

Domestic and International Research Progress on the Career Plateau of Nurses

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Abstract: Career plateau is a new phenomenon that occurs in an individual's career. It also refers to the period when an individual employee enters a "stagnant" period of career development, which can have huge negative impacts on individuals and organizations. Based on reviewing relevant domestic and international literature, this paper organizes, summarizes, and synthesizes information from three key aspects of the overview of nurses' career plateau, research population, and research countermeasures, so as to provide theoretical references for managers to take effective measures to improve the current career situation of nurses.

Keywords: Career plateau; Nursing; Career planning

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1. Introduction

Nurses' career plateau refers to a state of stagnation encountered by nurses in their careers, which can lead to an increased tendency to leave their jobs, thus affecting the stability of the nursing team. The phenomenon of career plateau also reduces nurses' motivation and innovation, leading to a decline in organizational performance, which in turn affects the quality of care and patient safety ^[1]. In this paper, we will review the status quo and progress of the research on career plateau and propose coping strategies to provide a reference basis for nursing managers in China.

2. Overview of career plateau

2.1. Definition of career plateau

American psychologists Ference *et al.* ^[2] first proposed the concept of career plateau in 1977, and they believed that career plateau refers to a stage in an individual's career where the possibility of promotion becomes very limited.

2.2. Effects of career plateau

2.2.1. Job burnout

The phenomenon of career plateau is an important factor leading to job burnout, and there is an interactive relationship between them. A study by Aiken *et al.* [3] showed that 78% of Swedish nurses and 34% of American nurses experienced job burnout. In China, the overall detection rate of nurse job burnout was 64.5% [4]. Career plateaus play a key role in triggering job burnout [5], as nursing staff face high work pressure, the risk of occupational exposure [6], and disruptions to their biological rhythms due to irregular shift work. Other factors include ineffective alleviation of long-term accumulation of physical and mental problems [7,8], lack of understanding from leadership, poor communication among colleagues, the mismatch between work abilities and salary [9], the pressure of career advancement and balancing multiple family roles, etc., all of which may lead to job burnout. In particular, nurses in units such as intensive care unit (ICU) and central sterile supply department (CSSD), who work long hours in relatively closed, high-pressure, high-intensity environments, have higher levels of job burnout [10,11]. In other words, the more severe the job burnout, the higher the psychological pressure, resulting in a decrease in motivation and the repetitive completion of work tasks, which may lead to the occurrence of the career plateau phenomenon.

2.2.2. Employee dissatisfaction

There is a negative correlation between career plateaus and job satisfaction, with career plateaus accounting for more than one-third of the variance in job satisfaction and 18.4% of the variance in nurse promotion opportunities [12]. Neff *et al.* [13] surveyed more than 10,000 nurses in the southeastern part of the United States and showed that these nurses felt very dissatisfied with their jobs. The results of a survey by Klaus *et al.* [14] also showed that nurses of different age groups generally had lower job satisfaction, with excessive overtime being a major contributing factor.

3. Research population of nurses' career plateau

3.1. ICU nurses

Wang *et al.* [15] sampled 372 ICU nurses in Jilin Province and showed that the nurses' scores indicated that they were at a potential career plateau, with many experiencing a hierarchical plateau, meaning they have entered a state of career plateau. This is primarily due to limited vertical mobility in their careers, meaning few opportunities for promotion, which has led to the onset of a career plateau.

3.2. Reproductive center nurses

Li *et al.* [16] conducted a survey on 536 nurses in reproductive centers in Guangdong Province, and the results showed that these nurses had a low to medium level of career plateau. This is primarily because reproductive medicine is highly specialized and nurses often do not receive relevant courses during their education, so they may have limited abilities in learning new theories and skills on the job, leading to career plateaus.

3.3. Cardiology nurses

Wang *et al.* [17] surveyed 576 cardiology nurses and found that these nurses were already at a potential career plateau. The main influencing factors included the nurses' ability to empathize and rumination. Specifically, career plateauing among cardiology nurses was negatively correlated with their empathic skills and positively correlated with rumination. This means that the greater the empathic skills of cardiology nurses, the lower the

likelihood that they will experience career plateaus; conversely, the more rumination they have, the higher the risk of experiencing career plateaus.

3.4. Psychiatric nurses

Liu *et al.* ^[18] conducted a questionnaire survey of 228 psychiatric nurses and found that these nurses had relatively high levels of career plateau, with scores for hierarchical plateau being particularly notable. This is primarily because psychiatric nurses generally perceive a very low likelihood of further promotion. This perception affects their motivation to learn new knowledge and skills, thereby increasing the risk of experiencing a career plateau.

