Span of Control for Front-Line Nurse Managers: 
A Concept Analysis

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Abstract. This study aimed to analyze the concept of span of control for front-line nurse managers. The key search terms were ‘span of control’, ‘hierarchy and supervisory ratio’, and ‘nurse manager’. To validate the clarity of the concept, Rodgers’ evolutionary method was employed. The concept of span of control for front-line nurse managers had three attributes: number of staff, the amount of time to interact with staff, and staff stability. Nursing unit characteristics, material management, and diversity of the unit were identified as antecedents which influenced in effective workforce management. The amount of time to interact with staff and staff stability should be reflected on the definition of span of control for front-line nurse managers as well as the number of staff. Understanding span of control as an integrated concept would be of a multifaceted strategy to optimize the contribution of front-line nurse managers in healthcare organization.

Keywords: Nurse managers, Span of control, Personnel management, Concept analysis

1 Introduction

The responsibilities of front-line nurse managers (FLNMs) has been expanded to actively cope with the rapid changes in medical technology[1]. As healthcare organizations in the United States and Canada have reduced supervisory positions and delayered hierarchical structure, FLNMs are usually responsible for budget management, staff hiring, and even more than one nursing unit[1]. They also need to manage directly and indirectly employees in various departments as well as temporary workers[1,2]. However, the expanded workload of FLNMs led to increased nursing turnover[3] and decreased quality of nursing service, which drew great attention on the appropriate span of control for FLNMs[4].

Span of control, as a manager’s breadth of responsibility, is typically the number of staff supervised by a manager[5]. According to Morash et al.[6], the definition of span of control includes staffs’ number, skill, stability, and diversity, units’ complexity,

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size of budget, and various programs. It implies a need of research on span of control to involve integral aspects. The purpose of this study was to examine the definition and attributes of span of control which is ultimately expected to improve work efficiency of FLNMs.

2 Methods

2.1 Data analysis

Rodgers’ evolutionary concept analysis guided the review process for clarity and utility of a concept; identify the interest concept, surrogate and related terms; collect data using a systematic search for hallmark articles; verify the concept’s attributes, antecedents, and consequences; if appropriate, provide exemplar cases; suggest implications in practice for further research[7].

2.2 Data sources

Using the terms span of control, hierarchy and supervisory ratio, and nurse manager, data collection was conducted from March to December, 2015. The search resulted in 652 articles. After reviewing the titles and abstracts, 21 articles that were available for full texts, related to conceptual issues, and not duplicated were analyzed.

3 Results

3.1 Attributes

In concept analysis of span of control for FLNMs, dominant attributes were number of staff, the amount of time to interact with staff, and stability of staff.

The number of staff is the total number of employees who cooperated with and were supervised by a front-line nurse manager[8]. These managers spent much of their time for staff management that was the major area of responsibility[6]. Doran et al.[9] found the significant relationship between number of staff and turnover rate that increased by 1.6% when ten more nurses were assigned to a FLNM.

The amount of time to interact with staff is time that FLNMs spent on staff supervision and support[2]. When FLNMs have sufficient time for interaction being capable for empowerment and supervision of staffs, healthy work environment can be created. The more interaction between a FLNM and staffs occurred, the better work nursing service they performed[4]. In addition, it was in positive relation to organizational commitment and particularly in close association with staff’s skill[4,5].
Stability of staff involves turnover rates and absenteeism[6]. In case of nurses’ turnover or being absent for personal issues and sick, FLNMs make a new staff schedule or hire a new nurse. Staffs’ stability affects nosocomial infection which has a critical association with patient safety, and patient satisfaction was increased when lower turnover rates were achieved[9].

Span of control in nursing is generally defined as manageable number of staff that a manager supervises[8] but it should be explained by a comprehensive aspects which embedded the amount of time to interact with staff and stability of staff.

3.2 Antecedents and consequences

Antecedents precede the phenomena of the concept and consequences are the events or situation followed by the concept[7]. The first antecedent is complexity of the nursing unit. It includes overtime, patient turnover, number of adverse incidents, and unpredictability[6]. The second antecedent is material management. It takes account of how much of time FLNMs spent for management of special equipment, maintenance, replacement, purchasing, and quality monitoring[6]. The third antecedent is diversity of the unit defined as the number of designated services requiring regular meetings with chiefs[6], cooperation and coordination with other departments, budgetary control, and reviewing programs of nursing service[6,10].

When administration executives in healthcare organization analyzed the span of control of FLNMs and then adjusted it to appropriate span, it showed significantly positive relationship with staffs’ organizational commitment and work satisfaction[4]. It also has influenced decreased turnover rates and increased retention of nursing workforces which has been the major concern of hospital administration[3]. As a result, the administration executives may be beneficial from effective budget operation. Moreover, increased patients’ satisfaction is supported by the fact that patients received timely nursing service and the frequency of complaints were reduced[1,9].

4 Conclusion

This study identified the definition and attributes of span of control for front-line nurse managers using Rodgers’ evolutionary concept analysis. The concept of span of control has three attributes of number of staff, the amount of time to interact with staff, and stability of staff that interpret the concept in an integral aspect. Antecedents of span of control were complexity of the unit, material management, and diversity of the unit. The consequences of optimal span of control for front-line nurse managers were an increase in nurses and nurse managers’ job satisfaction, decrease in turnover rates, an improvement of patient satisfaction, and cost-effective operation of healthcare administration. Based on the study results, future research need to investigate the additional affecting factors and develop a span of control measurement tool in Korean.
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