

Becoming a nurse: Premises for selecting and engaging in an occupation

Stephen Billett (Griffith University), Jennifer Newton (Monash University) and Cherene M. Ockerby (Southern Health)

Abstract

What motivates and directs individuals towards particular careers is an important issue for vocational and professional education. Individuals, their families and community invest significant time and financial resources when learning about and how to participate effectively in their selected occupation. Yet, given high attrition rates in some forms of occupational preparation and high levels early separation from occupations, understanding the bases by which individuals make decisions about their occupation becomes important. Drawing on synopses of earlier studies, and a current study of student nurses engagement with their occupation, it is proposed that individuals make occupational choices at various distances from the occupation itself. Importantly, individuals' premises for wanting to become a nurse are multi-fold, distinct and likely shaped by the particular experiences of each individual's life history. Yet, the more remote that decision-making occurs from actual practice the greater their choice is premised on ideals, rather than actualities of the occupation. Regardless, the process of forming an identity associated with an occupation is premised on negotiations between the occupation as a conception of practice and what is experienced through engaging with the occupation. Those who have a greater knowledge of what constitutes the occupation in practice and its requirements are more likely to engage in distinct kinds of negotiations and make more informed decisions about their chosen work or occupation, than those who have not engaged or have done so only remotely. These negotiated bases suggest the process of becoming is one negotiated between personal and social imperatives more than participation alone or the particular qualities of an occupation. In all, the agency of the individual directs and mediates these negotiations in identifying with and 'becoming' a practitioner.

Engaging in occupations and becoming

An important issue for vocational and professional education is what motivates and directs individuals towards particular careers. Individuals invest significant time and financial resources when learning how to participate effectively in a selected occupation. Significant public and private resources are also expended in this preparation through individuals' participation in educational programmes and in work, as either a student and/or novice worker. Furthermore, there are growing demands to more closely align higher and vocational education with opportunities available in the labour market and for both higher and vocational education to meet national strategic interests. So, when individuals elect not to complete courses preparing them for a particular occupation, or withdraw from that occupation shortly after completing their course, another kind of societal cost is incurred - the shortfall in meeting the kinds of occupations that society needs and has planned to secure. In this way, a range of personal and societal resources are expended as a result of individuals' decisions about their preferred career choices. These commitments are significant, particularly when the occupations require extensive preparatory experiences and are undertaken over an extended period of time because they are costly in both direct and indirect ways. Therefore, when individuals elect to leave an occupation or fail to complete the course considerable costs in personal, institutional, economic and societal terms may result. For instance, currently, in Australia the non-completion rate in entry-level training (e.g. apprenticeships) stands at close to 50% of those participating in them (ref). This level of attrition is unacceptable in national, economic, personal and community terms.

Beyond the cost in time and resources in the initial preparation for an occupation, early separations is also costly because those skills are no longer available, possibly in an occupation where there is need for those skills. Often, this voluntary separation can be found in types of employment where workers are in high demand, but where the work is characterised by having a

low societal esteem. For instance, the high level of voluntary occupational separation of hairdressers and nurses (both highly feminised occupations) are but two examples that illustrate particular personal, institutional and societal costs. In all, we need to know more about how best to inform individuals about and prepare them for making decisions about their preferred occupation..

However, currently the conceptual tools available to understand the process of occupational selection and identity formation remain incomplete. Perhaps most famously, Lave and Wenger (1991) have suggested that through participation in a social practice individuals form an identity associated with that practice. They map a pathway from peripheral to centripetal participation in a community of practice. Yet, participation in work alone is not a sufficient explanation, as the drop out rate of apprentices mentioned earlier indicates. Moreover, even when individuals complete their apprenticeships, the attrition beyond initial preparation is quite high in some occupations, for example the separation of hairdressers described above. Further, as Hodges (1998) notes, participation can lead to dis-identification from an occupational practice. What is proposed in the current paper is that the process of identifying with an occupational practice is one negotiated between the imperatives of individuals' needs and trajectories and the affordances or invitational qualities of the practices in which individuals participate. That is, there is relational interdependence between the personal and the social and natural world beyond the personal, which is central to decisions about engaging in and coming to identify with an occupation.

This paper discusses these interdependent, but personally relational, bases upon which individuals select their occupation and the process through which they come to identify their occupation as a vocation. The diverse premises on which a cohort of nursing students decided to become nurses are considered (Newton, Kelly, Kremser, Jolly, & Billett, 2009). The concern here is to understand the kinds of personal and social bases through which individuals select occupations and the processes that led them to these occupations as likely vocations. The analysis offered goes beyond the orthodoxy that such decision-making is shaped by either rational choice or social structures. Instead, the associations between personal values and histories (i.e. earlier experiences) are held to play a key role in the decision-making and also the process of beginning to identify with an occupation to the extent that it can be thought of as the individual's vocation.