4. Research on countermeasures of nurses' career plateau

4.1. Individual coping strategies

4.1.1. International research

Rantzw and Feller ^[19] proposed four strategies to mitigate the phenomenon of career plateau in 1985: firstly, the meditative approach involves accepting that one is at a career plateau and controlling any negative emotions; secondly, the jumping approach implies looking for opportunities for growth in other areas and progressing in these new areas while keeping one's old position unchanged; and thirdly, the job-hopping approach involves leaving one's current job and looking for a similar position in another company, banking on a change in the work environment as a solution to career plateau; and fourthly, the entrepreneurial approach is considered to be the most effective solution to career plateaus through innovation and experimentation, and endeavoring to communicate effectively with decision-makers, rather than simply accepting the status quo.

4.1.2. Domestic research

By setting clear goals and conducting thorough career planning, nurses can enhance their efficiency and enthusiasm and devote themselves to their work. At the same time, by improving work attitude, adjusting mindset, and cultivating a wide range of interests, nurses can ensure the quality of their work and enhance their learning ability, thus improving their overall comprehensive quality. These measures can not only improve nurses' job satisfaction but also reduce the incidence of the career plateau phenomenon ^[20], which in turn enhances the overall quality of care and effectively reduces the sense of career plateau.

4.2. Organizational coping strategies

4.2.1. International research

Organizations should explore a variety of positive incentives to increase employee motivation, which includes more than just monetary rewards and promotion opportunities.

- (1) It is suggested to introduce work challenges, encourage employees to take on new tasks, participate in specific projects or team work, and help those in career plateau transition to new roles through horizontal transfers. Research indicates that providing challenging work and development opportunities can serve as moderating factors, reducing the negative impact employees experience due to a lack of promotion opportunities. In other words, when employees face fewer career plateau issues, such as having more challenging work and development opportunities, their dissatisfaction with the lack of promotion opportunities tends to decrease.
- (2) Mentoring can be proposed to serve as a way to increase role diversity by guiding younger employees

to become functional or technical experts, thus compensating for a lack of promotions or challenges. Additionally, mentoring plays an important buffering role in the relationship between career level and content stagnation and factors like job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In other words, through mentoring or the transfer of professional skills, employees can maintain higher job satisfaction and commitment to the organization even in the absence of promotion opportunities or job challenges.

- (3) Emphasizing the importance of social support, managers should encourage employees to explore different career paths and provide attractive projects or unique work experiences to help those experiencing career plateau. Organizations can advocate for managers to show clear support for employees in career plateaus and employ strategies such as job rotation, enriching job content, or expanding job scope when facing career plateaus. Additionally, organizations should communicate the necessity and importance of the contributions of employees in stagnation through expressions of respect and appreciation, thereby providing the necessary social support.

4.2.2. Domestic research

- (1) At the healthcare organization level, a fair, just, and transparent assessment and promotion system^[21] should be constructed to increase career development paths, while improving nurses' salaries and benefits. Attention should be paid to the health status of nurses and scientific psychological counseling should be provided in order to enhance employees' sense of support for the organization and job satisfaction, thus improving the management mechanism and pathway of career plateau.
- (2) At the nursing management level, the following measures should be taken: (a) For nurses: Training on the phenomenon of nurses' career plateau should be strengthened, and nurses should be helped to formulate a plan to cope with the career plateau and be provided with diversified career development paths and specialized development directions. Internal knowledge and skills training and assessment should be regularly organized for nurses to increase their opportunities to participate in external training and exchanges. (b) For the head nurse: A training system for the head nurse should be established and a rotation program for the head nurse should be designed. A humane management strategy should be implemented for nurse leaders to encourage nursing innovation and improve the quality of nursing services, so as to reduce the phenomenon of career plateaus among employees.

4.3. Family coping strategies

In order to provide nurses with more understanding and support, it is suggested that family members share some of the household responsibilities. By offering mutual assistance, the burden of household chores on nurses can be reduced. This helps prevent nurses from being distracted by heavy domestic duties, avoids excessive fatigue, and reduces burnout and career plateau that can arise from managing work-related stress.

5. Summary and recommendations

This study integrated the results of previous research and analyzed survey data involving nurses from different clinical departments, focusing on individual, organizational, and family levels. It provides valuable guidance for nursing managers in developing targeted and effective intervention strategies. The findings can also serve as a reference for nursing managers in training, assessing, and measuring nurses' work capabilities.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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