses and the partnership of responsibility for work readiness between nursing education and the workplace can be described as precarious. The strategies of mentorship and preceptorship have been embraced within many healthcare organizations as a means of increasing work readiness, decreasing the effects of reality shock and lessening the possibility of new nurse attrition (Greenwood, 2000).

The period that separates a novice practitioner from an advanced beginner is one which requires support, guidance and constant supervision by experienced individuals to ensure newly licensed nurses develop competently and safely, both personally and professionally. Reality shock is a concept well studied in nursing transition to practice; however, few studies have focused specifically on early socialization and the link to nurses’ interpretation of the reality of nursing as a career choice (Price, 2009).

Throughout the literature, job satisfaction was the most consistent predictor of nurses’ intentions to remain employed (Sourdif, 2004). Shields and Ward (2001) found that nurses who reported overall dissatisfaction with their job had a 65% higher probability of intending to leave than satisfied nurses. Consistently, direct positive relationships have been found between job satisfaction and nurses’ intentions to remain employed (Aiken et al., 2002; Shields & Ward; Sourdif, 2004). Most studies also reported a positive direct relationship between nurses’ intentions to remain employed and specific components of job satisfaction, including satisfaction with pay and benefits (Cowin, 2002; Shields & Ward), satisfaction with scheduling, satisfaction with control (autonomy) and responsibility, and satisfaction with professional opportunities (Cowin; Shields & Wards).

In addition, a direct relationship has been found between nurses’ organizational commitment and nurses’ intentions to remain employed (Ingersoll, Olsan, Drew-Cates, Devinnery, & Davies, 2002; Sourdif, 2004). Ingersoll et al. found relationships between favorable perceptions of work group combined with increased levels of job satisfaction to nurses’ organizational commitment. Nurses who perceived their work groups as

supportive and cohesive were found to be less critical of their organizations and more likely to remain attached to their organizations. The level of commitment nurses have to their organizations has been shown to be correlated with work group cohesion (Chan & Morrison, 2000; Ingersoll et al.). Positive work relationships, effective nurse-physician collaboration, and high levels of work group cohesion have been found to contribute to higher job satisfaction and have been found to be significant determinants of nurses' intentions to remain employed (Chan & Morrison; Ingersoll et al.; Shader, Broome, Broome, West, & Nash, 2001).

Nurse burnout has been found to be inversely associated with both job satisfaction and nurses' intentions to remain employed (Aiken et al., 2002; Shader et al., 2001). Aiken, et al. found that 43% of nurses who reported high levels of burnout and dissatisfaction also intended to leave their jobs within one year. Shader et al. found relationships between nurse burnout, job stress, work group cohesion and nurses' intentions to remain employed. Specifically, higher levels of job stress and burnout coupled with lower work group cohesion served as a strong predictor of nurses being less likely to remain employed in their current healthcare setting.

Evidence exists of a relationship between the following characteristics of nurses and their intention to remain employed: age (Shields & Ward, 2001), specialization (Chan & Morrison, 2000), and years of experience as a nurse (Chan & Morrison; Larrabee, Janny, Ostrow, Witbrow, Hobbs, & Burant, 2003). Nurses were found to be more likely to remain employed when they were older, worked in specialized clinical areas, and had more years of nursing experience. Nurses with higher levels of education were found to be less likely to remain employed with their current employers (Shields & Ward).

Methodology

As an experienced nurse with ten years in clinical nursing and five years in administrative nursing this is a topic of great interest to me. In my current supervisory role it is alarming to realize the current and predicted shortage of nurses in the healthcare environment. Having experienced once being the newly licensed registered nurse, I am able to sympathize with those who are novices to the nursing profession. I also recognize the need to understand these individuals, what motivates them in their career choices, and the imperative to design a work place that attracts and retains them. Fortunately this was a topic I was able to explore for completion of my doctoral studies.

