Work values and job satisfaction: A qualitative study of Iranian nurses

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Abstract
This study aimed to describe the effect of nursing profession work-related values on job satisfaction among a sample of Iranian nurses. We used in-depth interviews with 30 nurses who worked in university-affiliated and public hospitals in Tehran, Iran. The results of thematic analysis of interviews are reported in four themes to present the participants' articulations in linking their work-related values to job satisfaction. The themes consist of values that "encourage tolerance," "enhance inner harmony," "reflect traditional commitment," "enhance unity," and are "centered around altruism and spiritual values." The most satisfied participants considered nursing a divine profession and a tool by which they could gain spiritual pleasure and satisfaction. Our findings highlight the potential role of nursing work-related values in reducing dissatisfaction with one's job. For the nursing profession, this may have implications in reducing job instability and turnover.

Introduction

This article focuses on the role and function of work-related values in determining job satisfaction in the nursing profession. Satisfaction attributes include (a) one's emotional reaction to different aspects of a job,[1,2] (b) one's attitude toward a job,[3] (c) one's expectation of a job,[4] and (d) personal values that guide one's perceptions, evaluations, and behavior toward a job.[5] The literature also clearly indicates that job

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satisfaction is a multidimensional construct. However, consensus as to which dimension is most prominent in its operationalization has not yet been reached.[6,7]

Values are beliefs that are held by individuals and guide their behaviors.[8] They are also attributes through which an individual describes himself or herself and are a part of the individual's self-concept.[9] Through the process of socialization, individuals internalize certain values and beliefs. These shape their moral judgment and become the launching pad from which their thoughts, attitudes, choices, decisions, behaviors, and actions are formed.

Work-related values are permeated by general values, as are all other aspects of life.[10,11] As attributes, work-related values arbitrate between motivating external factors and the individual's affective orientation. They set our standards, motivations, expectations, and principles and guide us to take a position on work-related issues and to determine the type of profession we choose.[12] An employee's job satisfaction is heavily influenced by his or her work-related values.[13–15] Work-related values also reflect individuals' attitudes toward overcoming barriers for obtaining satisfaction from a profession.[16,17] White[8] indicates that values can activate one's motivation for holding and remaining satisfied with a job. Tietjen and Myers[18] state that one way to keep employees satisfied at work is to recognize and respect their values and beliefs.

We also use work-related values to evaluate the work style and productivities of others,[19] as well as our own work-related decisions and actions.[20,21] We would therefore expect to see that the work-related values of nurses determine their job satisfaction.[22] Previous investigators have examined work-related values to explain the satisfaction of nurses at work.[23] For example, Mills and Blaesing[24] found a positive relation between work-related values and the career satisfaction of nurses. In a study involving Iranian nurses, Ravari et al.[15] also showed that nurses' work-related values helped determine their job satisfaction.

Most theorists suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that values are influenced by culture, society, and personality.[10,14,25] Work-related values are also engrained in the culture of any society.[21,26,27] To explore them requires one to look at the cultural context within which those values emerge.[28] Existing empirical evidence from Western countries suggests a decrease in job satisfaction when one's intrinsic work-related values are not fulfilled.[29,30] However, there is a paucity of studies that have explored the relationship between work-related values and job satisfaction among nurses living in non-Western countries. This study aims to examine the role of work-related values on job satisfaction in a sample of Iranian nursing staff.

Method

This was a qualitative study using elicitation interviews. A study flyer was used to recruit potential participants. A member of the research team screened potential participants based on study inclusion and exclusion criteria, informed eligible participants about the details of this study, and obtained their written consent. The inclusion criteria were (a) being either a male or a female nurse, (b) being 18 years of age or older, (c) having direct contact with patients, and (d) having between 6 months and 25+ years of experience working in general and critical care units at a university-affiliated and/or at public hospitals in Tehran, Iran. Eligible participants who provided written consent were interviewed.

Data collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private setting at work using a semistructured questionnaire. Semistructured interviews allow for better understanding of the participant's views on a given topic. In addition, it allows participants think more critically about the subject matter. A consistent set of initial questions and topics also makes it easier to replicate the interview and, ultimately, standardize a measurement tool. The main questions for the interview were developed by our research team that included four faculty

nurses from the School of Nursing and a social scientist from the Department of Psychiatry. The questions were designed solely for the purpose of this study. Each interview lasted approximately 1 h and was audio-taped so as to later analyze its content. Data were collected between May and November 2010.

