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Lorretta Krautscheid

George Fox University, lkrautscheid@georgefox.edu

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DEFINING PROFESSIONAL NURSING ACCOUNTABILITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

LORRETTA C. KRAUTSCHEID, PhD, RN*

Professional nursing accountability is described by both professional nursing organizations and nursing education credentialing agencies as a core aspect that underpins professional nursing practice. Although accountability is foundational to professional practice, a review of the literature revealed no consistent language or definition regarding professional nursing accountability. Instead, the literature itself reveals that professional nursing accountability is challenging to both describe and define. The ambiguity surrounding how to define professional nursing accountability contributes to challenges associated with both teaching and evaluating student nurse accountability within nursing education curricula. This article provides a reliable and comprehensive definition of professional nursing accountability derived from a synthesis of the literature. Recommendations for nursing education practice and recommendations for nursing education research are proposed. (Index words: Professional accountability; Nursing; Nursing education) *J Prof Nurs* 30:43–47, 2014. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

NURSE EDUCATORS HAVE a responsibility to foster students' learning of professional nursing accountability. One challenge faced by nurse educators is ambiguity surrounding how best to define professional accountability. Despite language provided by professional nursing organizations ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing \[AACN\], 2008](#); [Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, 2009](#); [International Council of Nurses \[ICN\], 2000](#); [National Council State Boards of Nursing \[NCSBN\], 2009](#)), nursing education experts report that accountability remains challenging to define. An inconsistent definition of professional nursing accountability contributes to educational challenges that relegate accountability education to the hidden curriculum ([Crigger & Godfrey, 2011](#); [Jacono & Jacono, 1995](#); [Mueller & Billings, 2009](#); [Shultz, 2009](#); [Wilson, 1995](#)). A reliable definition of professional nursing accountability, based on a synthesis of the literature, creates opportunities for nursing faculty to

move accountability education into the legitimate curriculum. In addition, a reliable literature-based definition of accountability provides a foundation upon which to study the meanings and experiences of accountability education in nursing. The purpose of this article is to develop a definition of professional nursing accountability that could then be utilized to intentionally integrate accountability education within nursing curricula.

Professional nursing accountability underpins safe nursing practice ([Shultz, 2009](#)) and is an essential behavior supporting congruence between nursing actions and standards that are associated with quality and safety in patient care. Nurse educators should not assume that nursing students inherently possess behaviors consistent with professional accountability. The lack of such professional accountability could result in less than optimal patient care. Nursing curricula should explicitly incorporate within the legitimate curriculum theory-guided teaching strategies and learning activities that address the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with professional accountability ([AACN, 2008](#); [Baxter & Boblin, 2007](#); [Crigger & Godfrey, 2011](#)).

Accountability is an entry-level competency expected of new graduates; however, according to [Dyess and Sherman \(2009\)](#), many new nurse graduates lack the

*Assistant Professor, University of Portland, Portland, OR.

Address correspondence to Dr. Krautscheid: University of Portland, 5000 North Willamette Blvd, BC348, Portland, OR 97203. E-mail: krautsch@up.edu

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ability to demonstrate accountability. Two descriptive studies that evaluated deficiencies in new graduate nurse competencies cited a lack of accountability, in addition to a lack of other professional behaviors (Berkow, Virkstis, Stewart, & Conway, 2009; Dohmann, 2009). Berkow et al. (2009) reported that among a list of 36 new graduate nurse competencies, only 35% of nurse leaders were satisfied with new graduate nurses' ability to be accountable for their actions. In comparison, Berkow et al. reported that new graduate nurses ranked highest in their utilization of information technologies (53% of nurse leaders were satisfied) and lowest in delegation of tasks (10% of nurse leaders were satisfied). The researchers noted that "more must be done to prepare students for practice in complex care environments" (Berkow et al., 2009, p. 17). Developing a reliable definition of professional nursing accountability will assist nursing faculty with the development of teaching strategies, learning activities, and evaluation methods with the goal of preparing students for entry into practice.