The purpose of this study was to explore newly licensed nurses' decisions to enter nursing as a career and to identify factors that influence their decision to stay in nursing as a career. A qualitative, naturalistic design with a phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to enable the researcher (the first author) to explore the lived experiences of the sample population being studied. The researcher used a purposeful sampling strategy for this study, and the sample size was determined by recognition of attainment of theoretical saturation after fourteen interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval from the University Medical Center for the study, the researcher interviewed a sample of full-time newly licensed registered nurse with one to two years of working experience in a hospital.

The researcher solicited nurse participation in this study by asking for volunteers from two hospitals. She first contacted nurse executives of the hospitals by letter and/or telephone for permission to conduct the study. The researcher then visited each hospital and met with these executives, who assisted in the recruitment process of nurse participation for this study by giving potential participants who met the criteria of having successfully passed the National Council for Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses (NCLEX) and having completed 12 months of nursing practice were given an informational letter created by the researcher. The informational letter outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures to be conducted within the scope of the study, and the rights as participants in the study. Individuals were asked to contact the researcher for more information, if interested.

The researcher scheduled individual interviews sessions in quiet, private locations at the participants' place of employment. She then conducted semi-structured in-depth interview with each participant to gather contextual truths through rich descriptions of their reflections of remembered experiences (Morse, 1994). She used guiding questions in order to bracket the research topic and also to aid in collecting data that would be useful in describing the phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). Participants were given fictitious names to assure confidentiality in data collection and analysis.

The researcher made audio recordings each interview and transcribed them verbatim after each interview and prior to conducting any subsequent interviews. The process of transcribing all the audio recordings assisted the researcher with becoming familiar with the data during the collection and analysis phase.

Data Analysis

The researcher first listened to each participant's oral description of the topic under investigation. She then transcribed each interview verbatim from the audiotapes. Immersion in the data was essential for the researcher to make meaning out of the participants' stories. She extracted significant statements and used memoing to begin formulating meaning out of the transcripts. The researcher next moved to identifying key concepts and clustering emerging themes. The researcher then constructed thematic portrayals of the experiences of the participants.

The researcher shared emerging themes and outliers at the individual level with some of the participants during follow-up interviews to validate that the descriptions actually depicted their lived experiences. During the follow-up interview, she also asked participants to read through the transcribed interviews and make comments if necessary, adding to the credibility of the study.

