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# The Attitude of Student Nurses Toward Patient Contact and Their Images of and Preferences for Four Nursing Specialties, 1958.

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ONE of the major developments in the profession of nursing has been the shift from bedside care to skilled-technical functions. This change has been brought about by an increase in the size, complexity, and bureaucratization of the hospital as well as by an increase in technical functions that have accompanied advances in medical care; and it has not been wholeheartedly welcomed by nurses. This paper is intended to shed some light on this problem by exploring attitudes of student nurses toward patient contact as well as their preferences for and images of several nursing specialties. Students in two types of programs will be compared at the outset of their training and at the end of their training. The two types of programs are that of a collegiate school with a new approach to patient care and that of a more traditional hospital program.

The findings to be reported in this paper constitute some of the data gathered from a large questionnaire study, which was part of a 3-year research project being conducted under a U.S. Public Health Service grant. This questionnaire was designed to explore personality factors and attitudes toward nursing among some 700 registered nurses and students of nursing in the Los Angeles metropolitan area and was administered to them during the fall and winter of 1956.

This study represents part of a research program being carried out under Grant GN-4552 from the United States Public Health Service. It is performed under the auspices of the Human Relations Research Group of the Institute of Industrial Relations and is co-sponsored by the Institute of Industrial Relations, the Graduate School of Business Administration, and the School of Nursing, University of California, Los Angeles.

## Procedure and Data

Five groups of students (a total of 195 girls) comprised the subject population of this paper. They were divided as follows: 68 beginning and 24 senior nursing students in a collegiate program, 22 beginning and 38 senior students in a hospital nursing program, and 43 high school girls who were members of Future Nurses Clubs.

One of the questionnaire items to which these students responded was one section of a Picture Item Test. (A description of this instrument and its effectiveness as a measuring device has been presented elsewhere (1).) This section consisted of five printed photographs. One photograph showed a nurse with a male doctor. The second presented the same nurse with a female patient. In the third photograph, the nurse was with a female aide and in the fourth she was shown with another nurse. The fifth photograph pictured the nurse working alone at the nurses' station. The respondent was asked to rank these pictures from one to five according to what she liked best to do. The resulting ranks indicated the subject's relative preferences for work companions, and, most importantly, the strength of her preference for patient contact. It was presumed that choice of the nurse-patient picture over and above the other pictures expressed a desire for patient contact.

Table 1 presents both the rank order and the mean rank value of each of the five pictures for each student group. The two groups of beginning nursing students, as well as the future-nurse high school girls (all at the outset of training), showed quite similar mean ranks for the nurse-patient picture.

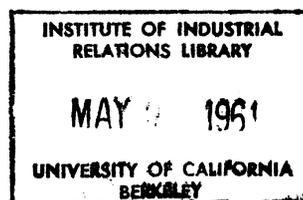


Table 1. Responses to Picture Items Showing Preferences of Five Groups of Student and Future Student Nurses

PICTURE ITEMS	STUDENT GROUPS									
	Future Nurses (high school) N = 41*		Beginning collegiate nursing students N = 67*		Beginning hospital nursing students N = 21*		Senior collegiate nursing students N = 23*		Senior hospital nursing students N = 37*	
	Mean rank	Rank order	Mean rank	Rank order	Mean rank	Rank order	Mean rank	Rank order	Mean rank	Rank order
Nurse with patient	1.86	1	1.69	1	1.76	1	1.31	1	2.19	2
Nurse with doctor	2.00	2	1.85	2	1.86	2	1.87	2	2.00	1
Nurse with aide	4.07	5	3.93	4	4.00	4	3.74	4	4.16	5
Nurse with nurse	3.73	4	3.55	3	3.29	3	3.61	3	3.00	3
Nurse alone	3.39	3	3.98	5	4.09	5	4.48	5	3.65	4

\* Two students in the high school group and one student in each of the other four groups did not respond to this item.

In terms of rank order, this picture was in first place for all three groups.

Considering individual responses, these groups were compared as to the number of students in each group who ranked the nurse-patient picture first. The resulting chi square values were: beginning collegiate with beginning hospital students 0.51; high school with beginning hospital students 0.00; and high school with beginning collegiate students, 0.70. None of these chi square values, with one degree of freedom, even approached significance.<sup>1</sup> Thus, these students at the outset of their training were not significantly different in their preference for patient contact (the nurse-patient picture). All three beginning groups felt that being with the patient was the most desirable work situation. This probably reflects the compelling quality of the nurse-patient image as a recruitment appeal for the career of nursing.

