Research on the Influence of Professional Identity of Specialized Nurses on Core Competency Development and Enhancement Pathways

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Abstract: Within contemporary healthcare systems, professional identity among specialized nurses serves as a pivotal intrinsic factor influencing the development of their core competencies. This review synthesizes existing research, revealing that professional identity positively impacts the development of core competencies through multiple pathways, including psychological drive, behavioral facilitation, teamwork, and career stability. Building on this analysis, this paper proposes systematic enhancement strategies from four dimensions: education and training, organizational environment, cultural development, and individual growth, aiming to provide a reference for nursing practice and professional development.

Keywords: Specialized nurse; Professional identity; Core competency; Nursing education; Career development; Enhancement pathways

1. Introduction

Specialized nurses are professionals who possess proficient clinical skills and specialized knowledge in defined nursing fields, having completed accredited postgraduate training and passed relevant certification examinations. They constitute a central pillar of clinical nursing practice. The Outline of the Development Plan for Nursing Care in China explicitly delineates quantitative targets for cultivating clinical specialist nurses. Correspondingly, regional healthcare systems have actively implemented clinical nursing specialty initiatives tailored to local contexts, positioning specialized nursing development as a strategic priority within the broader nursing profession. Empirical studies indicate a significant positive correlation between specialized nurses' professional identity

and their core competency development [1]. Existing evidence demonstrates that specialized nurses with stronger professional identity exhibit greater professional responsibility and sense of mission in their work, thereby facilitating the advancement of clinical skills and the deepening of specialized knowledge [2]. Conversely, diminished professional identity adversely affects nurses' work motivation and service quality, reduces job satisfaction, increases turnover intention, and undermines the long-term sustainability of the nursing workforce. To address this, the present review systematically examines the extant literature to elucidate the impact of professional identity on core competency development among specialized nurses, uncover underlying mechanisms, and propose evidence-based enhancement pathways. By integrating current research findings, this paper aims to furnish a theoretical foundation for nursing practice and inform the optimization of professional development and educational frameworks for specialized nurses.

1.1. Definition of core concepts

Professional identity, originating from psychological discourse, represents a fundamental psychological construct for individuals within an occupation, reflecting the degree of acceptance and internalization of their professional role. It functions as an intrinsic motivator that fosters professional growth and commitment [3]. As essential contributors to the nursing workforce, specialized nurses typically possess a well-defined awareness of their professional role and a heightened sensitivity to their value within healthcare organizations, which cultivates a stronger sense of professional identity. This clear role perception and pronounced sense of professional value drive specialized nurses to proactively acquire professional skills and enhance clinical capabilities, which are integral components of core competencies.

2. Analysis of the impact of professional identity on core competency development

2.1. Psychological driving mechanisms of professional identity

Nurses' professional identity encompasses a multidimensional psychological process involving cognition, emotion, behavior, and clinical practice, primarily centered on the acquisition of professional expertise and the internalization of ethical standards. Professional identity refers to an individual's perception and appraisal of their own professional capabilities and occupational worth. Research indicates that professional identity may influence core competency development by shaping personal attributes [4,5]. This self-awareness regarding professional value and competence serves as a cognitive prerequisite for competency growth. The psychological dimensions of professional identity ultimately manifest in nursing practice. The ethical dimension inherent in professional identity promotes the development of competencies related to legal and ethical practice, while cognitive and behavioral engagement drives improvement in core competency domains such as clinical care and professional development.

Other studies suggest that perceived professional benefits can enhance work engagement, refine occupational cognition, mitigate burnout, and foster organizational attachment, thereby encouraging nurses to invest more actively in professional practice and facilitating core competency development [6].

2.2. Behavioral facilitation of professional capabilities through professional identity

Nurses' professional self-concept emerges from the dynamic interaction of various internal psychological elements. As a direct evaluative framework for occupational cognition, affect, and behavioral tendencies, it

significantly influences work initiative and professional performance [7]. Nurses with a robust professional self-concept can accurately appraise the significance of their work, sustain high professional standards and a positive occupational outlook, and consistently pursue skill refinement and capability enhancement, thereby fostering holistic development across all core competency domains.

Prior research identifies self-efficacy, defined as nurses' confidence in applying their skills in practical settings, as a key element of professional identity [8]. Specialized nurses with advanced core competencies typically exhibit heightened self-efficacy and stronger professional identity. Reciprocally, strong self-efficacy associated with professional identity empowers nurses to confidently employ specialized skills in addressing clinical challenges, continually honing competencies in clinical practice, communication, and coordination. Similarly, nurses with high core competency levels often experience greater self-determination and professional identity. This self-determined professional identity enables autonomous work planning and clinical decision-making, which in turn cultivates critical thinking, managerial abilities, and other higher-order competencies, thereby expanding the scope of core competency development.