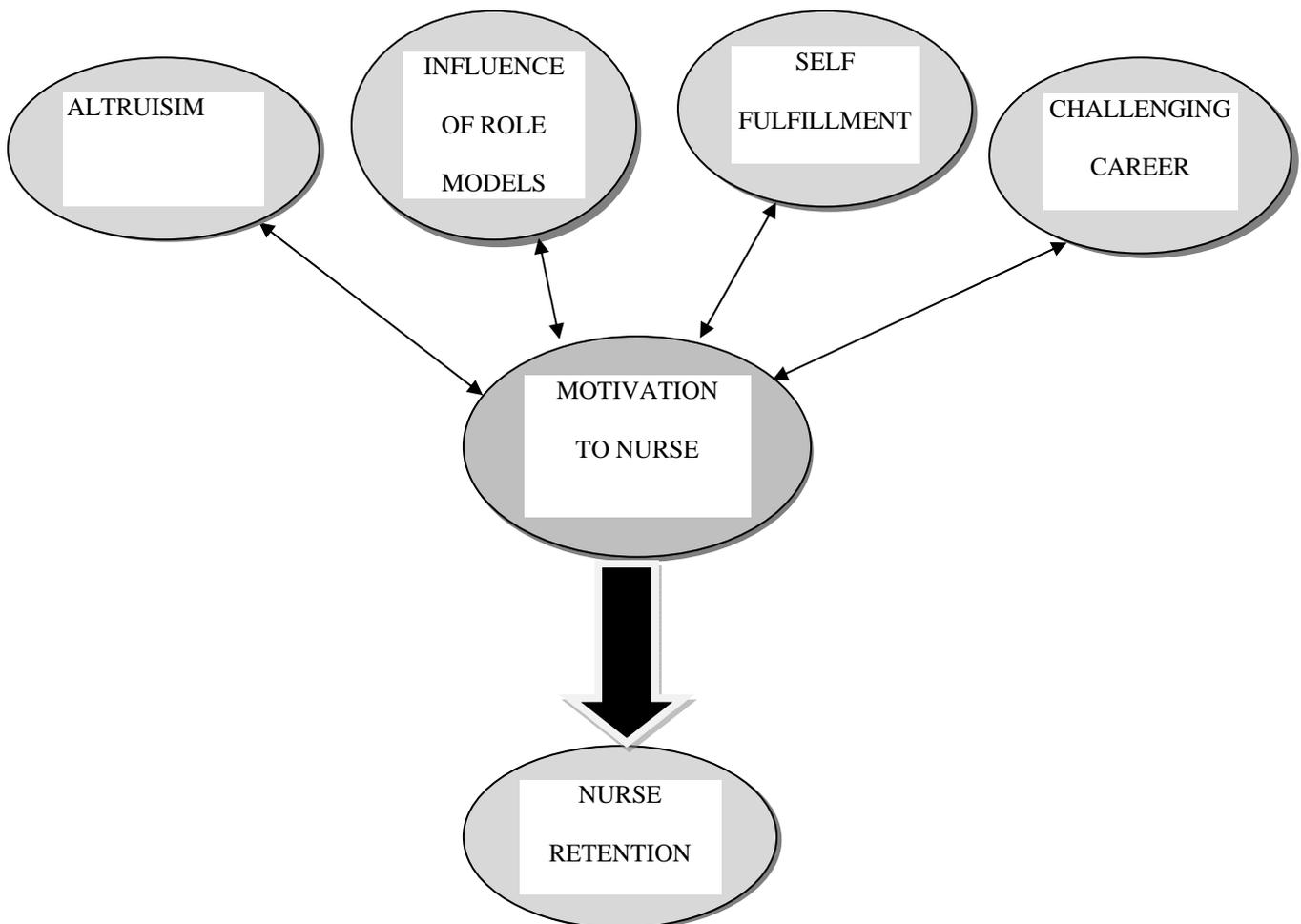
After verification of the themes and sub-themes by these participants, the researcher continued her analysis of the data. The researcher reviewed and reflected on the significant statements, formulated meanings, and themes to compose a description of newly licensed registered nurses' career motivation. This description included explaining the themes in a narrative format. This description contributes to an understanding of why some newly licensed registered nurses' choose to remain in their current nursing jobs in spite of the challenges that have led others to leave the profession.

Credibility of the findings was strengthened not only by the member checking with a small sample of participants in the study but also by means of peer debriefing with a peer coder. After data collection the peer coder and researcher discussed and debated the process of theme extraction and code assignment until consensus was reached. In addition, a detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the process of design, data collection and analysis.

Findings

Newly licensed registered nurses articulated that the motivation for remaining in nursing includes knowing your calling in life and having the desire to nurture others who are in need. There was an associated feeling of fulfillment when providing competent and safe care. New nurses thrived on support from experienced nurses and from patients who fostered their development of self-confidence and feelings of competence.

The overall essence of newly licensed registered nurses' motivation for remaining in nursing as a profession was understood as an altruistic responsibility to the greater good of the profession. The experiences of the newly licensed registered nurses who participated in this study will be described in the context of four main themes.



Findings indicate that the motivation to enter nursing and remain in nursing is largely influenced by four factors. Participants in this study were eager to share, in their own words, their stories that illuminate these motivational factors. Embedded in their stories were the following factors that influence a motivational behavior to choose nursing as a career and to stay in nursing, despite a demanding work environment: altruism, self fulfillment, challenging career and the influence of role models.