In making its case, the paper is structured as follows. Firstly, consideration is given to the nature of the personal, institutional and societal contributions in selecting a particular occupation, through discussing the means by which individuals construct their vocations. Next, bases for individuals' decision-making about engaging with particular occupations are discussed through an appraisal of the current ways of explaining these decisions, drawing on studies of aged care workers, bakers, and a market worker. Following this, initial findings from a study of student nurses are used to identify and illuminate the factors that contributed to them electing to engage with the occupation of nursing. From this, a more elaborated account of the premises upon which individuals make career decisions is proposed. This account emphasises an individual's life history, social circumstance and priorities and beliefs as being engaged and negotiated in ways that are person-dependent, yet shaped by their particular engagement with society. These ongoing negotiations include experiences within family, community and experience of the social world. Thus, efforts to minimise personal costs, institutional commitments and societal needs might best be realised through providing individuals with experiences of particular occupations in order to seek alignment between their personal interests, motivations and agency, and what the occupation affords them in terms of a basis for a vocation. The paper concludes by suggesting that beyond the practicalities of knowledge of and engagement in occupations, the importance of aligning personal interests and capacities with particular occupations through proximal access is critical. That is, they need to experience the occupation and its practice before significant levels of personal and societal investment are expended.

Occupational choice: personal, institutional and societal factors

Individuals make decisions about a preferred occupation and pursue learning in order to engage in that occupation. These are important decisions for individuals because they are likely to invest

significant time and resources in realising that choice, and possibly come to identify with that occupation as their vocation. This decision-making might or might not commence a process of learning about the occupation, how it is practised and to lead to the formation of a personal–social identity as they become practitioners. Lehmann (2007) suggests that school students' decisions about post-school life are often explained in terms of two distinct premises: (i) human capital or rational choice theory that assumes cost-benefit analyses are undertaken as part of the decision-making; and (ii) social structured outcomes that often emphasise the capacities of social and institutional structures to reinforce inequalities. That is, students' engage in a process of rational decision-making, premised on realising personal goals. However, the pathway to the formation of a personal-social occupational identity may not necessarily arise in this way. For many students in educational programs preparing for an occupation, it may not be until their second year of enrolment, or even later, that they experience actual practice.

Of course, for others, the opposite is the case. That is, they engage in a form of conveniently available work (without it being a preferred occupation) but through a process of participation they come to identify with this work as their occupation (Somerville, 2003), or, perhaps more accurately as their vocation (Dewey, 1916). Such engagement may arise through access (i.e. observation, partial participation) to the particular occupational practice (Newton et al., 2009), or from other kinds of close approximation to the practice (Chan, 2009). For instance, there are many reasons why people make a decision to become a nurse. The desire to help or care for others and to contribute to society, are often reported as dominant factors influencing this choice (Boughn, 2001; Prater & McEwen, 2006; Zyberg & Berry, 2005). However, these premises can have quite personally distinct conceptions. What constitutes 'helping others', for instance, for some student nurses can mean seeking positive feedback from their patients when giving care (Rognstad, Nortvedt, & Aasland, 2004), so that issues of self-concern are enmeshed in caring for others. Hence, the apparent contradiction of associations with being seen and acknowledged as helping others was really about helping oneself (i.e. sustaining a personal sense of self). So, motivations for engagement are premised in a range of sentiments associated with fulfilling a long held goal. This goal might be the need to form an occupational identity, dissatisfaction with current work or some haphazard processes that lead unintentionally to coming to identify with an occupation as a vocation. So, there are personally distinct and diverse pathways that lead individuals to identify with a particular occupation, and to make it their vocation. Indeed, as Hansen (1994) stated one of the key distinctions between employment and a vocation is the degree by which individuals consent to identify with the work they do, and take it as their vocation. All of this underlines the importance of identifying whether personal needs and subjectivities are alignable with the selected occupation.

There are two commonly applied uses of the term vocation in the English language: an occupation or a personal trajectory. They each have quite distinct meanings that need to be delineated for the purposes of the case being made here and the broader project of vocational education. Occupations are a set of practices that have conceptual, procedural and dispositional dimensions that are shaped in and transformed in response to evolving societal needs. As such, they exist as institutional facts: that is of society (Searle, 1995). Yet, although premised in societal need, and evolving through history, as the needs of society and technologies change, occupational practices will only have a specific form when enacted in a particular workplace setting (Billett, 2001). So another institutional fact: situational requirements, shape how they are enacted, and whether the ideal that some are drawn to is realised in their practice. Thus, much of occupations' form and development are imperatives of the social world. They are the callings that individuals are drawn to which might exist in social forms but are appropriated by individuals as they participate in them, find personal meaning, secure attachments and use them to meet their needs, goals and trajectories.

