

THE PORTRAYAL OF NURSING IN SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSPAPERS: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The newspaper heading 'Bring back a calling for those who really care' echoed the calls of many articles in South African newspapers from 2005 to 2009. According to one newspaper editor (In search of compassion 2006:9), 'hardly a day passes in which the newspaper does not receive at least one letter from an angry, frustrated and often traumatised reader in which yet another horrendous experience at one of the provincial hospitals is recounted'.

A qualitative content analysis was done to determine how South African newspapers reported issues related to nurses and nursing. A search of the database SA Media of Sabinet was performed for the period 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2009, using the keywords, 'nurse' and 'nursing'. A purposive sample of 161 newspaper articles from national and regional newspapers was analysed using a qualitative, inductive approach.

Images of nurses as caring, compassionate and knowledgeable professionals were present but were overshadowed by negative reporting. Articles that portrayed nurses as overworked, uncaring, lazy, ruthless, incompetent and suffering from burnout appeared regularly during this period. The government has a major role to play in improving public healthcare in South Africa. Steps to address the nursing shortage, lack of resources and poor performance of public hospitals and clinics have to be introduced as a matter of urgency. It is, however, up to the nursing profession to take a critical look at the image of the profession portrayed in the media and to address issues of laziness, ruthlessness, uncaring and general negative attitudes amongst nurses.

KEYWORDS: content analysis, image of nursing, media portrayals of nursing, nursing profession in South Africa

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The shortage of professional nurses is a global phenomenon. In South Africa, the estimated shortage of professional nurses ranges between 14 000 and 21 000 (Wildschut

& Mqolozana, 2008:12). According to Janiszewsky Goodin (2003:335), the public image of the nursing profession and of nursing as a career of choice contributes to the global nursing shortage. The significance of the media in shaping the professional image of nurses cannot be overestimated. How it impacts on nurses' professional self-image and their work performance is unknown but it can be assumed that a negative public image impacts negatively on the self-esteem of nurses. In addition it could contribute to the declining interest in a nursing career by school leavers (Zondagh, 2005 cited in Meiring, 2010:5), thereby aggravating the nursing shortage.

Studies on the image of nursing in the media report that nurses have been portrayed in a stereotypical fashion. Nursing has evolved through dominant media stereotypes from the ministering angels, to the unprofessional Sara Gamp (Charles Dickens' fictional character), to war heroines, to handmaiden and sex object. The public image of nurses is influenced by the portrayal of nurses in the media, dramas, films and television programmes. Nurses are generally portrayed as unintelligent women in traditional, even obsolete, roles (Chitty, 2005:79; Summers & Summers, 2009).

Although nurses are often portrayed in television dramas, soap operas and movies, Bishop (2006:177) maintains that nurses and the nursing profession seem to be quite invisible in the print media. The Woodhull study on Nursing and the Media (Sigma Theta Tau, 1998 cited in Chitty, 2005:82) found that nurses in the United States (US) are severely under-represented in the print media and are consequently in effect invisible to the American public. A literature search for studies on the portrayal of nurses in South African newspapers yielded no results.

Newspapers are important sources of information for the general public, because they report on events that happen in a community, a country or the world. Newspapers can provide forums for debates and inform public opinion, reporting on newsworthy and sensational topics. Newspapers generally value stories that are seen as exclusive, exciting or controversial (Wells, Marshall, Crawley & Dickersin, 2001:1029). Newspapers also play an important role in the transmission of attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. Dominick (2002:485) argues that although the mass media may influence the shaping of stereotypical images, the media also have the power to change such stereotypes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The nursing profession in South Africa faces many challenges that could hamper nurses' image and role as being the backbone of the primary healthcare system (PHC) in the country. These challenges include serious shortages of nurses in the public and private sectors, serious shortages of resources in public hospitals and clinics and a lack of interest in nursing as a career. Newspaper reports referring to nurses and nursing affect the visibility and public image of the nursing profession. The problem investigated in

this study was how South African newspapers portrayed issues related to nurses and nursing from 2005 to 2009.