The first question in each interview was: "What do you think job satisfaction is?" Subsequent questions were designed to elicit specific job experiences, such as the following: "What has been your most satisfactory experience at work?" The nurses were also asked to describe their experiences, outlooks, and opinions about the role of work-related values on job satisfaction.

Data collection took place during all shifts over a 4-month period. No new information was gained during the last three interviews, at which time the data were considered to be saturated. Approval for conducting this study was obtained from the Rafsanjan Medical Sciences University, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects.

Data analysis

The data collected were immediately transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The content analysis involves subjective elucidation of the content of textual data.[31] Through careful inspection and continuous comparison of the data, themes and categories emerge by mainly inductive reasoning. This method considers manifest as well as latent contents in a text and highlights the differences and resemblances within themes and categories.[32] Manifest content includes concepts that are formed from the actual responses of the participants, while "themes" are viewed as expressions of latent content.[33]

In order to ensure reliability and consistency of the results and to provide an assessment of inter-rater reliability, the interviews were coded independently by the principal researcher and the research assistant. More than 80% of the codes were consistent between the two researchers. For each interview, the outcomes were discussed and revisions were agreed upon by members of the research team. The codes remained stable during a recoding process, after a 2-day interval by the same research team. The principal investigator also studied and carefully reviewed the entire interview coding to confirm consistency.

Findings

Study participants (n = 30) consisted of 17 women and 13 men who on average had practiced nursing for 12 years. Their average age was 31 ± 7.8 (range, 21–49 years). Many of the participants referred to the role of work-related values as a determining factor in job satisfaction. They insisted that their personal values shaped their interest in the nursing profession. Five general work-related value themes, each relating to some level of job satisfaction, were derived from our elicitation interview data.

Values that encourage tolerance

Interview participants said that their work-related values significantly helped in overlooking those parts of their jobs that they found dissatisfying. They relied on their personal values to remain motivated and carry out their day-to-day responsibilities, even in the presence of job adversities. For example, one respondent stated:

> Often, I am extremely dissatisfied with the governing system. It's like everything and everyone is liaising to aggravate us. One day they reduce our regular pay, one day they don't pay us when we work overtime … sometimes I tell myself: don't be so caring towards your patients, who cares what happens? But then again, I can't convince myself to do nothing when they need my help. I damn the devil and do my best to take care of them. I think what helps us to take good care of our patients and do our best, is our inner voice that constantly reminds us of the value of our profession.

Another participant touched upon the devotion of the nursing profession in caring for others and said:

> I think our job is sacred. When I'm disturbed, tired, working shift after shift, and irritated by my supervisor, what keeps me motivated and content is that I know my work is virtuous, while many other people don't have the chance to do such virtuous work. This keeps me calm.

Values that enhance inner harmony

Some participants stated that work-related values are critical parameters in shaping one's perception toward a job, by harmonizing the job satisfaction-related parameters and by putting them into perspective. One participant said:

> We should learn to look at work values as an influential factor in all domains of job satisfaction; not just as one separate factor. It is the work values that give meanings to such things as one's salary, position, and promotion.

Another participant said: "One's work-related values link all elements of job satisfaction like a thread connecting rosary beads." Another participant believed:

> When you have a higher value in mind, for example, being "righteous" then earning good salary is no longer "the" goal in your life. You aim higher. You don't just think of getting a promotion. Getting a promotion will be satisfying only if it is earned virtuously and justly.

Some participants noted that work-related values help with making steadfast decisions and in determining any necessary actions at work. In this regard, one participant stated:

> Some of my coworkers are so unpredictable. When they are happy and satisfied, they're willing to do anything for a patient. Other times when they aren't content, they don't work very well. Those who value their work have a solid professional conscience and are less prone to work uncertainty and fluctuations.

Values that reflect traditional commitment

Some participants in this study believed that personal values in putting your best performance to work were "the" driving force behind their satisfaction with a job. For example, one nurse stated:

> There are times when you think no one cares about your knowledge or your expertise. However, what motivates me to stay up-to-date with nursing education is because it helps with performing well at work. We all need to expose ourselves to the new information that relates to our profession. This is the only way we can perform well and be satisfied with ourselves and our jobs. Being virtuous is the value that motivates me to always be prepared and equipped with necessary skills so that I can offer the best service to my patients. That is the logical thing to do; what my conscience dictates me to do, my values drive me to practice this, and so I do.

Other participants spoke of the "power" of values motivating them to provide optimum care to their patients. One participant used a vivid description to elucidate on this:

> Values are like fire in your shoes, making you attentive; making you question yourself; you can't turn a blind eye anymore. Paying attention to our work values makes us keep an eye on ourselves and the way we treat our patients.