In this way, vocations are something premised upon personal needs, imperatives and experience, albeit being shaped by the social world and arising through personal negotiations with that world. The emphasis here is on vocations as personal practices with which individuals identify and with that identification often related to their valuing of or engagement with the social world

(Dewey 1916). This distinction of personal attachment and appropriation is important because although individuals engage in a range of practices, they will not assent to all of these as being central to their sense of self, and what they call themselves. So, for individuals, ultimately, vocations are associated with their subjectivity. Yet, not all of paid work that individuals undertake can be classified as their vocations: only those that hold meaning for them. Martin (2001) suggests that “vocations are the work we choose to do as distinct from the job we have to do” (p.257). Similarly, Hansen (1994, p. 263-64) states that:

... being a teacher, a minister, a doctor, or a parent would *not* be vocational if the individual kept the practice at arm’s length, divorced from his or her sense of identity, treating it in effect as one among many indistinguishable occupations. In such a case, the person would be merely an occupant of a role. This is not to say the person would conceive the activity as meaningless. He or she might regard it as strictly a job, as a necessity one has to accept, perhaps in order to secure the time or resources to do something else. Thus, in addition to being of social value, an activity must yield a sense of personal fulfilment in its own right in order to be a vocation.

Dewey (1916) also emphasises the significance of these personal dimensions claiming that they are the bases for and enactment of vocations. He proposes that not only are vocations the personal embodiment of occupations, but they are given form, direction and value by those who assent to them as their vocations.

A vocation means nothing but such direction in life activities as render them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and are also useful to his [sic] associates. ... Occupation is a concrete term for continuity. It includes the development of artistic capacity of any kind, of special scientific ability, of effective citizenship, as well as professional and business occupations, to say nothing of mechanical labor or engagement in gainful pursuits. (Dewey, 1916, p.307)

Dewey also emphasises the importance of individuals securing a vocation, through occupations.

An occupation is the only thing that balances the distinctive capacity of an individual with his [sic] social services. To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness. Nothing is more tragic than failure to discover one’s true business in life or to find that one has drifted or been forced by circumstances into an uncongenial calling. (Dewey, 1916, p.308)

Consequently, more important than the societal standing of a particular occupation, is what it means to individuals and its consonance with their beliefs and values. Here, Dewey (1916) articulates a clear goal for education and educators: assisting individuals to find the calling to which they are suited. However, in some ways an occupation has to be more than what individuals crave of it. Individuals’ capacities, energy and interests will not always be consistent with what is required for a particular occupation. Moreover, individuals’ sense of agency and commitment to their work may well embody the belief, whether consciously or not, true or falsely that they have something to contribute to it (Hansen, 1994). But the notion of being “called”, of having something distinctive to offer, should not be taken to imply a kind of blind faith in one’s capabilities or desires, however consonant they are with the individual's beliefs. The importance of occupations becoming vocations stands as a central consideration for those interested in vocational education. The German concept of occupation or *Beruf* which comprises a body of systematically related theoretical knowledge [Wissen] and a set of practical skills [Können], as well as the social identity of the person who has acquired these (Winch, 2004), is useful in capturing both dimensions of occupations as vocations.

This definition is also helpful in understanding the relations between occupations and vocations, and in particular, an individual's identity with a particular occupation. In doing so, it also provides a reminder of the two purposes that Dewey (1916) proposes for vocational education: (i) aligning individuals’ capacities and interests and (ii) preparing them for the occupation to which they are drawn. For instance, it seems that strong social factors play a role in young women's choice to become hairdressers, dental assistants and nurses. That is, at the time they are forming their

identity as young women they are drawn to gendered (i.e. feminised) occupations. Yet, given the high attrition rates in those occupations, the evidence suggests that these premises are flawed and have deleterious consequences for some of these young women. Hence, idealised views about what represents a particular occupation that constitute an individual's choice about an initial occupation may be ill-informed and undertaken in the absence of knowledge about the everyday practice requirements of that occupation. Instead, ideals arising from societal sentiments may well predominate.

Decision-making and occupational choice

Quite distinct bases for engaging in and coming to identify with an occupation have been identified in recent studies. Allan (2008) notes the way that women who married farmers became farmers' wives, and sometimes engaged fully as a farm worker and owner. Through this process they came to identify as being a farmer not through choice of occupation, but by marrying a farmer. Her account provides richly personal and situational premises for the process of becoming a farmer's wife that extends beyond developing the capacities for farming work and includes becoming a member of a farming family and community. Importantly, Allan (2008) identifies how the process of becoming a 'farmer's wife' was engaged with, sustained and transformed in quite different ways across a group of such women. It was a complex and individually-negotiated process shaped by the family circumstances, situational factors and personal dispositions of these farmers' wives. For many of these women, their starting point was quite distant from farming work. Hence, they had little understanding of the requirements of being or the journey to become a farmer. These journeys were completed in personally distinct ways and not all of these women either assented to or continued to identify as a farmer.