At the end of training, however, the collegiate students moved toward an even greater liking for the nurse-patient picture while the hospital seniors apparently learned to prefer something else. The nurse-patient picture dropped to second place (mean rank of 2.19) among the hospital seniors with nurse-doctor becoming most preferred, while the mean rank of 1.31 for the collegiate seniors was the greatest nurse-patient preference indicated by any group. The chi square value comparing the two senior groups as to frequency of first choices for the nurse-patient picture was 7.34, significant at the .01 level.

<sup>1</sup> The only picture that yielded some discrepancy in ranks among the three "before training" groups was the photograph of the nurse alone; but even here the two groups of beginning nursing students were not significantly different, though the high-schoolers did differ significantly from the beginning collegiate students. The chi square values comparing the groups as to frequency with which this picture was ranked last were 0.60 for the beginning collegiate students vs. beginning hospital students, 1.63 for high-schoolers vs. beginning hospital students and 8.70 for the high-schoolers vs. beginning collegiate students. The first two values were not significant, but the last one reached significance at the .01 level.

The other marked difference between the two senior groups concerned the photograph of the nurse alone at the desk. Presumably she was performing such skilled-technical functions as charting, et cetera. The mean rank of this picture for the hospital seniors was 3.65, and the corresponding value of 4.48 for the collegiate seniors was the lowest (bottom) mean rank given by any group to any picture. A chi square comparing the number in each group who gave the bottom rank to the picture of the nurse alone yielded a value of 6.73, significant at the .01 level. Thus, the hospital seniors seemed to be less averse to working alone at the desk than the collegiate seniors.

To summarize the difference: the girls entering nursing wanted to be with the patient. The collegiate seniors desired patient contact even more while the hospital seniors relegated it to second place and softened their dislike of working alone at the desk.

A second questionnaire item on which the two senior groups, and also the beginning groups, differed asked the students to rank four nursing specialties (medical, psychiatric, public health, and surgical) according to their personal preference.<sup>2</sup> These four specialties certainly varied as to the usual type of patient care, with surgical nursing requiring more skilled-technical functions. Also, from a list of 17 adjectives, the subjects were asked to assign to each of the four specialties those two adjectives which would best describe their feelings about it. These 17 adjectives, selected after a pretest from a larger group of words actually used by nurses to finish incomplete sentences, were: challenging, depressing, difficult, dramatic, dull, enjoyable, exacting, exciting, frightening, high-pressure, impersonal, rewarding, slow, sociable, specialized, technical, and undemanding.

Table 2 presents the preference data in terms of rank order and mean rank value for each specialty for each student group as well as the adjectives most frequently used by each group to describe each

<sup>2</sup> The surgical specialty was defined as "nursing on a surgical floor" so as to exclude the operating room.

specialty.<sup>3</sup> Regarding preferences for the medical and public health nursing specialties, both educational programs resulted in similar changes. Public health nursing was more preferred by the senior groups (much *more* so by the collegiate seniors) while medical nursing was less preferred by the senior groups (much *less* so by the hospital seniors). (Note the change in adjectives used to describe medical nursing, with "depressing" used only by the senior and not by the beginning student groups.) There was no marked change regarding psychiatric nursing.

There was, however, a profound difference between the students in the two programs regarding surgical nursing. This specialty started in first place for the beginning hospital students and remained in first place for the seniors, though there was a slight drop in mean rank value; but it started in third place for the beginning collegiate students

<sup>3</sup> This questionnaire item was not administered to the high school students.

and ended in fourth place for the seniors, with a large drop in mean rank value.

At this point, a comparison of the students' images of these four specialties with self-images of graduate nurses in those specialties seemed a fruitful step. A population of 67 medical, 74 psychiatric, 70 public health, and 59 surgical nurses had completed the questionnaire during the course of our research, and their responses to the adjective items were utilized for this paper.<sup>4</sup> To measure the discrepancy or distance between any two groups, they can be compared, adjective by adjective, as to the frequency of their choice of each adjective, to describe a particular specialty. The resulting Distance Scores are given in Table 2—the larger the score, the greater the discrepancy between student and graduate nurses in describing the latter's specialty. (This distance measure has been described and dis-

<sup>4</sup> The group of surgical nurses did not include operating room personnel, but was limited to those nursing on a surgical floor.