PURPOSE, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent and nature of newspaper coverage of nursing in South Africa.

The questions prompting this study were how visible South African nurses and the nursing profession are in the print media; and how nursing is portrayed in South African newspapers

The objective of the study was to conduct a content analysis of the nature of events related to nurses or nursing in South Africa as portrayed by newspapers.

Definition of concepts

Content analysis is defined by Rayner, Wall and Kruger (2001:70) as a method of collecting and analysing large amounts of information about the content of media products in order to draw conclusions about an issue.

Events refer to incidents, happenings or experiences that relate to nurses or nursing as reported in newspapers.

An image is defined as ‘a mental picture of something not real or present’ (The Free Dictionary, 2010) or ‘the character projected to the public, by a person or institution especially as interpreted by the mass media’ (Answers.com, 2009).

Media (mass media) refers to any form of communication that simultaneously reaches a large number of people, including but not limited to radio, television, newspapers, magazines and films (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006:2). In this study the term media refers to newspaper reports only.

Nursing is defined by the South African Nursing Act, No. 33 of 2005 (South Africa, 2005) as a caring profession practised by a person registered with the South African Nursing Council (SANC) who supports, cares for and treats a healthcare user to achieve or maintain health and where this is not possible cares for a healthcare user so that he or she lives in comfort and dignity until death.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Content analysis enables a researcher to sift through large volumes of data in a systematic fashion. It has been used in media studies, and portrayed in the literature as a suitable technique for qualitative studies (Bengs, Johansson, Danielsson, Lehti & Hammarström, 2008:963; Dodgson, Tarrant, Thompson & Young, 2008:319; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004:105; White & Marsh, 2006:22). The purpose of content analysis is to provide knowledge, new insights and a representation of facts. It is defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content-related categories, based on explicit rules of coding (Krippendorff, 1980 cited in Stemler, 2001:1). Qualitative content analysis is a rich and meaningful technique that extends far beyond simple word counts (Stemler, 2001:1–3).

Content analysis may be used in an inductive or deductive way. When little knowledge is available about a phenomenon, or if this knowledge is fragmented, the inductive approach is followed. In inductive content analysis the categories are derived from the data; while a deductive approach is based on an existing theory or model and therefore moves from the general to the specific (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008:109). This study followed an inductive approach.

A database search of the South African full-text newspaper database SA Media of Sabinet was performed during 2010 for the period 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2009, using the keywords, ‘nurse’ and ‘nursing’. Both Afrikaans and English newspapers were included. The search yielded a total of 1 841 articles. All these articles were scanned for relevance and to identify those which addressed issues related to nurses and the nursing profession in South Africa. A purposive sample of 161 newspaper articles from national and regional, daily, weekly and Sunday newspapers were retrieved, printed and numbered. Only articles that referred to nurses and/or nursing within the South African context were included. A large number of articles addressed the same incidents or were duplicate press releases that appeared in different newspapers. In these instances only one article was analysed. The following were excluded: newspaper reports that addressed nursing issues or incidents from abroad and elsewhere in Africa; reports warning against bogus or illegal nursing institutions; reports on nurses who were victims of crime, rape, hijacking or murder that occurred outside the healthcare environment; and reports that referred to nursing homes without referring to the profession or individual nurses.

ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis was complete newspaper articles. Each newspaper article was read several times to get an overview of the total article after which meaning units were identified. Meaning units included words, phrases and sentences that reflected on nurses and the nursing profession. These meaning units were transferred to another document

and thereafter they were coded and assigned tentative codes (sub-categories) (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004:106). These condensed meaning units (codes) were interpreted and grouped into categories. Elo and Kyngäs (2008:111) point out that creating categories does not simply mean bringing together observations that are similar or related, but rather that data are classified as belonging to a particular group and providing a way of describing the phenomenon. The analysis yielded four themes. The categories and themes are depicted in table 1.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the sub-categories, categories and themes were discussed, compared and revised with a co-coder.