Somerville (2003) notes the way that aged care workers came to identify with an occupation that attracts little societal esteem. Many aged care workers in her study initially commenced such work through convenience of location and availability of work. Some of them came to identify with the work as their vocation as demonstrated in their effortful engagement and caring behaviours, and eventually assenting to become identified as aged care workers. So, although the decision to initially engage in this form of work was not about occupational preference, instead the need of an income, some of these workers came to identify strongly with being aged care workers. Hence, this attachment arose not from pursuing a preferred occupation but through engagement in an unfamiliar form of paid work, that came to me and something important to these workers. Similarly, in study of young people becoming bakers, many of the apprentices initially engaged in baking because of a lack of other viable choices (Chan, 2009). They came to engage in baking via other work carried out in proximity to the baking work per se. That is, through employment such as retail work associated with baked products or cleaning at a bakery, the apprentices were able to see and experience bakers at work. Once engaged fully in baking, the apprentices came to identify with baking work, and in particular, with their participation in and standing in the particular bakery in which they worked. So, their premises for developing an occupational identity were premised on the particular bakery. Later, they became to identify more generally as a baker.

The personal imperatives of a woman working in a wholesale fruit and vegetable market provide another instance where strong personal rationales were the basis of decision making about work and occupations (Billett, Smith, & Barker, 2005). This worker was a single mother who was highly motivated to secure an identity outside of the home. She engaged in the work in the market with the conscious imperative of securing employment and an occupational identity. She was able to secure a form of work in which she became the workplace specialist and made it her own area of practice. She also worked effortfully to secure enhanced responsibilities and standing in the workplace. In this way, she formed her occupational identity out of opportunity and persistence, rather than progressing towards an idealised occupational outcome, which was the trajectory of another individual in the same workplace (Smith, 2004).

Consequently, from each of these studies, it is possible to identify structural factors such as male ownership of a farm and farming family into which the woman marries; the low standing of

aged care work which made it available to workers without specific preparation or skills, and the employment options available to students whose educational success constrained their choices. There is also some evidence here of rational decision-making, of particular kinds associated with personal need and even those evolving through the experiencing of work. However, what constitutes rational decision-making goes further than economic or strategic decision-making. It is evident from these studies is that although there were structural factors at play and processes of decision-making engaged, how these individuals engaged with socially structured situations and the kinds of decision-making processes in which they engaged was premised upon a range of situation and personal factors as well. This extended not only to participation in the occupation, but as Allan's (2008) research indicates, the bases by which individuals decided to disengage from that occupation or transform it in some way in response to their purposes and needs.

As these studies demonstrate there were clear differences in the workers' starting points and distinctions between decisions to engage in paid work, sense of vocation and career trajectory. Understanding what motivates individuals to engage in nursing as a career is important given high attrition rates amongst nurses and a critical global shortage. In order to elaborate these distinctions, the next sections draw on a primary study of individuals becoming nurses (Newton et al., 2009).

Premises for becoming a nurse

Knowing what motivates individuals to nurse may assist healthcare systems determine how best to support nurses' career development and retention. Indeed, the recruitment and retention of nurses has become a worldwide concern for healthcare systems for a number of reasons. The high attrition of new graduates, together with a high incidence of nurses leaving healthcare work and an increasingly ageing nursing workforce, mean that problems of succession planning are becoming fraught. The findings reported here arise from a longitudinal, multi method investigation that included interviews with undergraduate student nurses, registered nurses, Nurse Unit Managers and Directors of Nursing from four hospitals across an Australian healthcare organisation. Overall, the data indicated that there were four key themes common to all participants that motivated their interest to become nurses: (i) a desire to help, (ii) caring, (iii) a sense of achievement and (iv) self-validation (Newton et al., 2009). These premises suggest that the orthodox view that decisions about participating in an occupation are premised upon a personal cost benefit analysis or on societal structuring of occupational choices stands as an insufficient explanation. To elaborate further the premises for becoming a nurse, this paper focuses on the views expressed by a group of 11 student nurses, a representative and illustrative subset of the 28 student nurses who participated in the larger study.

The majority of the informants were, at the time, in the second year of their nursing degree with some experience of nursing practicums. Yet, the point of progress in their studies was not always a clear indication of their nursing experience, as a number of them had significant nursing or health-related experiences prior to entering the degree program. Thus, some came directly to the nursing degree from schooling while others had taken more circuitous routes to making the commitment to enrol in an undergraduate course to prepare them to be a registered nurse.

Bases of occupational decision-making

In the first of a series of five interviews, student nurses were asked about their life histories, reasons for choosing nursing as a career and the degree by which nursing work was consistent with their values. The interviews were audio-recorded and converted into verbatim transcripts, and analysed qualitatively to understand the reasons for becoming nurses and the pathways followed. Table 1 provides a summary of the (pseudonymously named) student nurses' responses to the questions about how their values associated with nursing had been shaped by earlier experiences. Summaries of data about their personal value and earlier experiences are presented in this table. Personal and life history contributions to the student nurses' decision-making are reported separately to provide a basis through which they can be appraised, compared and any relationships identified. That is, they

are not seen as oppositional concepts, but factors which may both separately and together offer helpful explanatory bases for understanding the decision-making involved in becoming a nurse.