The literature suggests that professional accountability is taught in contemporary nursing curricula; however, that education is reported as either hidden or weakly taught. Crigger and Godfrey (2011), Shultz (2009), and Wilson (1995) reported that virtues and professional behaviors are elusive, difficult to teach, and hidden or not attended to in nursing education. Teaching professional behaviors, including accountability, is complex because of a "perceived lack of program standards consistent with professional standards and limited skills articulating professional deficits" (Killam, Montgomery, Luhanga, Adamic, & Carter, 2010, p. 11). These reported challenges may cause faculty to place more emphasis on cognitive and psychomotor content, which is viewed as concrete, objective, and easier to define. Development of a literature-based definition of professional accountability offers the opportunity to overcome the vague and ambiguous understanding of professional accountability. A reliable definition would support education endeavors of both nursing faculty and nursing students by establishing a foundation upon which they could meaningfully engage in learning encounters that focus on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with professional nursing accountability.

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted to determine what is currently known about defining professional nursing accountability. A systematic review of the literature was conducted via the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Google Scholar databases. The purpose of the review was to define accountability in professional nursing and to understand the background and significance of accountability in professional practice. Key terms used in the literature review included the following: *accountability*, *student*, *nurse*, *education*, *professional behaviors*, *professional socialization*, *professional development*, *professional ethics* and *disposition*.

These key terms resulted in 653 sources from peer-reviewed journal articles in the medical and allied health literature between 1990 and 2011. Abstracts of the 653 articles were reviewed for relevance. Articles were selected if they specifically addressed how to define professional accountability or professional nursing accountability. We also included disconfirming literature, specifically sources that challenged definitions associated with responsibility and accountability. Literature sources were excluded if they did not specifically provide a definition of professional nursing accountability, for example, sources that discussed professional behaviors such as advocacy or altruism and did not incorporate accountability were excluded from the literature review. The inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in locating 26 expository articles and six research articles that fit the purpose of this literature review. Five of the research articles represented a mix of both descriptive quantitative and qualitative studies that focused on identifying and describing unprofessional behaviors of concern among nursing students and staff nurses. One quantitative research article was located from the *Journal of Physical Therapy Education* (Hayward & Blackmer, 2010) that studied how physical therapy faculty teach professional behaviors, inclusive of accountability.

Bibliographies of the expository and research articles were reviewed, seeking additional sources to support a well-rounded review. The bibliographies resulted in locating seven books on the topic of professional behavior development in nursing. Dissertation and master's theses databases were also searched, resulting in locating one dissertation that explored student nurse experiences of professional socialization (Wilson, 1995) and a second dissertation that studied factors influencing the development of moral agency among nurses (Godfrey, 1999). The literature review was considered complete when redundancy in findings was achieved.

The aforementioned literature review process resulted in 41 sources representing a mix of primary and secondary sources. These sources were again appraised against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in the final inclusion of 19 sources that provided the highest level of relevance for defining professional accountability in nursing.

Professional Accountability Defined

A review of the medical and allied health literature resulted in a wide range of definitions of *accountability*. No consistent language for accountability in nursing was located. In fact, several authors reported that disagreements exist as to how best to define professional behaviors (Caulfield, 2005; Dohmann, 2009; Milton, 2008; Shultz, 2009; Snowdon & Rajacich, 1993), making defining professional nursing accountability challenging. This inconsistency in defining accountability may translate into the experience of teaching accountability, that is, if the language within and external to the profession is ambiguous, then nursing

faculty may experience dissonance when attempting to teach accountability.

Within the literature, accountability was embedded, described, and identified with the following terms: *professional socialization, professional values, virtue ethics, professional identity, professional behaviors, ethical behaviors, Code of Ethics, moral agency, ethical decision making, professional development, and character development* (AACN, 2008; American Board of Internal Medicine [ABIM], 2001; American Nurses Association [ANA], 2010; Butts, 2002; Caulfield, 2005; Crigger & Godfrey, 2011; Dohmann, 2009; Glover, 1999; Hayward & Blackmer, 2010; ICN, 2000; Lewis & Batey, 1982; Milton, 2008; National League for Nursing [NLN], 2008; NCSBN, 2009; Oregon State Board of Nursing [OSBN], 2009; Rhodes, 1983; Shultz, 2009; Snowdon & Rajacich, 1993; Wilson, 1995). A systematic review of the definitions offered by each of these authors and agencies resulted in the identification of common language that consistently appeared within the literature. The language in the literature is discussed and synthesized here, culminating in a definition of professional nursing accountability.