Another interviewee referred to "self-control" as the end product of one's values and said:

> Values help you with having a purpose at work. There is no need for closed circuit cameras. It's your values that instruct you to do your job well. To make God happy, you do your job right; no more need for surveillance cameras.

Values that enhance unity

Many participants indicated that their work-related values help reduce their sense of selfishness, promote group unity, and develop work habits and practices based on humane principles. In this regard, one participant stated:

> At work, people usually look for a kind of job that is easy and comfortable. For example, we prefer to choose patients who are less of a hassle and easy to manage. But when our values come into place, they can overshadow our selfishness and can motivate us to consider the well-being of the patients first.

Another participant referred to the role of values in gaining group consensus and reducing arguments, disagreements, and conflict at work by saying:

> Some daily arguments in the Unit are the results of back biting, lying, and ingratiation. If we base our actions on honesty, unity, and friendliness, many of the usual quarrels would not occur. These are what I consider values.

Other participants insisted that values can create an amicable atmosphere for the personnel, so that they can work more closely and support each other. One participant stated:

> One day I was very tired and was about to give the wrong serum to a patient. One of my coworkers quickly caught my mistake and stopped me in such a manner that I won't get embarrassed in front of my patient. She didn't tell anybody about that incident; rather advised me to be more careful. She really wanted to help me. I will never forget that. She and I, eventually, became good friends, indeed she is my role model. I believe her action had a strong message of values.

Altruism- and spiritual-centered values

Some participants indicated that the altruistic nature of their profession adds to their inner enthusiasm and pleasures at work. They emphasized that the root of this enthusiasm was not materialistic. One participant stated:

> I have an inner enthusiasm towards my profession. When I am at work (i.e. in the Unit/Ward), I'm happy and excited. I love what I do and I do it well. My passion for work is not worldly-based—for example, having a well-paid job, or a prestigious position, or such. These are short-lived causes. But, my passion is a kind of enthusiasm that has a spiritual base. It is real and long lasting.

Some participants viewed their inner enthusiasm as a blessing from God. For example, one participant said:

> I am blessed to have this job. I feel I have God's support on my side. I ask God to help me to be a good person through this job. Of course I am happy with my job. It gives me an opportunity to make something of myself that God approves.

Another participant stated:

> What is important to me is to please God. When I perform well at work, God is pleased with me. My aim in life is pleasing God. I care for my patients not because I seek their endorsement. I think they are the means to help with reaching a higher end, which is to please God. Sometimes God works through a sick patient, or through a tough manager, or other adversities at work to give me opportunities to improve myself. I truly believe this.

Discussion

On the issue of values

In this qualitative study, we aimed to highlight the potential role of nursing work-related values in characterizing job satisfaction among a sample of 30 Iranian nurses, using elicitation interviews. The nurses in our study expressed how various aspects of their work-related values had different levels of influence in motivating, committing, and satisfying their religious and professional obligations toward their patients and, therefore, making them more satisfied at work. Lemonidou et al.[34] state that once people are able to practice their moral values, they are more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction and are less inclined to change their jobs.

The majority of participants in this study stated that values attached to nursing as a profession guide their performance and determine their job satisfaction. Boldero and Francis[35] classified work-related values into "standard" and "goal-oriented" categories and discussed their relationship with job satisfaction. In several models, work-related values are referred to as an instrumental[36] or material entity.[22] These conceptualizations do not convey the same meaning that our participants experienced and expressed in this study. In fact, some of the nurses in our study viewed work-related values as an intrinsic quality that stemmed from their belief that nursing is a sacred profession. Knoop[37] suggests that valuation is a qualitative act or an inner assessment and determines what merits exertion and effort. Chu[38] contends that the extent to which people value a profession or an occupation influences their mind-set toward evaluating it. Our analyses of the nurses' perceptions of "work-related values" in deriving job satisfaction resulted in the following core attributes.

