

# What makes a nurse today?

## A debate on the nursing professional identity and its need for change

- Philosophical analysis, review
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### Introduction

Nurses often are being seen as compassionate helpers (van der Cingel, 2014). The public image of nursing, however, consists of stereotypes such as:

- nursing being a 'doing' profession
- care being a 'female' characteristic

The nursing identity seems a simple and straightforward enough construct, but nothing less is true.

### Nurses can do it!



### Nursing, a profession in need

Dominant images form a **public image** of nursing (Hallam, 2012). Nursing seems quite valued in the public opinion. Therefore, one would expect nursing to be a desired and attractive profession for many, and that the profession would not have any **retention** or workforce issues.



Unfortunately, this is not the case. Nursing is not **attractive** and desirable enough to keep all nurses aboard.

### Traces of History

The shaping of the nursing identity is one of ages, in which many historical and social developments contributed. Our current image of nursing is deeply influenced by Nightingale's ideas, but notions such as nursing being **dirty work** or a **religious calling** from before nursing became a profession, also still influence nursing today (Frechette & Carnevale, 2020).

### Nurses' identity

Identity can be seen as a construct of:

- individual, societal and professional values such as: **compassion, trust, autonomy**

Nurses themselves also have normative ideas about what the profession ideally should look like, in which **stereotypical images** are present. Nurses as well as the public image contribute to stereotyping (Steele & Davies, 2003).



### Stereotypes

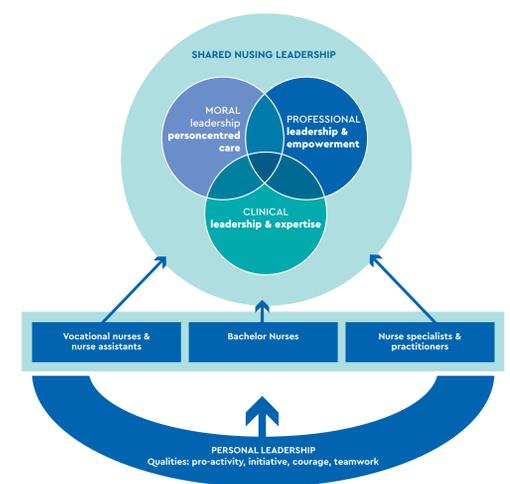
The shaping of an identity is a continuous process that one develops, and which can change over time (Verhaeghe, 2012). This also applies to a social **group identity**. A social group can confirm labels and adapts accordingly. This has a **reinforcing effect** because individuals change their behavior in order to fit in the group.

Therefore, we need to communicate a **multilayered view of nursing** to ourselves and the world!

### Conclusion

Specific characteristics of nursing as remnants from the past and in dominant images today became stereotypes that **hinder the flourishing of nursing** as a profession. Images such as nursing being a gendered and 'doing' job solely, give us a very flat and simplified idea of nursing.

Such a view does not consider underlying moral values which motivates nurses. It also denies the **uniqueness** of individual nurses. If nursing has the courage to let go of stereotypes it can live up to a **renewed, modern and attractive professional identity** in which **nursing leadership** can flourish.



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