The most prevalent language found in the literature, appearing 11 times within 19 references, ties accountability with *responsibility for nursing actions*. For example, according to the AACN (2008), *accountability* means taking “responsibility for individual actions and behaviors” (p. 26). Similarly, for Glover (1999), “each nurse is... responsible for the outcome of his or her professional actions” (p. 2). Dohmann (2009) challenges this language, however, reporting that responsibility is distinctly different from accountability.

According to Dohmann (2009), *responsibility* equates to having the authority to accomplish an activity, whereas *accountability* arises out of one's free choice and strong personal commitment to ensuring that a result is achieved. From a pragmatic viewpoint, Dohmann's distinction between responsibility and accountability would suggest that nurses are responsible for ensuring that nursing actions are carried out and accountable for the results of their actions. This splitting of responsibility and accountability attempts to clarify and distinguish accountability as a separate professional behavior with the goal of helping to identify, label and, therefore, educate nurses on expectations associated with accountability.

In contrast to Dohmann (2009), Bovens (1998) defined responsibility as a dimension of accountability. Supporting the claim that responsibility and accountability are connected, Bovens pointed to the origin of the word *responsibility*. Responsibility derives from the German word *respondere*, which means “giving an answer...in the sense of giving account, justifying oneself” (Bovens, 1998, p. 23). Supporting Bovens's suggestion that responsibility and accountability are connected concepts, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011) defines *responsibility* as “the quality or state of being responsible: moral, legal or mental accountability.” In addition, Merriam-

Webster defines *accountability* as “the quality or state of being accountable: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions.” The literature frequently relates accountability with responsibility. A definition of professional nursing accountability to guide teaching practices should therefore include language associated with the aspects of responsibility for nursing actions.

The second-most prevalent language found in the literature, appearing eight times within 19 references, associates accountability with being *answerable to self and those who are influenced by one's actions*. Snowdon and Rajacich (1993) stated that accountability is connected with “being answerable for one's actions” (p. 5), further explaining that “full accountability can only be held by the professional nurse who is comprehensively educated for the role” (p. 10). Rhodes (1983) and Caulfield (2005) offered similar definitions of *accountability*, reporting that nurses are professional agents who have an obligation to be answerable for their actions regardless of the advice or directions given by other professionals. Finally, Bovens (1998) states, “it suggests that someone takes his tasks and duties seriously, acts only after due deliberation, and considers himself answerable to others for the consequences of his actions” (p. 26). The language of being answerable for one's professional nursing actions is connected with accountability and should be incorporated into a professional accountability definition that will help guide teaching practices.

Four additional areas that were used to define professional accountability were equally noticed in the literature, each appearing four times within the 19 cited references. These areas were described by the following language: nurses are accountable for their *omissions, life-long learning, quality patient care*, and for *upholding standards of the profession*. The literature reported that nurses are not only accountable for what they do but also for their omissions or what they fail to do. For example, “accountability means being prepared to explain and justify one's...actions and omissions to those involved or influenced by one's actions” (Milton, 2008, p. 301). Dohmann (2009) further reported that nurses demonstrate a lack of accountability when they omit or fail to make a choice or fully commit to being accountable. According to Dohmann, when a nurse states, “I'll try to do better” or “I don't know why this situation is happening”(p. 19), he or she is relegating practice to random chance and committing an act of omission toward taking accountability for evidence-based practice. The language of omission within the definition of accountability should be made explicit.

Life-long learning, quality patient care, and *upholding professional standards* were equally described in relationship to accountability within the literature. Each of these terms was primarily cited as an aspect of professional nursing accountability by nursing organizations and education credentialing agencies (ANA, 2010; ICN, 2000; NLN, 2008; OSBN, 2009). For example, the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses states that accountability in

nursing calls for nurses to maintain competence for continual learning, to promote safe and quality care, and to set standards for nursing practice. The Code of Ethics provided by both the ICN and ANA “serve as a mandate for accountability” (Butts, 2002, p. 88). In addition to language provided by professional nursing organizations, expert opinion articles also articulate the relationship between accountable behaviors and professional outcomes. For example, Lewis and Batey (1982) noted that quality patient care and upholding standards defined by societal and organizational frameworks are outcomes of accountability. According to Caulfield (2005), “accountability serves the purpose of describing performance, improving quality patient care, and upholding standards of nursing” (p. 18). Analysis of the literature suggests that a lack of accountability could result in poor nursing practice. In contrast, it is anticipated that nurses who espouse professional accountability engage in life-long learning to maintain and enhance competence, promote quality patient care, and uphold the standards of the nursing profession. Including this language in the definition of professional accountability would provide guidance to nurse educators about what to teach related to accountability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A synthesis of commonly occurring language and related concepts resulted in the formation of a comprehensive definition. Professional nursing accountability will be defined as taking responsibility for one's nursing judgments, actions, and omissions as they relate to life-long learning, maintaining competency, and upholding both quality patient care outcomes and standards of the profession while being answerable to those who are influenced by one's nursing practice. This definition offers a wide view of accountability that is inclusive of the purpose and the process of accountability. This definition provides nurse educators with language upon which to develop teaching strategies and learning activities. Finally, this definition also provides terminology to stimulate research that seeks to explore and understand meanings and experiences associated with the phenomenon of teaching accountability.