Altruism

Altruism, described in various forms, was a significant influencing factor shared among the majority of the participants. This altruistic desire to be a nurse focused on the vocation of nursing as an opportunity to help others. Some participants recalled from early childhood being driven by a feeling of obligation to become a nurse or having had a calling to be a nurse.

A 35 year old married female registered nurse with one year medicine floor nursing experience was motivated to remain in nursing through determination to be a registered nurse since the age of five. She shared that part of her motivation stemmed from the fact it gives her pleasure.

I have always wanted to be a nurse since the age of five...I enjoy taking care of people, taking care of patients.....

Similarly, the desire to help others was expressed in a married 39 year old female registered nurse with one of year surgical care nursing experience. She expressed the intention and determination for remaining in nursing as follows:

I have always wanted to be a nurse and it is in my soul. I went to _____ University I went with the intentions of becoming a nurse and I am determined to remain a nurse because of the things I went to get where I am today..... to be a nurse. My life experiences motivate me to stay in my place- which is nursing.

An obligation to nursing was shared by a 40 year old married female registered nurse with one year of surgical floor experience. She described her reason for staying in nursing in terms of a feeling of obligation:

I feel obligated to nursing..... I know I am good and I love to take care of patients.

A calling to nursing as a career was described by a 27 year old single registered nurse with one year of critical care experience. She stated her motivation to be a nurse was in response to answering a calling from God:

Everyone has a calling in life...I believe God called me to nurse and since I have been a nurse it is just like accepting his calling similar to minister accepting his calling and since I have done that he has truly blessed

me.....It is really what God wants me to do and when I really go to work I don't really want any rewards here on earth and I say God help me to do you want me to do and when I do something good I want people to see the God in me. That is reason why I continue to nurse.

A newly registered nurse verbalized her understanding of the importance of documenting care for the patient but revealed that her motivation for remaining in nursing is caring for patients at the bedside. She was very clear about how she sets her priorities when working on the floor:

Caring at the bedside.... I know charting is important but I put it off to last because I need to be there for the patients and family members.....to make them comfortable...

Another nurse with one year of nursing experience on a surgical unit explained that nursing is not just what she does for a living, but rather it is who she is. She described this in the following words:

I have gotten attached and it is like an arm or limb because it is just a part of what I do my being. It has become a part of my life.....it is like second nature to me taking care of patients.

Self-Fulfillment

Self-fulfillment is revealed in the responses of the newly licensed registered nurses who participated in this study. In particular, this motivating factor is evident when a patient expresses his or her appreciation to the nurse, or the nurse's sense of self satisfaction is realized through the results of their efforts. Several nurses voiced the feeling of appreciation from patients and family members. This theme centered on the recognition of an individual's need to be appreciated for their efforts. Being thanked and appreciated for providing care is illustrated in the following quotations:

The patient and/or family member that tell you thank-yousay I really appreciate you....that is the only thing that keeps me going because this job is very stressful.

I like the feedback I get.....I like to working with people it really makes you feel real good helping. One day, an old man shook my hand and said 'thank you' and that made my day. The only thing I did was empty his Foley bag every hour and he said you don't understand what that meant to me.

When I take care of my patientone out of fifty that can laugh and say thank-you makes me take care of one hundred more patients.... that is my motivation.

The satisfaction I get from my patients is what cause me to keep going.... and even the family members because if they see me out they will say hey, hey, I remember you ...you are the nurse who took good care of me or my family that is what keep me going because family members will remember me and I have seen people come up to me and I would not even remember them or their family and they say you were goodthat is what keep me going.