As Table 1 illustrates, diverse journeys were taken by these individuals to becoming a nurse. For some, the pathway was direct from school. However, for others their decision arose from experiences in which they observed and came to appreciate nursing work. These students had concluded that nursing at the level which requires university preparation (i.e. Division 1 nurse) was the kind of work that they wanted to do. For instance, Amanda engaged in care related activities as part of her schooling and was variously employed as a hospital orderly, working in a doctor's surgery and teaching first aid before gaining entry into the nursing degree program through a course in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) which qualified her to work as an enrolled nurse (Division 2 nurse). Having unsuccessfully attempted to gain direct entry into the undergraduate nursing course, Amanda persisted in finding a route to become a nurse through enrolling in this certificate course, knowing it would articulate into the undergraduate degree program. She demonstrated a significant and enduring interest in becoming a nurse. This interest commenced in another country, and spanned her time as a mother and the various allied health work she undertook. Although nursing had been her long term career goal, she reported it was an interest in the technicalities and processes of nursing, as much as the caring dimensions of the work which motivated her interests.

Stef provides an example of different shorter journey. She went directly from high school into a physiotherapy undergraduate program. Physiotherapy, being classified as a health profession in Australia, could be considered a higher status occupation than nursing, with university entrant requirements considerably higher for physiotherapy than for nursing. Even so, Stef claimed that her first preference had always been nursing, and after only six months in a physiotherapy program she transferred to a nursing program. So, whereas Amanda worked upwards through levels of work and education to realise access to her preferred occupation, Stef, like others in the student nurse cohort had in some ways downgraded, educationally and occupationally, to achieve hers.

Peter's journey to become a nurse had elements of serendipity about it. Undertaking voluntary community work in a local nursing home, he found himself in a work situation that suited his preference for interesting and varied work with people. The voluntary employment led to paid employment as a carer and then to an interest in pursuing nursing as a career. However, Ben's decision to become a nurse appears more directed and highly pragmatic. He selected nursing as an employment option (i.e. not a career or vocation) in order to increase his pay and improve his working conditions. He had experienced a number of different kinds of work before his wife suggested that he try nursing. At the time of the interview, he was not convinced that nursing would be his long-term career. He was less interested in high care forms of nursing and reported being more concerned about the level of salary, mobility and opportunities which nursing provided as a form of paid work.

Table 1 Student nurses' personal values and earlier experiences

subject	Contributions of personal values	Contributions of earlier experiences
Miranda	Nursing is something she always wanted to do. Attempted to enter nurse education to be a Div 1 nurse four times unsuccessfully, before becoming a Div 2 nurse and then progressing to this program. Has a strong interest in medical matters and processes. Claims that caring is not a primary interest, rather "the medical side of things". Nevertheless, she reports engaging in assisting those who were unwell from an early age – "I was born right into it". But, what she likes about the job is tasks such as diagnosis.	Part-time nursing studies as a school student, worked as a hospital orderly, doctors' receptionist, home help, taught first aid courses and worked with special needs children with healthcare issues. Employed as a Div 2 nurse.
Stef	Elected to transfer from physiotherapy to nursing because the former did not provide the kind of interactions with patients that she wanted. She has always liked taking care of little children and other people, and views the idea of caring and nursing as being inter-related. Caring and being open is a family value.	Commenced a Bachelor of Physiotherapy, but transferred to her first preference of nursing after the first semester. Before that, she had worked part time in retail and service work, but has worked with children, including tutoring them and every second Saturday taking a lady with multiple sclerosis shopping.
Zara	Always wanted to work in the health sector, since being young. Initially, wanted to be a doctor, but believes nursing is a good way to help people. Views nursing as been a great reward for herself. Enjoys working in a team environment and being able to assist those who are less fortunate and unwell. Through nursing, she can help people in a very real way, including them living their lives to the full. Also, nursing offers the prospect of guaranteed employment, travel and working with those in need. Grandfather requested that she never be rude or rough like some of the nurses he had experienced.	While at school, she participated in operating a soup van for disadvantaged people in Melbourne city, was house and ministry service captain and organised fund-raising events, particularly for Breast Cancer Australia. She also travelled to the United States where she witnessed poverty and homelessness, and contrasted that to her own circumstances.
Peter	Enjoys working with people and being health oriented. His mother is a nurse and family members work in the health sector. Identifies with the values and good work associated with nursing. Likes to see the end result of his efforts, that people are happy or comfortable as a result of his work. Likes the interesting and changing kinds of nursing work as it is challenging, and therefore stimulating.	Was made to do voluntary community work by his mother when he got suspended from school in year seven. He was then offered a job helping out, and decided after six years of this work to progress onto nursing work. Working in a nursing home with high dementia elderly patients and likes the interactions and engagements that this work provides.
Jayne	Likes helping people, making them feel good and enjoying the rewards of that. Nursing is in the family, her mother, sister and also one of her cousins are nurses. It is also an occupation which she can leave and return to, as she has shown. It is a form of work which is more interesting than some of the others in which she has engaged or compared.	Undertook Div 2 training after the laboratory work and applied science. However, subsequently after 4 or 5 years worked in hospitality and then in computer programming for a number of years before returning to nursing through agency work. However, realised the need to upgrade to Div 1 nursing as Div 2 nursing is quite restrictive.
Ellie	Personal values of working with and respecting others, rather than competing, are held to be a pleasant and effective way of being. Caring for other people to central part of that, particularly those who are vulnerable in some way. The experiences with a family member provide a manifestation of this.	Completed an undergraduate degree in arts and law and practised law, then had a family and decided to become a nurse Her first child was premature and she spent extensive time in hospital with her son and witnessed nurses and nursing work. This seemed to offer a more satisfying form of work than her previous occupation. Wants to focus on paediatrics.