Table 2. Student Preferences and Adjective Images for Four Nursing Specialties Along with Distance Scores Comparing Student Descriptions with Self-Descriptions of Graduate Nurses in Those Specialties

NURSING STUDENT GROUP	MEDICAL NURSING	PSYCHIATRIC NURSING	PUBLIC HEALTH NURSING	SURGICAL NURSING
Beginning collegiate				
Rank order	1	4	2	3
Mean rank	2.33	2.82	2.41	2.44
Most popular adjectives*	Challenging Enjoyable Rewarding	Challenging Depressing Difficult	Challenging Rewarding Sociable	Dramatic Exacting Specialized Technical
Distance from adjectives of graduate nurses self-description	57.5	55.7	43.3	53.1
Beginning hospital				
Rank order	2	4	3	1
Mean rank	2.55	2.80	2.70	1.95
Most popular adjectives*	Challenging Enjoyable Rewarding	Challenging Depressing Rewarding	Enjoyable Rewarding Sociable	Challenging Dramatic Exciting Rewarding
Distance from adjectives of graduate nurses self-description	37.0	66.0	64.3	37.3
Senior collegiate				
Rank order	2	3	1	4
Mean rank	2.50	2.88	1.71	2.92
Most popular adjectives*	Challenging Depressing Rewarding	Challenging Dramatic Specialized	Challenging Enjoyable Rewarding	Challenging Dramatic Enjoyable Technical
Distance from adjectives of graduate nurses self-description	38.3	65.8	35.4	39.6
Senior hospital				
Rank order	4	3	2	1
Mean rank	2.86	2.61	2.36	2.17
Most popular adjectives*	Depressing Dull Slow	Challenging Depressing Difficult	Challenging Rewarding Sociable	Enjoyable Exacting Rewarding Technical
Distance from adjectives of graduate nurses self-description	78.3	62.7	43.6	46.1

\* The three most frequently used adjectives are given for medical, psychiatric, and public health nursing. Due to ties in rank, four adjectives are listed for the surgical specialty.

cussed by Osgood and Suci (2) and by Cronbach (3.)

The Distance Scores generally paralleled preferences—the greater the preference for a specialty, the greater the similarity between students' adjective descriptions of that specialty with self-descriptions by graduate nurses practicing in that specialty. In other words, liking for a specialty was accompanied by greater accuracy in describing that specialty as its practitioners did. This trend occurred: (1) within groups; (2) across groups in the same school; and (3) over all groups regardless of school and semester status. First, within any one student group, the better-liked specialties had the lowest distance scores and vice versa. (For example, beginning hospital students liked surgical nursing best and psychiatric nursing least while the distance scores were 37.3 and 66.0 respectively.) Second, comparing beginning and ending students in the same program, specialties that showed an increased preference also showed a lessened distance score and vice versa. (For example, medical nursing dropped from second to fourth place between beginning and ending hospital students while the distance score increased from 37.0 to 78.3.) Third, over all groups, instances of greatest preference paralleled the smallest distance scores and vice versa. (For example, the top mean ranks of 1.71 for public health nursing among senior collegiate and 1.95 for surgical nursing among beginning hospital students were accompanied by two of the smallest distance scores, 35.4 and 37.3.)

The one dramatic reversal of this general trend was the extremely low preference for surgical nursing among the collegiate seniors (the mean rank of 2.92 was the lowest value accorded by any group to any specialty) which was accompanied by an unusually small distance score of 39.6. An understanding of this reversal (and perhaps of the opposite feelings of college and hospital seniors toward surgical nursing) may be gained by considering certain developments in the history of nursing.

## Discussion

During the last several decades nursing has moved toward a professional role placing high value on functions which, in terms of our adjective list, can be characterized as *exacting*, *specialized*, and *technical*. But prior to this conceptualization of professional nursing, there was an earlier period, as Burling, Lentz, and Wilson suggest (4), that engendered the more popular image of the nurse with the patient and valued patient contact or satisfaction from people rather than from performance of technical skills. The new philosophy in nursing education—at least as represented in the collegiate program studied for this report—has maintained that the shift to this skilled-technical role has often deprived both nurse and patient of their mutual relationship; consequently the new approach has sought to re-emphasize patient contact and to de-emphasize the skilled-technical virtues. (This does not imply a return to a nonprofessional role since the new view of the nurse-patient rela-

tionship is grounded in knowledge and application of the social sciences. Although a new meaning of "technical" based on the social as well as the biological and physical sciences may be in the making, it is the more usual meaning of exacting-specialized-technical that is relevant for this paper.)