Tolerance encouraging value of the nursing profession

One important theme that emerged from this study relates to the role of one's intrinsic values in relieving and managing stress. Our participants expressed that their inner values for nursing profession sometimes helped with rationalizing and tolerating stressful situations at work. Many noted the complexity of the nursing profession in Iran, resulting in moments that compromised the care of their patients. However, they spoke of the "internal alarm" of their professional values, which prevents one from overlooking the well-being of his or her patients. Nurses in our study stated that these intrinsic values helped with letting go of the negative energy and harrowing factors that would cause conflict at work. In a study conducted by Knoop[37] on 607 teachers and administrators, it became evident that there was a negative relationship between intrinsic work-related values and stress. Furthermore, in some models, compassion was regarded as an essential attribute in work-related values.[39] Indeed, having compassion, a professional conscience, patience, and tolerance are attributes in providing ethical and quality care, which are emphasized in the nursing codes of ethics in Iran. Giving value to these attributes has offered nurses in our study a framework to assess and guide their own practices and resolve any moral dilemma in patient care, especially when under work stress. Jormsri claims that unresolved moral distress in patient care can result in high nurse turnover if left unresolved.[40] Nurses in our study perceived core values that are attached to the profession of nursing as resources that help in achieving moral competence and therefore higher satisfaction with their job. Tietjen and Myers[18] argue that job dissatisfaction is the function of any perceived discrepancy between what one practices at a job and the intrinsic values that are attached to that job. Hegney et al.[5] state that job satisfaction is reduced when one's intrinsic values are challenged. This is in contrast to the view of others who perceive discrepancy in expected materialistic awards as the source of dissatisfaction.[4] If job satisfaction is defined by the rewards that an organization is willing to offer in contrast to intrinsic rewards, it can be the subject of social climate or organizational change, resulting in instability.[42] Further studies are needed to clearly operationalize aspects of externally based versus internally based work-related values and delineate their roles in job satisfaction among Iranian nurses.

Inner harmony enhancing values of the nursing profession

According to our findings, the function of values is not only limited to mitigating job-related pressures but also harmonizes other attributes of job satisfaction. Our participants reported that once they adhered to their intrinsic work-related values, they were better able to enjoy their jobs and be more satisfied. For these participants, their values helped with realizing the humane, transcendental, and dignifying nature of their profession, which was more rewarding to them than any worldly rewards, such as getting a promotion. Indeed, there is agreement among researchers that having a positive attitude toward a profession is one of the attributes of job satisfaction.[43] The literature shows that nurses' personal regards toward their profession may determine their attitudes toward their jobs and their satisfaction with their jobs.[44–46] In Iran, the profession of nursing is highly regarded for its ethically driven roots, a concept that is also shared and respected globally.[47] However, unlike Western countries, practicing ethical care in Iran is perceived as more than an ethical obligation and legal responsibility in providing a standard of care.[48] It is understood or internalized as a religious responsibility, with the conviction that once it is realized, it will bring inner peace and harmony with one's patients and coworkers, which in turn leads to a higher level of job satisfaction. Health-care delivery organizations in Iran should be cognizant of the religious and spiritual values that the nursing profession maintains within its constituents and work with its leaders toward preserving these values at work.

Traditional commitment reflecting values in nursing profession

For this group of nurses in our study, the traditional core values of their profession were a driving force in attaining job satisfaction. Those participants who perceived nursing as a "valuable" profession, of and by itself, regarded working within this profession as satisfying as well. To these participants, satisfying nursing responsibilities bring about inner satisfaction by design. They claimed that external factors such as evaluations, promotions, and demotions play a small role in determining their job satisfaction.

Despite many efforts that have been put forward to enhance job satisfaction among nurses,[49,50] the level of job satisfaction in this profession remains low.[51] Our results suggest that by promoting the traditional core values of this profession, nurses may feel empowered to find the means to motivate and please themselves and further strive to find ways to boost their satisfaction. Studies have shown that the more the nursing core values such as altruism, human dignity, justice, truth, and freedom are compromised in the workplace, the more likely nurses will report higher levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout.[16] A health-care system that recognizes and respects the core values of the nursing profession will help nurses provide ethical as well as clinically competent care.

In Islam, there is a belief that God watches all our deeds. Hence, when professional commitments are associated with religious obligations, fulfilling these responsibilities also clears one's religious conscience. Some of the nurses in our study considered nursing a sacred profession that, if practiced according to its core values and as a religious obligation, can bring about a deep sense of job satisfaction. This feeling is distinct from that which results from aesthetically driven rewards or challenges. Our findings suggest that promoting the spiritual values of the nursing profession is important in improving job satisfaction among its workforce. This is especially important since current technological and pharmaceutical advancements in patient care potentially can undermine these values.[47]

Unity-enhancing values in the nursing profession

Some nurses in this study said that their work-related values compel them to look beyond achieving personal satisfaction. They emphasized the importance of achieving group satisfaction in this profession. These

nurses felt obligated to facilitate resources through which others can obtain satisfaction as well. The experiences of our participants show that their inner work-related values for the nursing profession lessened their sense of selfishness and self-interest and encourage group cohesiveness. As a result, they promoted shared governance and job satisfaction, which ultimately reduced discontent and stress in the ward, resulting in nurses being more honest and courteous toward each other. These nurses believed that the nursing profession values and promotes comradeship and unity among coworkers. This in turn improves nurses' relationships with their patients and fellow nurses and makes their job more pleasant and satisfying.