Ben	Views nursing as a means to an end, like any other aspect of life. Seen as a job, not yet as a career: finding the money to live.	Left school early did a range of work tasks and courses including fitness instruction, gardening and then first aid. Suggested that he consider nursing because of pay and conditions enjoyed by a Div 1. Not interested in working in a nursing home. Wife is a nurse, but he is still unsure whether he wants to remain in nursing.
Eddy	Became interested in health care and anatomy through working in a cancer centre, likes the variety of the work undertaken by nurses. Prefers surgical nursing because of the quickness of results, which you don't get in wards where individuals recuperate over longer periods of time.	Schooling in the country and then completed a tourism course at TAFE and worked in nightclubs. Worked in a pharmacy part-time when at school, so went back to that and did a pharmacy technician course. This led to working in a hospital specialising in cancer treatments. Experience working as part of the team with nurses. Completed Div 2 through TAFE and after applying a couple of times admitted into undergraduate nurse education program. Worked in a private hospital for two years.
Sally	Likes the skills and excitement of nursing including "the gory stuff" and being part of a group of nurses working together. Not sure yet whether she will like nursing but it is consistent with her values to care for others, which arose from values emphasised in her family.	Went straight to nurse education from school, but had done work in retail and working in a hostel. Decided between teaching and nursing as a result of attending a university open day.
Toni	Always wanted to be a nurse. Interested by the possible scope of nursing work and the capacity to travel overseas and work, which would accommodate her changing interests. Is aware of the importance of how people engage and act and the more holistic approach to health and health care -- treating people as a whole.	Through visiting relatives in hospital and being a patient herself she was impressed by the competence and caring of nurses. Did work experience at a hospital while a school student. Her practicum experiences are shaping particular preferences for nursing, including women's health and psychology.
Anna	Having cared for her parents and engaged in working in disability area she would like to do nursing work because it meets her intrinsic needs, including the prospects for working flexibly as she gets older, possibly through overseas service. Her vision is to engage in something equivalent to the Fred Hollows kind of work.	In the last 10 years worked extensively in welfare administration having completed a bachelor of arts in human services. Worked in disability case management. Left this work to care for her parents who had cancer.

Another variation in the journey to becoming a nurse was that provided by Anna. After a long career in the welfare sector, including key employment roles and responsibilities in the disability sector, the experience of caring for her parents, and in particular witnessing the work of nurses who also cared for them, motivated her to become a nurse. Anna commenced her nursing with ambitions to develop capacities which she could use to help others in Australia and possibly overseas. She referred to being able to attempt to emulate the work of the late Fred Hollows - the Australian surgeon who dedicated his life's work to curing eye diseases in poor African communities and countries. Consequently, the conditions that Ben identified as meeting his needs (employability and opportunities to travel), were seen by Anna as offering potential to do good volunteer work overseas in poor communities and countries. The contrasts reflect the different premises behind individual decision-making for a particular occupation: for one, a means to secure important material goals, and through it personal satisfaction, and for another the achievement of vocational goals associated with assisting others, and improving the lot of those who are disadvantaged. However, these grounds for decision-making are both about meeting the needs of the self, although in quite diverse ways.

Zara in some ways epitomises the caring dimension of nursing by someone who has always wanted to be a nurse. While still at school she undertook voluntary work helping disadvantaged people, raised money for charity and had other experiences, outside her home and community, which exposed her to poverty and vulnerability. This included encountering homeless people on a

vacation to America. She claims that she has always wanted to work in the health sector, and uses this work as ‘a great reward to herself’, presumably because it meets her personal values and need to help people live their lives to the full. Zara refers to the importance of living up to the request of her dying grandfather to be a good and caring nurse. Yet, even with Zara, other values and motivations are apparent. She sees nursing as not just a personally-rewarding occupation but one which will guarantee her employment and the prospects of travel as there is a shortage of nurses globally.