This theme of self fulfillment was expressed consistently among participants. The need to believe that they could contribute to improvement in a patient's health status was monumental with participants. Participants voiced the need for a feeling that they had achieved something and had made a difference in patient outcomes. Many stories reflected the desire to provide competent and safe care, to be the patient advocate, and to be able to make sure all the patient's needs were met. Four participants described a feeling of satisfaction about providing competent and safe care. These nurses expressed a sense of fulfillment in seeing the patient get better and knowing that the patient had relied on them:

The most motivating factor for me is being a patient advocate and taking care of the patientI feel good about providing great care to my patients.

It is wanting to do it right and give the patient my best and try to look at them as if they were my mom and dad..... Give the best patient caregive the best quality care. I try to do it right the first time.....I want to be the best in my field.

Just knowing that I am helping them and seeing them get better helps me stay here.

The patients that come in with something different and they rely on me. You are all they have and you are the person they see the most and to watch them leave the hospital gives me satisfaction with a purpose.

Challenging Career

The excitement of an ever changing work environment that drew many into nursing also served as a factor for individuals choosing to remain in nursing. Nursing was perceived as providing an exciting learning environment where one actually gets to experience advances in healthcare as well as technological advances during the day to day treatment of patients. Moreover, nursing units were perceived as providing a setting where newly licensed RNs routinely experience human anatomy and disease processes and have the opportunity learn something new every day. The dimensions of this theme included enjoying a variety in the practice settings, having opportunities to learn new things, and experiencing something different every day. The importance of having a variety of options was expressed as preventing the exposure to burnout. A nurse

explicitly expressed the importance of having something different everyday keeping her motivated in nursing:

It is something different everyday it is never the same. I had a job that was easy, I did the same thing every day, and I got to the point that I hated it but nursing is about something new and different.

Another new nurse described her desire to continue learning new things as her incentive for remaining in nursing:

The learning aspect of nursing.....because you are constantly learning something new. I want to know everything and I want to conquer that before I move on to something else. I don't feel like I have conquered nursing, I am not sure if I ever will conquer nursing. I love the constant learning.

Yet another participant described her need for constant growth to keep her going.

This field is constantly changing and will never stay the same. This is a field that I can grow in.

Influence of Role Models

The influence of role models played an important part in the decisions of newly licensed registered nurses to remain in nursing as a career. Participants told stories about high school advisors and other role models such as grandparents, preceptors, and parents playing a pivotal role in their career decisions. This influence was illustrated in the following quotation:

My grandmother taught meanything worth having is worth working for and hard work is a part of life and you are a nurse for life.....it's your calling in life..... I keep her words in my heart.

Having family members in the healthcare field influenced this newly licensed registered nurse as stated:

Well, I knew long time ago that I wanted be a nurse even though I took the long route getting here. Because when I was younger we had an elderly lady who stayed up the street from us and she had diabetes and she had both of her legs amputated and I took care of her like giving her insulin and grandmother would cook for her and give her a bath. I have people in the medical field my mother is a certified nursing assistant (CNA) and she went to nursing school but did not finish and nurses are all around me. My aunt.....other family members are nurses. They keep me from leaving this stressful situation.

The influence of a high school counselor was expressed below:

I was in high school where there was a program that took honor students to the hospitals like once month and we got to see the different jobs that were in the hospitals. I just saw nursing and I just went from there. My high school mentor's sister is a nurse and she continues to mentor me about nursing and how I can advance in life through my career choices.

Similarly, family members who are nurses motivated this newly licensed registered nurse as revealed below:

I had to make a decision I have a lot of family members who are nursesthey helped me decide to continue on with my journey of nursing because it gets better with tenure and education.

The importance of having a great preceptor was a motivating factor for continuing in nursing as described in the following terms:

For me having that preceptor right there with me to guide me through my nursing judgments and that means also working with me through my mistakes.....