Initial recommendations for nursing education focus on an intentional introduction of terminology and definitions associated with professional behaviors (ABIM, 2001; Baxter & Boblin, 2007; Hayward & Blackmer, 2010; Kohlberg, 1975; NCSBN, 2009; Quinn, 1990; Vezeau, 2006; Wilson, 1995). In addition to formal lectures, multiple sources reported that a consistent and congruent language would aid in teaching professional behaviors and that this language should be evident in institutional documents, for example, mission statements, program outcomes, course outcomes, and evaluation tools (ABIM, 2001; Baxter & Boblin, 2007; Crigger & Godfrey, 2011; Wilson, 1995). Exposing students to the language of accountability, its definition, and expected learning outcomes sets the stage for expectations and provides a framework for

feedback on the development of accountability behaviors, limiting the confusion and challenges associated with inconsistent language.

Following an introduction to accountability terminology, the literature recommends engaging students in discussions with peers, facilitated by knowledgeable faculty. A professional values development course provided to the students in Hayward and Blackmer's (2010) study introduced language associated with professional values, incorporated case studies to apply concepts, engaged students in discussions with peers and faculty, required students to participate in self-reflection on values, and ensured formative faculty feedback.

Educational methods that incorporate multiple learning activities, as described by Hayward and Blackmer (2010), are consistent with those described elsewhere in the literature. For example, Godfrey (1999) noted that internalization of professional values requires more than knowledge construction alone. The literature encourages values clarification exercises, incorporating Socratic questioning, exposure to value-laden experiences (simulated and real), ensuring ongoing and repetitive reflection, and creating dissonance and disequilibrium (AACN, 2008; Crigger & Godfrey, 2011; Kohlberg, 1975; Quinn, 1990; Vezeau, 2006). According to Baxter and Boblin (2007), students need to encounter disequilibrium to challenge their thinking and to develop behaviors consistent with those required of professional nurses. When students encounter disequilibrium, it is essential that their thinking be facilitated by a knowledgeable professional to ensure the development of mental models consistent with professional standards.

Throughout the learning process, “access to support by faculty members should be assured for students learning new behaviors” (Vezeau, 2006, p. 6). Ongoing and repetitive feedback is an effective teaching strategy to help students make connections between what they believe, what they value, and how their beliefs and values influence how they act (Quinn, 1990). The challenges with providing consistent, quality feedback are noted in the literature (Crigger & Godfrey, 2011; Jacono & Jacono, 1995; Quinn, 1990; Vezeau, 2006; Wilson, 1995). Most notable is a consistent theme describing professional behavior education as challenging and reports that faculty lack sufficient knowledge for guiding discussions, facilitating critical reflection, and providing feedback. These challenges, when combined with an inconsistent and ambiguous definition of professional nursing accountability, contribute to the issues of hidden accountability education in nursing curricula.

Recommendations for nursing research include utilizing the definition proposed in this article to guide research that seeks to understand the meanings and experiences associated with the phenomenon of teaching professional nursing accountability. For example, what are the experiences of nurse educators who teach professional nursing accountability? Do nurse educators intentionally teach students to be accountable for their actions and nonactions because

they relate to life-long learning, maintaining competency, upholding the standards of the profession, and ensuring quality nursing practice?

The development of a reliable definition, derived from the literature, will assist nurse educators to effectively articulate and evaluate student nurse attainment of this professional behavior. A reliable definition also assists nurse researchers to investigate and develop evidence-based understandings about professional nursing accountability education. Foremost, the definition proposed in this article provides a framework and common ground upon which nurse educators and nurse researchers may collectively engage in discourse about professional nursing accountability.

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