Overall, the student nurses' narratives reflect the enactment of both personal values and prior experiences, albeit in different ways. A synthesis of these career choice narratives, as presented in Table 2 suggest that there are at least five distinct sets of premises for making the career choice of becoming a nurse, through enrolling in undergraduate program. In the left-hand column, these five premises are presented as: (i) a long-term goal based on personal values; (ii) changing occupations to realise personal goals; (iii) experiences with nurses and nursing shaping interests; (iv) the characteristics of the work (i.e. social, interesting and mobile); and (v) the pay and conditions of nursing. In the right-hand column, instances of these premises are provided. It should be noted that a number of the informants reported interests and motivations behind their decision to enrol in this course which are aligned with more than one of these premises.

Table 2 – Premises for making career choices

Premises for career choice	Subject and instance
‘Always wanted to be a nurse’ <i>Long term goal –based on personal values</i>	Miranda – history of preferred work, Zara - related to family and personal values, Toni – experiences with hospitals from early life led to interest, Anna – a focussing of her life’s work
‘Interesting and better work’ <i>Changed occupations to realise personal goals</i>	Stef - as a result of dissatisfaction with existing work, Jayne – tried different forms of work, but returned to nursing, Ellie – to engage in more satisfying work, Ben – to secure better paid work, Eddy – moved to nursing from pharmacy work
‘Experience with nurses and nursing’ <i>Experiences with nurses shaped interest</i>	Peter – ‘forced’ voluntary work provided context for gaining interest, Ellie – experience with son’s birth, Eddy – opportunity to work with nurses led to interest in nursing work, Anna – caring for parents
‘Qualities of nursing work’ <i>Social, interesting and mobile form of employment</i>	Jayne – wants flexible work, Sally – want interesting work, decided to nurse through advice provided at university open day, Toni – qualities of work captures her interest, Anna – mobility and flexibility promises to assist her realise life’s work for caring elsewhere and I other ways
‘Secure and better paid work’ <i>Pay and conditions of nursing</i>	Ben – guided by desire to secure better paid work

Taking each of these in turn briefly, for at least three of the participants the decision to enrol as an undergraduate student nurse was premised on the realisation of long-term goals based on personal values. For Amanda, it was working towards a long-term goal interrupted by parenthood and the need to negotiate through tiers of education. For Zara, the imperative was working towards a goal held since childhood. For Toni, the goal of being a nurse was established early from visiting relatives in hospital and being a patient herself. And, for Anna, the goal involved refocusing her life's work in caring for others that led to her decision to become a nurse. Amongst these informants, maintaining an interest in nursing may require different kinds of fulfilment. For instance, Zara epitomises the caring individual who converts a set of personal values and practices into a vocation through nursing. Yet, she has already encountered setbacks, in the form of unhappy and unsatisfactory practicum experiences. Although she reports her most recent experiences in a positive light, her previous dissatisfaction with peers and preceptors who were perceived as being unhelpful and rude is still apparent.

Indeed, the promise of once preferred occupations becoming less so is also evident in the stories of those who change their occupations to become nurses. Stef, changed her interests from physiotherapy to nursing. Jayne has engaged in, for lengthy periods, different kinds of work before returning to nursing, yet hints that it is a form of work that individuals can leave and then returned to as their needs suit. Ellie, through experiencing excellent nursing care, left her previous legal training and work to enrol as a student nurse. Ben decided to commence nursing, and discard previous occupations, to realise the potential material benefits of better paid and more secure employment. To progress his career, Eddy moved from pharmacy work into nursing. Although there was little reporting of enthusiasm for a discarded occupation, except when it was nursing, the findings indicate that individuals could easily relinquish their interest in and commitment to a replacement occupation if it fails to meet their needs at particular points in their life histories.

Processes of becoming

Like the accounts provided in earlier studies by farmers' wives, aged care workers and bakers, the narratives of the student nurses show evidence of the process of negotiating identity and circumstances. The personal imperatives at times reflect a form of rational decision-making - maximising the opportunity to secure a return on their investment in learning an occupation. But this does not stand as an explanatory principle for many of the student nurse informants, for example, those individuals changing from more prestigious occupations (physiotherapy and law) to become student nurses. Although evidence was not available about the informants' social standing, there were both cases of persistence in seeking to secure a desired and more esteemed occupation, as well as cases of opting to engage in lower status occupations. This suggests that individuals can exercise agency in ways that do not presuppose that social and institutional structures are unassailable. The idea that participation in a social practice necessarily leads to identification with the occupation (e.g. Lave & Wenger 1991) was also not upheld here. As in the studies of apprentice bakers and aged care workers, there were instances of proximal engagement that lead student nurses to form identities with their occupation. However, much of that engagement was almost unintentionally about finding meaning, purpose and, in some case, a vocation through participation. Rather than some long-held ideal about the practice, it was the actualities and experiences of practices that were generative of identity-forming commitments. Indeed, it seemed that the most enduring of commitments to an occupation arose from encounters with its practice. In particular, experiences occurring in circumstances with potentially powerful personal implications, such as the care of children or elderly parents or promises to a loved grandparent were commonly reported as the cause of changing from another occupation to nursing.