Returning now to surgical nursing, it is generally considered the most demanding of these skilled-technical virtues. Assuming that the traditional hospital program emphasizes these virtues, while the collegiate program is in the process of de-emphasizing them, it follows that the hospital seniors would prefer surgical the most while the collegiate seniors would prefer it the least.

As for the beginning students, the Picture Test data indicated that they were quite similar in their desire for patient contact, and it was suggested that this reflected the appeal of the older nurse-patient tradition. Why, then, should the beginning hospital and collegiate students differ about surgical nursing, with the former showing a greater initial preference for that specialty? An examination of the adjectives most frequently used to describe surgical nursing shows that, for the beginning collegiate students, exacting, specialized, and technical were among the top four adjectives; while, for the beginning hospital students, not one of them appeared in the top four. Again the question arises, why the difference?

A partial answer lies in the fact that the beginning collegiate students took the questionnaire approximately one month after they had begun their first course in nursing. According to their instructor, they had previously received a lecture on surgical nursing; and this perhaps explains why they already viewed surgical nursing as exacting, specialized, and technical while the beginning hospital students did not, and why their preference for surgical nursing was lower. Of course, a study of a beginning group of collegiate students prior to *any* course work, as well as a re-examination of both groups of beginning students when they reach the end of their training, would serve to clarify this point. It is expected that this further study will prove feasible in the fall of 1958.

Considering that the beginning student groups were initially similar in their esteem of patient contact, while the collegiate seniors have learned to like it more and the hospital seniors have learned to like it less, what does this mean in terms of their over-all satisfaction with nursing? To answer this, an average Alienation Score was computed for each student group. This score, described in detail elsewhere (5), was obtained as follows: the total frequency (percent) of choice of alienated or negative adjectives (dull, undemanding, impersonal) was subtracted from the total frequency (percent) of unalienated or positive adjective choices (challenging, enjoyable, rewarding).<sup>5</sup> The higher the score,

<sup>5</sup> Evidence as to the compellingness of the Alienation Score is shown in the responses of 270 graduate nurses in the four specialties who were asked to describe their *own* specialty as well as the *other* three. The average Alienation Score for description of subjects' *own* specialty was 66.1; while for the *other* specialties, the average Alienation Score was 21.9.

the more positive (less alienated) is the group's orientation to nursing.

The scores were: beginning collegiate students, 78.3; beginning hospital students, 73.8; senior collegiate students, 87.6; and senior hospital students, 64.4. Thus, in terms of the amount of positive or unalienated orientation, the two beginning groups were again quite similar, showing a very positive orientation; while the senior collegiate students became even more positive and the senior hospital students became more alienated. This difference can perhaps be made more vivid by stating that, among the senior collegiate students, 83 percent never used negative words to describe nursing; while among the senior hospital students only 59 percent avoided negative adjectives.

This same trend is revealed in another type of positive orientation—namely, that expressed in the two adjectives, "dramatic" and "exciting." Seventy percent of the senior hospital students never chose either "dramatic" or "exciting" to describe their feelings about nursing, while the corresponding figure for the collegiate students is 33 percent. The resulting chi square value of 8.05 was significant at the .01 level. Thus, the collegiate seniors, as compared to the hospital seniors, not only held a less alienated view of nursing but they were also more likely to describe their feelings about nursing as dramatic and exciting.

## Summary and Conclusions

The high school girls and the two groups of beginning students, all at the threshold of their experience with nursing, expressed a great preference for working with the patient and preferred that situation to work situations involving other colleagues. The group of collegiate seniors, at the end of their training, had strengthened this preference and were even more in agreement in ranking the nurse-patient picture first. The hospital seniors, however, had moved in the opposite direction. They preferred the nurse-doctor situation

more than the nurse-patient situation and they were less averse to working alone at the desk. Furthermore, the divergent attitudes toward the specialty of surgical nursing were interpreted as evidence that the hospital seniors had learned to emphasize the skilled-technical functions whereas the collegiate seniors had learned to de-emphasize them.

One consequence of the hospital seniors' shift away from the patient was that they were less satisfied with nursing. They expressed a more alienated, less positive orientation toward nursing than that evidenced among the beginning students. The collegiate seniors, on the other hand, showed the most positive, unalienated orientation of any group and also were inclined to describe their feelings about nursing as dramatic and exciting more frequently than the hospital seniors.

It should be pointed out that a longitudinal study following the same group of students through their training would enhance the significance of these findings. It is hoped that such a study will prove feasible in the fall of 1958 when the two groups of beginning students studied for this report will be seniors.

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