

When the World is White

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Abstract

This essay offers insights into racial disparities in the nursing profession and nursing education. Perspectives are offered on cultural competency and a Eurocentric worldview. Historical antecedents of whiteness are discussed and the links between race and status are noted.

Key Words: Diversity, nursing education, racism, essay

American nursing has been and continues to be a predominantly white, female profession that does not reflect the diversity of the population. Racial disparity in the profession is also projected to increase, as ethnic/racial minority groups will represent 50% of the population by the middle of this century. Recruiting and retaining minority students in schools of nursing has become a topic of much discussion, yet students continue to be predominantly young, white women. The United States nursing education system has been viewed by some as a culture that reflects white, middle-class values, which creates barriers for minority students (Sullivan Commission, 2004). It is suggested by dissenting voices in the profession that subtle forms of racism exist among predominantly white faculty and students that make the educational experience particularly difficult for underrepresented students (Allen, 2006; Hassounah-Phillips & Beckett, 2003; Puzan, 2003). This essay explores some of the issues with race in nursing education.

Emphasis on cultural competence in nursing education is evident when one looks at the literature of the last few decades. Such competence has been described as the ability to care competently for patients or clients from cultures other than one's own. "Transcultural nursing" is considered essential in nursing curriculum to eliminate the shadow of racism in which one culture is cast as the norm from which others differ. Leininger (1995) suggested, "some of the most significant changes in nursing are related to learning, teaching,

and applying transcultural nursing knowledge" and that using transcultural nursing knowledge "is leading to different ways of practicing nursing" (p. 10). Emphasis is most often placed on preparing nurses to provide culturally specific care for a diverse population. Yet there is little emphasis on the need for schools to respond to the needs of culturally diverse students. American educational institution culture is most often framed from a Eurocentric worldview and has the potential to create conflicts for students with differing cultural perspectives. While recruitment efforts have led to increased enrollment of minority students, attrition rates of non-white students from schools of nursing continue to increase. Some scholars suggest that this may be attributed in part to curricula that do not reflect the cultural perspectives of non-majority students.

The profession has done little to examine its own practices for inclusion of racial, cultural, and ethnic differences within the educational system. De Leon Siantz (2008) noted that the need for changing nursing educational environments is imminent. Calling for change at the highest levels of educational institutions, she suggested that risk taking is necessary to transform nursing education for the future. It is acknowledged that the concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture are socially constructed and not shaped by biology (Nairn, Hardy, Parumal, & Williams, 2004), however we continue to struggle with the conflicts that such concepts have created in the world around us. It is critical that nurse educators and other members of the nursing profession address the issues that encumber efforts to form a profession that reflects diversity. These is-

ues include racism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and lack of cultural understanding (Sutherland, 2002).

The word "nurse" provokes a variety of images, for some it is the feeding and nurturing of an infant or small child, but for most Americans it is a figure, most often female, of Western European descent, dressed in white, administering to the sick. The image provokes thoughts of the aseptic hospital environment. While the population of the United States has changed, reflecting a culturally diverse population, the image of the nurse has remained essentially unchanged. The white uniform may be outdated, but the white woman is still the prominent figure in professional nursing (Figures 1, 2, & 3). Traditional nursing leaders are women of middle- and upper-class white families. Their perspectives on order, behavior, and professionalism have shaped the profession for over a century. The single woman in the starched collar with uniform pressed and spotless was the epitome of the ideal nurse until the mid-20th century (Figures 4 & 5). Female students remained unable to marry until the 1960s. White typically connotes purity and innocence; however, in the setting of nursing education white has come to imply the rigid, Eurocentric culture that is dominant in nursing education. Few images of women of color, who were also pioneers in the profession, are as readily available (Figures 6 & 7). Although considered a neutral color in the world of art, white is far from neutral when considering issues of power in the realm of nursing. Puzan (2003) demonstrated that the terms white and non-white not only represent categories of skin color, but also categories of domination and power. Fox (1994) discussed Korzbski's studies of general semantics in which he recognized a relationship between language, behavior, and reality. In general semantics, words are not the same as experience; the word is not always the same



THE PERRY PICTURE. FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE. 1929

Figure 1. Florence Nightingale.

as the thing that is being symbolized. It is important to remember that the experience of images may outweigh what the written or spoken word portrays. Images of the Superintendents of the Army demonstrate this clearly (Figures 3 & 8). Puzan described whiteness as an “unexamined substrate upon which all life is sustained... Those who are racially designated are measured against mostly implicit standards of whiteness and, whether they are willing or unwilling, able or unable to meet those standards, find themselves deficient or subordinate” (p. 194). Whiteness is equated with privilege and advantage over those who non-white (Allen, 2006). Those who are white get to make and validate the rules. Whiteness determines who belongs and who does not. White and non-white are linked with socially valued and negative attributes. White often becomes synonymous

with racist. Consider the character of Nurse Ratched (Figure 4) in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Her character is synonymous with rigidity and intolerance. Ironically, white light is comprised of all colors of the light spectrum, while white in this instance is reflective of the absence of diversity. When we consider culture in nursing we generally speak of culture that is outside the boundaries of a white, middle-class female-dominated world (Figure 5). Transcultural nursing refers to the study and practice of nursing that focuses in differences and similarities among cultures with respect to health and nursing care. We seldom consider the need for transcultural nursing education, which would focus on the need to provide educational experiences within the boundaries of diverse cultural beliefs and practices of students. Cultural competence is sometimes defined as the

ability to provide effective clinical care for a particular ethnic or racial group and is seldom seen as the ability to reach a culturally diverse student population with varying perspectives on health and illness and female roles. There is so much dialogue about cultural diversity as the differences in those who are non-white that we fail to recognize and discuss the attributes of whiteness.