Table 1: Themes and related categories

Theme	Category
Nursing shortage and emigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Decline in numbers of student nurses and young professionals ● Exodus of nurses ● Statistical evidence of nursing shortage ● Human resources for health
Declining healthcare system and poor working conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public hospitals in state of collapse ● Occupational health and safety issues ● Excessive workloads ● Conditions of service ● Negative relationships
Death, suffering, humiliation, misconduct and incompetence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Industrial actions/strikes ● Horror stories of alleged patient neglect ● Nurse-patient ratio and patient mortality ● Alleged misconduct ● Lack of professional values
Celebration of a noble profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● International Nurses Day ● Nurses' role in South Africa ● Positive patient experiences ● Recognition of service excellence

MEASURES FOR ACHIEVING TRUSTWORTHINESS

The process of data verification (see table 2) was carried out according to Guba’s model of trustworthiness as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004:109).

Table 2: Measures taken to enhance trustworthiness

Criterion	Strategies for assessing criteria	Specific actions taken by researcher
Truth value	Credibility	Determining the focus of the study, selection of context and data gathering approach. (Daily, weekly, national and regional newspapers representing a broad spectrum of reporting were included in the study.) Selecting the most appropriate method for data collection and the amount of data (1 841 newspaper reports were scanned for applicability of which 161 were analysed). Selecting the most suitable meaning unit. (Meaning units included words, phrases and sentences.) Applicability of categories and themes to cover the data. (Representative quotations from the text included in the report.)
Consistency	Dependability	Categorisation and coding of data. (Open dialogue with a co-coder to determine credibility of categories and themes.)
Applicability	Transferability	The extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings. (Clear descriptions of the research method and appropriate quotations from the newspaper reports are presented in this report.)

DISCUSSION OF THE FOUR THEMES

Theme 1: *Nursing shortage and emigration*

Nursing shortages and the emigration of nurses were reported widely during the five-year period of the study. The general trend of reporting was negative. The exodus of South African nurses was described as not only being a huge headache for the government, but also posing a real danger for patients. The ageing profession and plans to recruit retired nurses to return to nursing, as well as the homecoming revolution to facilitate the return of expatriate nurses, featured in many reports. This theme is illustrated by the following statements:

Gauteng's hospitals and government health clinics are bleeding into crisis, as highly skilled doctors and nurses leave the profession in droves. Quality of care is declining because of the increased workload and lack of resources (Gallagher, 2005:3).

The South African nursing profession is currently suffering from shortages in crucial areas such as intensive care units, operating theatres, midwifery and mental health ... things cannot get worse than they are right now (Govender & Appel, 2006:6).

The private sector is also at risk as Steenkamp (2007:1) stated: ‘A huge nursing shortage has reached a critical point where the quality of healthcare is threatened, even in private hospitals’ (translated from Afrikaans).

The exodus has left many health institutions with acute staff shortages, as Mudzuli (2006:4) stated: ‘Hordes of nurses have continued to migrate at an alarming rate from Gauteng for greener pastures’. The closing of many nursing colleges aggravated this shortage. Newspaper articles blamed the government for the disastrous situation where nurses are overworked and disillusioned. Cullinan (2009:6) stated:

‘Thanks to the ill-conceived decision to close a number of nursing colleges to save money during Thabo Mbeki’s presidency and migration, the rate of skilled professional nurses has dropped from 149 to 110 per 100 000 people from 1998 to 2007’. Under the heading ‘Doctor our nursing crisis’, the Sowetan (Doctor, 2005:12) reflected that ‘scaling back training has led to this calamitous situation where nurses are overworked and underpaid’.

Articles that called for leadership and a plan to address the shortage and emigration of nurses appeared in newspapers recurrently.