Discussion

This study captured the lived experiences of fourteen newly licensed registered nurses working in clinical healthcare environments. Their stories described what motivated them to choose nursing as a career and to remain in their nursing jobs, despite the challenges that have led others to leave the profession. This study also contributes to the literature by revealing participants' motivational factors through their personal stories in their own words. Participants in the study revealed motivational factors of altruism, self fulfillment, challenging career and the influence of role models as the major influences in their career decision-making. Although extant literature provides a description of nurses' career motivation, much of it pertains to characteristics of the institution, rather than personalized individual motivational factors (Ingersoll et al., 2002; Kovner et al., 2007; Price, 2009; Shields & Ward, 2001).

The majority of the participants identified professional socialization factors which are consistent with Mamchur and Myrick (2003) study on the importance of acquiring knowledge, skills, identity, occupational traits, values, norms and self-concept. Newly licensed nurses entered the profession with expectations of the work environment. They expected to find an environment where they would be socialized into the role of "nurse" with mentoring from experienced nurses who would share their wisdom. Some were surprised to find an environment where the acquisition of additional knowledge and skills specific to nursing was not supported. Those who felt their expectations of the work environments were met indicated a higher likelihood to remain in nursing.

The significance of job satisfaction has been recognized by researchers for many years and its inclusion here is not surprising (Larrabee et al., 2003, Price & Mueller,

1981). Most of the nurses in this study enjoy their work, a finding that is not supported by While and Blackman (1998) who state that forty percent of newly registered nurses are disappointed with career choice. Findings suggest that nurses need support, learning opportunities and recognition that they, in turn, give to other nurses. Consistently, direct positive relationships were found between job satisfaction and nurses' intention to remain in nursing, as also described by Shield and Ward (2001). The newly licensed nurses' in this study indicate that satisfaction with professional fulfillment, socialization and learning opportunities have a significant influence on whether or not they remain in nursing as a career choice, which supports the findings of a study by Cowin (2002). Job satisfaction coupled with praise and recognition were found to be factors that motivated retention of nurses. This suggests that nursing administration should establish programs that promote praise and recognition of nurse's contributions within the healthcare system. Hopefully this will lead to increased retention of newly licensed registered nurses in the clinical setting.

The influence of a role model seemed to be the most meaningful to participants in this study when it was associated with actual patient care experiences. Early professional socialization experiences, such as interactions with nurses in the health care setting, have a strong influence on an individual's view of nursing, self identification with nurses' attributes, and the decision to enter and remain in the profession (Beck, 2000). This study finding is consistent with Hinds and Harley's (2001) study on the influence of senior nurses to motivate newly licensed nurses to enter and remain in nursing. Nurses demonstrate commitment by remaining employed in their clinical setting, rather than choosing to take employment with other organizations or leave the profession entirely.

Recruiting and retaining newly licensed registered nurses is a paramount concern in our current healthcare climate. We live in a society that reports an increasing shortage of nursing professionals. More research is needed to determine facilitators and barriers to not only recruiting but more importantly retaining newly licensed nurses. Also, further study is recommended to explore what newly licensed nurses perceive as the "ideal nursing job." Those nurses who choose and remain in nursing have distinctive values that set the foundation for their expectations in the workplace. Therefore, if we propose to retain newly licensed nurses in the nursing profession we must first determine how to create a work environment that aligns with their cultural values, beliefs and lifestyles.

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Authors' Note

Zarata Mann Banks is a PhD prepared Registered Nurse working at G.V. Sonny Montgomery VA Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi as the Associate Chief of Nursing Performance Improvement. Dr. Banks research interests are nursing recruitment and retention, particularly staff morale and performance improvement issues. Correspondences regarding this article can be addressed to: Zarata Mann Banks, 2467

North Norrell Road, Bolton,MS 39041; Telephone: 601-368-3959; E-mail: dbankstwins@bellsouth.net

Dr. Jessica H. Bailey is Director of Medical Education in the Department of Medicine at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Dr. Bailey's undergraduate degree is in Health Informatics and her masters degree and doctorate are in Adult/Higher Education. Her research interests are in the social science realm, particularly role socialization. You can contact Dr. Bailey at 601-815-5656.

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