Attrition of students of color is often associated with the absence of social connections, including role models who are people of color, financial supports, and commitment and support from predominantly white faculty (Hassouneh-Phillips & Beckett, 2003).

Puzan (2003) suggested that there is an entrenchment of whiteness in nursing, evident in practice, and where nursing education takes place. When we are white, we are neutral and those who are not are viewed as distinctly different. White is representative of the dominant Eurocentric culture. People of color continually examine their status with relationship to prejudice in the everyday world, while whites are typically unaware of the meaning of their race as a component of status, power, and authority. Among non-whites, white is synonymous with the status and privilege of the dominant culture. Whiteness for whites is taken for granted. For students and nurses of color, “acting white” is often a way to blend into the nursing establishment. This may require embracing certain behaviors, communication patterns, and practices from the dominant culture to gain acceptance. While this may be useful in working in the white healthcare establishment, it is often a cause of personal and interpersonal conflict. Professional survival often requires submitting to the rules of established white authority while incurring loss of personal and cultural identity. For nurses of color, “wearing the whites” is distinctly more than dressing for work.

It is imperative that nursing faculty conduct research with students of color to explore, describe, and understand their perceptions of education in a predominantly white nursing education culture. Through



Figure 2. M. Adelaide Nutting



Figure 4. Nurse Ratched, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.



Figure 3. Jane Delano, Second Superintendent, Army Nurse Corps.



Figure 5. Class of 1941, Johns Hopkins University Hospital School of Nursing.

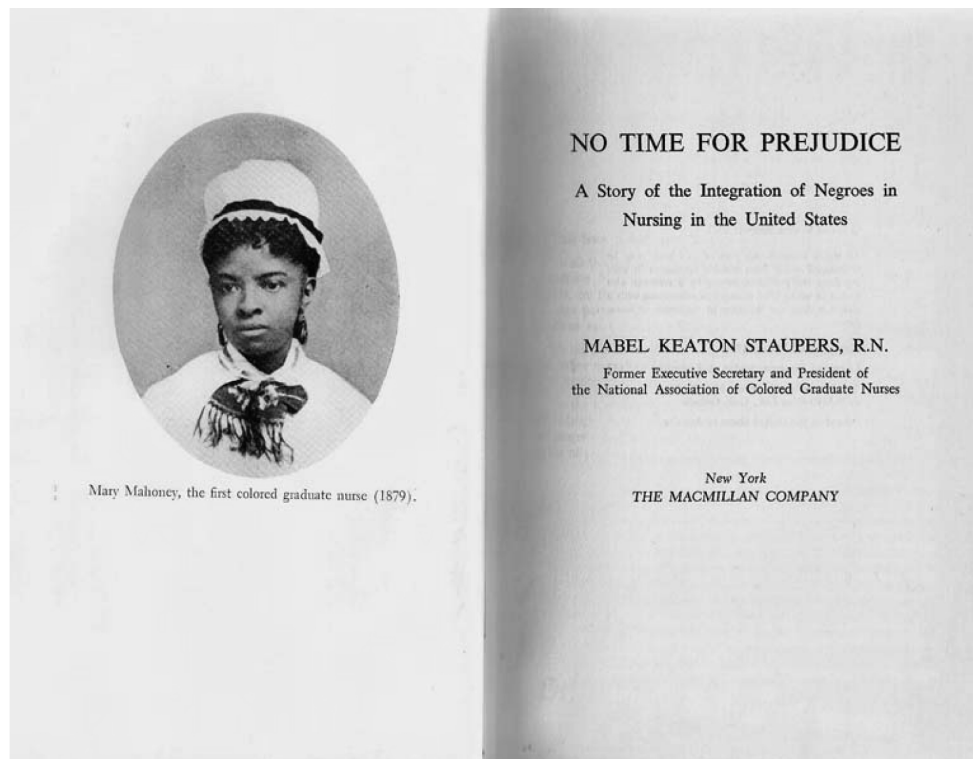


Figure 6. Mary Eliza Mahoney.



Figure 7. Mary Seacole.



Figure 8. Julia Flikke, Sixth Superintendent, Army Nurse Corps

such research, faculty may be able to link theories of culture with theories of caring. They might ultimately identify teaching strategies sensitized by the many experiences that diverse students bring to educational and clinical environments.

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