Emotional appeals to nurses to return home were published. Headlines such as ‘Your country needs you’ (Comins, 2007:1) reflected the urgent cry from South Africa to its nurses scattered around the globe as the skills crisis assumed unprecedented levels with thousands of vacancies in the public and private healthcare sectors. Emotional calls for nurse emigrants and retirees to return to work were met with dismay by those concerned. Letters in the press containing opinions of expatriate nurses and others who had left the profession suggested that the government should first address nurses’ grievances before they would consider re-entering the profession.

Editorials and other reports called on the government to speed up efforts to train more nurses and improve their salaries, and to address the poor working conditions that were driving South African nurses away. Articles emphasised the lack of leadership that further contributed to the shortage and emigration of nurses as indicated by the heading ‘Skills crisis needs leadership’ (Editorial, 2007a:7). Newspapers also reflected on plans to address the dire shortage of nurses, including the re-opening of nursing colleges and recruitment of retired nurses. Ramoroka (2007:3) stated that

‘the Northern Cape is in dire need of the skills of retired nurses and that government will do everything to get them back into the system’. Private hospital initiatives included the recruitment of qualified nurses from India (Comins, 2008:5).

Despite the abundance of reports and articles that referred to serious nursing shortages during the study period, Wildschut and Mqolozana (2008:62) maintained that it was difficult to assert whether nursing shortages really existed in the South African healthcare

system. According to these authors, there were two major problems, namely attrition between graduation and registration; and attrition between nurses on the registers and those active in the workforce. Healthcare institutions were experiencing difficulties in filling vacancies and therefore reported shortages. The estimated shortage of professional nurses was between 14 000 and 21 000 (Wildschut & Mqolozana, 2008:12).

Theme 2: Declining healthcare system and poor working conditions

This theme's categories addressed how inadequate supplies of medication and equipment hampered nursing and healthcare and indicated public healthcare to be in a 'state of collapse'. A lack of security in public hospitals, verbal and physical abuse by patients and their families, and a risk of HIV infection by needle stick injuries posed occupational risks to nurses. Reports of nurses in public hospitals who were victims of violent attacks and rape were found. The following quotations support these categories:

An inadequate supply of protective equipment, negligible waste disposal methods and high patient loads are some of the issues that threaten the wellbeing of health workers already critically understaffed ... At some clinics nurses were required to draw blood, give injections or handle body fluids, but no gloves were available (Hartley, 2005:1).

... he suddenly just went crazy and attacked the nursing staff physically, and passed derogatory statements ... although the nurses called security for help, they only arrived 10 minutes later ... (Naidu, 2008:10).

We are all quite aware of how unsafe our public hospitals are as we've had incidents in the past of nurses being killed at work (Denosa international relations coordinator quoted by Govender & Appel, 2006:6).

The terrible conditions in many public hospitals have not yet touched the privileged minority of the population (Editorial, 2007b:20) (translated from Afrikaans).

The research had shown that some clinics lacked basic hygiene and this compounded the risks for nurses as well as for patients (Hartley, 2005:1).

The picture of nurses' excessive workloads, poor remuneration, unsocial working hours, lack of recognition and lack of career advancement highlighted the extremely negative working environment of nurses in the public sector. Nursing conditions were described as being intolerable, with many nurses suffering from burnout and compassion fatigue. Nurses mentioned these strenuous working conditions and under-staffing for their decisions to leave the profession as illustrated by the following quotations:

Nurses spoke about an often overwhelming feeling of hopelessness in the face of the sheer size of the challenge confronting them (Lehman & Zulu, 2005:11).

Public sector nurses in the Free State experience high levels of burnout and stress, leading to a deterioration in the quality of healthcare and staff shortages (Ingber Win, 2007:7).

... staff shortages often forced clinic workers to do work outside their job descriptions – often without appropriate training or remuneration (Hartley, 2005:1).

Public hospitals are no longer a safe place for patients and nurses are at risk because demotivated and underpaid nurses make mistakes (Mabuza, 2006:6).

Poor relationships with hospital management, doctors and other members of the multidisciplinary team further aggravated nurses' misery. Reports of nurses who had been verbally abused by doctors were found.