As much as long-held desire to engage in a particular occupation, vocations arose through engagement. The findings about farmers' wives, aged care workers and bakers, the student nurses' narratives reiterated two key premises for wanting to engage in an occupation: the importance of close experiences of the actual occupational practice and being informed about its actualities. Certainly, engagement in work activities provides the opportunities for desires to be fulfilled or found to be ill placed, as was the case with many of the student nurses who had left other forms of occupations. Through such experiences the qualities of the occupation can be appraised and their capacity to fulfil long-held desires and other motivations can be revealed. This conclusion suggests that vocational callings arise through experiencing the actualities of an instance of practice, rather than holding a conception of an occupation as an ideal. Hence, the importance of aligning individuals' capacities and interests with particular occupations, as Dewey (1916) argued. For the student nurses, the situated experiences provided a point of engagement with the occupation that, when aligned with personal interests, intentionality and goals prompted the process of identifying with the occupation as a vocation. So, beyond rational decision-making, issues of self emerged as a key imperative in both separating from existing work and engaging with another. It seems that opportunities for individuals to experience the actualities of practice might be helpful before they make choices about occupations and then for this to be continued in their occupational preparation. It also behoves the provision of experiences to be structured in ways that support the formation of

an occupational identity. Guarding and guiding the formation of an occupational identity might be as important as the development of occupational capacities.

Acknowledgements. The authors acknowledge the financial support provided by the Australian Research Council and the generous contributions of a major healthcare organisation, as well as the time and good will of those interviewed for this paper.

References

- Allan, J. (2008). Farm women learning to become and belong. In Billett, S., Harties, C., & Eteläpelto, A. (eds) *Emerging perspectives of learning through work* (pp. 83-96). Rotterdam: Sense Publishing.
- Billett, S. (2001). Knowing in practice: Re-conceptualising vocational expertise. *Learning and Instruction, 11*(6), 431-452.
- Billett, S., Smith, R., & Barker, M. (2005). Understanding work, learning and the remaking of cultural practices. *Studies in Continuing Education, 27*(3), 219-237.
- Boughn, S. (2001). Why women and men choose nursing. *Nursing and Health Care Perspectives, 22*(1), 14-19.
- Chan, S. (2009). *Belonging, becoming and being: The role of proximal participation in beginning an apprenticeship*. NZ Vocational Training & Research Forum. Rutherford House, University of Victoria. 22nd & 23rd April.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hansen, D. T. (1994). Teaching and the sense of vocation. *Educational Theory, 44*(3), 259-275.
- Hodges, D. C. (1998). Participation as dis-identification with/in a community of practice. *Mind, Culture and Activity, 5*(4), 272-290.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning - legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lehmann, W. (2007). *Choosing to labour? School to work transitions and social class*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Martin, I. (2001). *A note of unfashionable dissent: Rediscovering the vocation of adult education in the morass of lifelong learning*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Standing Committee on University Teaching and Research on the Education of Adults, London.
- Newton, J., Kelly, C., Kremser, K., Jolly, B., & Billett, S. (2009). The motivations to nurse: an exploration of factors amongst undergraduate students, registered nurses and nurse managers. *Journal of Nursing Management*.
- Prater, L., & McEwen, M. (2006). Called to nursing: Perceptions of student nurses. *Journal of Holistic Nursing, 24*(1), 63-69.
- Rognstad, M.-K., Nortvedt, P., & Aasland, O. (2004). Helping motives in late modern society: values and attitudes among nursing students. *Nursing Ethics, 11*(3), 227-239.
- Searle, J. R. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. London: Penguin.
- Smith, R. J. (2004). *Necessity in action: The epistemological agency of the new employee*. Unpublished Master of Education, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Somerville, M. (2003). *Who learns?: Enriching learning cultures in aged care workplaces*. Paper presented at the 11th Annual International conference on Post-compulsory Education and Training: Enriching learning cultures, Gold Coast.
- Winch, C. (2004). What do teachers need to know about teaching? A critical examination of the occupational knowledge of teachers. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 52*(2), 180-196.
- Zyberg, L., & Berry, D. M. (2005). Gender and students' vocational choices in entering the field of nursing. *Nursing Outlook, 53*, 193-198.