Furthermore, a sense of team belonging constitutes a vital component of professional identity. A supportive team environment and organizational (care) make nurses feel respected and valued, enhancing job security and motivating active participation in collaborative work. Such collaboration advances competencies in communication, coordination, and leadership. Research also indicates that social validation from family and friends, as an external extension of professional identity, provides substantial social support, alleviates work-family conflict, and allows nurses to dedicate more energy to professional growth, contributing to the steady accumulation of core competencies.

2.3. Influence of professional identity on career stability and competency accumulation

The level of professional identity significantly affects nurses' career stability. Enhancing professional cognition, a key aspect of professional identity, through specialized training programs can reduce burnout and improve retention among specialized nurses [9]. The perceived professional value inherent in strong professional identity drives nurses to remain abreast of advancements in their field and proactively pursue new knowledge and skills, ensuring sustained momentum for long-term competency development. Positive professional affect associated with professional identity enables nurses to rationally appreciate the value and strengths of the nursing profession, consciously refine their professional attitudes and values, and willingly invest time in learning innovations, thereby achieving continuous competency enhancement. Nurses with high professional identity can more clearly discern their professional worth and establish career goals aligned with personal development. A robust professional identity shifts nurses from a reactive to a proactive stance, motivating them to seek out competency-building opportunities, such as advanced training or research involvement, rendering competency development more targeted and effective.

3. Pathways to enhance professional identity among specialized nurses
3.1. Reinforcing education on professional values and identity

A strong correlation exists between the state of professional identity within the nursing workforce and their functional capabilities. Research demonstrates that core competency levels among specialized nurses are positively correlated with overall professional identity scores and specific dimensions such as self-efficacy [10]. This indicates

that higher core competencies are associated with greater professional autonomy, which in turn strengthens professional identity.

3.2. Cultivating a supportive organizational environment and team culture

Team psychological safety is a positive predictor of professional identity. Fostering mutual respect and trust within teams encourages members to collaborate in problem-solving and provide mutual support. Creating an environment where errors can be discussed without fear of punitive criticism reduces psychological burden and enables nurses to take constructive interpersonal risks. Promoting team learning and collaboration, clarifying individual developmental objectives, and leveraging members' expertise enhances work engagement and consequently strengthen professional identity.

Moreover, studies affirm a positive relationship between organizational climate in nursing settings and professional identity [11]. Establishing a warm, harmonious, and mutually supportive organizational atmosphere where nurses feel valued and respected is crucial. Implementing non-punitive reporting systems for clinical incidents and encouraging innovative suggestions from nursing staff can further alleviate psychological strain.

3.3. Fostering a positive organizational culture and ensuring material support

Developing a constructive hospital culture that incentivizes continuous learning in advanced clinical technologies and management practices expands professional development opportunities. Strengthening professional ethics to cultivate a patient-centered care culture, organizing professional recognition events, academic exchanges, and team-building activities enhances job satisfaction and professional fulfillment. Promoting teamwork and peer support boosts unit cohesion and belongingness. Establishing equitable compensation structures, transparent performance evaluation and incentive systems, and participatory governance ensure fair reward for contributions and stimulate professional initiative. Adhering to person-job fit principles in staffing, optimizing workforce distribution, and strategically alleviating workload in high-pressure units (e.g., ICU) prevent burnout and allow nurses to fully engage with their professional roles.

3.4. Enhancing individual professional competence and psychological resilience

Employing multifaceted approaches to advance professional competence, including technical training, emotional support, and cognitive reframing, strengthens specialized knowledge and stress management capacities. Consistently adhering to professional conduct standards reinforces professional credibility. Focusing on psychological resilience development through regular physical activity, structured routines, and artistic engagement promotes emotional stability and fortifies professional commitment. Participation in resilience workshops, support groups, and relevant educational resources equips nurses to navigate challenges effectively. Structured resilience training programs that incorporate scenario-based learning and desensitization techniques help nurses manage workplace adversities. Regular assessment of resilience levels coupled with personalized psychological support indirectly consolidates professional identity.

4. Conclusion

Professional identity is intrinsically linked to core competency development among specialized nurses. Core competency, as a key indicator of nursing proficiency and a metric for evaluating specialized training outcomes,

is vital for quality care delivery. Weakened professional identity adversely impacts nursing motivation, service quality, job satisfaction, and retention, posing risks to workforce stability. It is recommended to adopt an integrated approach encompassing values-based education, organizational environment optimization, incentive system refinement, and individual resilience building to holistically strengthen professional identity. Such strategies will underpin sustained core competency development and contribute to a robust, stable nursing profession.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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