Planning for a patient's care in Iran is a family decision and less individually focused.[47] Iranian nurses are obligated to respect the values attached to this norm. Our findings suggest that some level of comradeship among nurses may help with sharing this responsibility and ultimately preserving the nursing profession reputation. Individualism has always been a hallmark of Western civilization, which at times can be a source of conflict and job dissatisfaction. Our findings indicate that emphasizing teamwork helps build group cohesiveness, unity, and the attainment of job satisfaction in nursing.[52]

Altruism- and spiritual-centered values in nursing profession

Some of the participants in our study stated that their view of nursing as a highly altruistic and spiritual profession made them more enthusiastic in serving and providing loving care to their patients. Although nursing has been described as an intensive and demanding occupation, one's view of the profession and its values can help make any hardships more tolerable. Our participants claimed that, sometimes, the difficulty of the job creates excitement and elation to overcome work-related challenges. Individuals considered nursing a profession that authorizes one to help others, and by doing so, they can please and become close to God. Participants who endorsed this value and had reached this level of enthusiasm viewed patients as the means for reaching higher goals: a non-secular and spiritual goal, for example, God's gratification. They believed that working with passion and enthusiasm generates an intrinsic and pleasing feeling that can lead to spiritual growth and a sense of internal tranquility. Furthermore, they had felt the positive effects of such rewards in their personal and family life.

Numerous studies have reported that due to the pressures of the nursing profession, many nurses have experienced over-exhaustion at work and have tried to switch professions.[49,53,54] The results of our study suggest that nurses who value the spiritual rewards of their profession are more tolerant toward the adversities of their profession and at times even describe it as delightful and rewarding. In countries such as Iran with limited resources, a spiritual view of the nursing profession helps nurses take control over the attributes that qualify for defining job satisfaction. In an earlier work, Ravari et al.[55] state that, indeed, nurses are obligated to view achievement of job satisfaction as a personal obligation. They contend that if this responsibility is left solely in the hands of managers, as in most Western countries, it could be subject to constant socioeconomical and political changes.[55]

Investigators who rely on traditional job characteristic models (e.g. pay, anatomy, promotion, and security) to determine nurses' job satisfaction have been able to predict only small variations of this construct, that is, less than 40%.[56,57] Further study is needed to operationalize aspects of spirituality that enhance nurses' enthusiasm to serve.

Study limitations

The results of this study are limited by the inherent limitations of any qualitative research, which does not allow for the generalizability of the findings to the larger nursing population. Other limitations of this study included the following: (a) nurses were self-selected, which therefore threatens the external validity or generalizability of findings and (b) a relatively small sample size, that is, 30 participants. However, this

is not unusual for any qualitative study wherein the focus is on collecting data that are rich and detailed and reveals experiences and views of the participants.

Despite these limitations, our study offers a general picture of the key values in the nursing profession that may lead to job satisfaction among nurses, some of which are not discussed elsewhere in the literature. This information can be used in developing a survey instrument that reflects the potential relationship between intrinsic work-related values and job satisfaction for the nursing profession.

Conclusion

Nursing personnel in this qualitative study expressed and articulated the bond between five sets of work-related values related to their profession and job satisfaction. They considered nursing a divine profession and a tool through which they can gain spiritual pleasure and satisfaction. They considered themselves most satisfied at their job when they delivered the nursing profession's values that encourage tolerance to stress, enhance inner harmony, reflect traditional commitment to patient care, enhance unity, and are centered around altruism values. This is especially noteworthy because combination of these values and the nursing profession's core values (i.e. human dignity, equality in patient care, and preventing harm) can motivate nurses to deliver the best care to their patients and remain satisfied at work.

Recommendations

Further qualitative studies are needed to determine whether our findings apply to nurses living in other parts of Iran, as well as for other allied health personnel. In addition, quantitative studies are needed to test the validity and generalizability of our findings, which is limited in this study. It would be equally interesting to see how aspects of work-related values, both its secular (as defined in Western countries[35]) and spiritual meaning identified in this study, are associated with better nurse retention and enhanced patient care in Iran in comparison with other countries. Studies are also needed to develop and test the validity of a survey instrument that would operationalize job satisfaction around individuals' intrinsic work-related values.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors have any type of financial or conflict of interest related to this article.

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