The overwhelming negative depiction of nursing in newspapers seemed to appeal to the South African government to address the appalling conditions in public hospitals. The editor of a daily newspaper reflected on the nursing predicament as follows:

'Nursing is a calling rather than just a job. It requires a commitment to humanity, an ethos of caring, empathy for the sick, and a sense of humour to lift the spirits of those who are ill. These are special people and yet they are generally poorly paid and their status in society has steadily declined' (Editorial, 2006:8).

The declining public healthcare system and resultant poor working conditions of nurses have been identified as factors that contributed to the emigration of South African nurses (Oosthuizen, 2005:241–249).

Theme 3: Death, suffering, humiliation, misconduct and incompetence

This theme illustrates how newspaper coverage created a picture of nurses as inhumane, unprofessional, demotivated and incompetent. Reports of striking nurses who denied patients access to hospital premises and thus to healthcare portrayed a dismal picture. This theme relates to alleged poor treatment of patients, inhumane care, infant and maternal deaths, negligence, lack of infection control and exceptionally negative attitudes. In addition incidents of theft, bribery and corruption, assault, sexual and physical abuse and abandonment of patients made headlines. Nurses were depicted as being rude, uncaring, obstructive and completely incompetent. Newspapers reported alleged incidents of negligence, resulting in death, suffering and humiliation. The following statements illustrate this theme:

Basic medical and nursing standards and practices in the children's ward were found to be poor and infection control measures limited (Baby deaths, 2008:4).

... who has described the ordeal he allegedly suffered at the hands of ... Academic Hospital nursing staff as 'hell on earth' ... broke down in tears while describing how (he) had been lying in his own faeces for nearly three days (Hosken, 2009:1).

A used needle stuck to the hospital bed, a wet adult nappy under the bed, a blood spattered toilet and an overflowing sharps bin near a patient's bed are some of the horrifying conditions that a ... family endured at ... Academic Hospital before their mother died ... severely traumatised by what she described as downright rude, obstructive and completely incompetent nurses (Masemola, 2009:3).

... three women were forced to give birth without assistance at the ... Community Health Centre. The women were made to go through all this suffering while nurses laughed, threatened them and continued to drink tea ... (Magome, 2009:6).

The disgraceful conduct of nurses, the absence of compassion, their lack of empathy and caring and prejudice against some patients could indicate the erosion or a total lack of professional values, as described in the following quotations:

She was wracked with pain and her water eventually broke. I went to them again asking for help. They said 'we don't want to hear about your water that broke. What we need is the baby's head. I remained standing there in the doorway from 2am to 6am. My water by then was mixed with blood ... I hoped one of them had a good heart and would help me (Venter, 2006:2).

The nurses tend to sit in the consulting rooms drinking tea and laughing a lot while we are not being attended ... accused the nurses of being rude (Hlatshwayo, 2006:2).

Five nurses accused of taking part in a sex orgy in front of patients in the children's ward of a KwaZulu-Natal provincial hospital are in more trouble (Mapumulo, 2006:3).

Newspaper coverage of poor nursing care and misconduct referred to alleged incidents being investigated by authorities. Some of the cases might have been referred to the South African Nursing Council (SANC) for investigation. More than 200 nurses were found guilty of professional misconduct from 2005 to 2008 (SANC, 2010). From July 2008 to June 2009, the SANC reportedly received 432 complaints of professional misconduct against nurses in both the public and the private sectors (Magome, 2009:6). According to the International Council of Nurses (ICN, 2007:1), unhealthy work environments and the poor organisational climate characterising many workplaces have contributed to the global health crisis. Newspaper coverage of nursing in South Africa pointed towards unhealthy work environments where nurses suffered from burnout or simply did not care.

