Social Norms in the Profession of Nursing

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Various theorists have classified norms into two broad categories, collective and perceived norms (Lapinski & Rimal 2005). Collective norms are upheld within groups such as in a community, institution, or profession. On the other hand, individuals manifest perceived norms. The nature of collective and perceived norms can be either descriptive or injunctive. On the individual level, descriptive norms guide the decision to act in a certain manner while injunctive norms place some pressure on the individual to act in a particular way.

Social norms are described as rules of conduct that are applied within a group to determine whether an action is appropriate or inappropriate. Social norms are characterized by attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that conform to the group rules. Social norms are enforceable within society because individuals are afraid of exclusion, which is the most severe consequence of disobedience.

Nursing like any other human profession is governed by social norms. Nurses work every day among fellow nurses and other healthcare professionals to deliver wholesome healthcare to patients. The nursing profession is one of the noblest in society. This is because the primary goal of nursing care is to improve the overall quality of life for nursing patients. To this end, nurses employ elaborate work norms. Nurses wear uniforms that are universally identifiable. They also work hard within their groups to ensure that they deliver value to their patients and their employers.

Within the workplace, there is the norm of cooperation. This social norm is driven by the need to increase efficiency in the end. Nurses and doctors may not agree all the
time but they do understand that proper patient care depends on their ability to cooperate. Some of the norms that may be followed within the nursing profession are the norms of reciprocity. This norm dictates that it is polite to return a favor with another. If a colleague offers to cover a shift, the benefactor is required to return the favor as soon as possible (Lapinski, & Rimal, 2005). The norms of reciprocity also dictate that one should give gifts during special occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays, or weddings to colleagues and even patients undergoing treatment.

The norm of distribution is equally applicable in the nursing profession. Nurses historically grouped themselves into professional groups to push for the advancement of their professional interests. These professional organizations are driven and created out of the need to balance the distribution of power within the healthcare profession. For a long time, doctors have been ranked higher than nurses and other healthcare givers. The norm of distribution allows nurses to fight for equal or equitable consideration within the profession.

There are several sanctions applied within the nursing profession. These sanctions work through both formal and informal avenues to regulate conduct among nurses. Formal sanctions include uniforms, designated working stations, work schedules, and timesheets. All these are put in place to ensure that nurses are easily identifiable and are fully occupied during their official working hours. Informal sanctions include stigma from colleagues after unacceptable behavior such as having an affair with the boss. The ultimate sanction for going against social norms is rejection and expulsion from the group. This can be formal or informal. Formal rejection could occur in the case where the misconduct amounted to professional negligence. Informal rejection
only occurs within the perceived group that an individual may have belonged to. For example if a nurse has an affair with a doctor, this could be interpreted as a betrayal to the fellow nurses and gross professional misconduct depending on the organizational policy on such matters (Lapinski, & Rimal, 2005). The nurse could suffer both personal and professional rejection.
References