Theme 4: Celebration of a noble profession

The fourth theme, celebration of a noble profession, deals with positive coverage of nursing. Positive reporting was limited, however. Most positive coverage was within the

week of 12 May every year, when nurses celebrated International Nurses Day. Events that took place in celebration of this day were covered. Reporters reflected on nursing values and described nursing as a service to mankind. Nursing was referred to as the backbone of the PHC in South Africa. Positive patient experiences and references to old values and an ethos of service and dedication were found. Recognition of excellence awards for nurses and foreign grants for the enhancement of nursing education were also reported. Nursing was described as a celebration of passion, trust, care, dignity and team spirit. The following statements support this theme:

A nurse's job is often a thankless one, including long hours, meagre salaries, a lack of resources and a huge emotional burden – but many nurses would never trade their work because it is a calling (Sonjica & Matomela, 2006:3).

Nursing has always been a service to mankind in preventing illness, supporting those in need and giving care to others (Workplace staff, 2005:3).

There are thousands of nurses who, despite difficult conditions and poor remuneration dedicate themselves to compassionate service. We salute and honour them. But we mourn the fact that there are so many for whom International Nurses' Day would have been but a hollow and meaningless tick on the calendar (In search, 2006:9).

A service orientation is fundamental to the ethics of a profession. This means that a professional's contact with clients is motivated by service to the client and not by self-interest. The code of ethics is enforced by self-discipline, professional etiquette and disciplinary control by the profession. The nursing profession is founded on specific values and a belief that the services provided by nurses are essential for the well-being of society. However, positive newspaper coverage of nursing was overshadowed by the negative coverage.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa.

The researcher has taken measures to ensure trustworthiness of the findings as depicted in table 2.

CONCLUSIONS

South African nurses are mostly visible in the print media through negative reports. The analysis of newspaper reporting on nursing in South Africa revealed a profession in distress. During the period 2005 to 2009, many newspaper articles reflected the poor state of PHC in South Africa. Most of the analysed reports reflected on aspects of nursing, such as heavy workloads due to shortages, deteriorating public healthcare

institutions, poor care and suffering in South African hospitals and clinics. The public image of the nursing profession, as portrayed in newspapers, should be a major concern for the profession.

Being professional implies having certain attributes, including a scientific knowledge base, specific skills, values and attitudes. Nursing is a caring profession – but the desired image of a competent, trustworthy and caring profession was often challenged in the South African media in their reporting on poor care, neglect and misconduct. South Africa might lose trust in the profession, while the profession might be losing its reputation as a caring profession. The image of uncaring and overworked nurses neglecting their patients, working in deteriorating public healthcare institutions with limited resources overshadowed the coverage of acts of dedication by caring, competent nurses. Newspaper coverage of nursing in South Africa revealed a deep erosion of professional values of caring, compassion and respect for people at their most vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the issues and challenges that impact on the nursing profession cannot be the responsibility of the nursing profession alone. The government must address the appalling and inexcusable conditions in public hospitals in order to create positive environments for nurses and other healthcare professionals to provide quality care.

The nursing profession has to take action and become visible in positive media coverage by responding to negative coverage. Newspaper articles can shape public opinion, influence policy makers and the career choices of school leavers and newly qualified nurses. It is up to the profession to take the challenge and become visible in positive media coverage. Hospitals and nursing education institutions should appoint nurses to liaise with and communicate nursing achievements to the media regularly. Nurses who liaise with the media should be knowledgeable and demonstrate professionalism and expertise. Hospitals, clinics and other healthcare facilities could include lectures on professional practice in human resource development programmes.

The profession should create awareness among its members of the professional values and ethos of the profession. This might need a renewed emphasis on these values in the teaching and socialisation of student nurses at colleges and universities.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is difficult to maintain the integrity of narrative material during the analysis when such a large sample is used. The researcher had to read articles several times to grasp the essence of what was written. If qualitative data are compressed too much the integrity

may be compromised and the richness of the original data disappears. This limitation was addressed by including numerous supporting quotations from newspaper reports in the analysis and discussion as proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008:114). It is difficult to give a thorough presentation of the results of this study within the word limitation. Space does not allow for tables to present the sub-categories that were identified during the initial stage of coding that were grouped into categories and subsequently themes.

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