

ORIGINAL RESEARCH: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH –
QUALITATIVEMetaphorical expressions used in Swedish news media narratives to
portray the shortage of nurses and their working conditions

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of the study is to uncover and reveal how nurses as a profession and their working conditions are dramatized and portrayed in Swedish media narratives about the shortage of nurses.

Background. The media is an arena where stakeholders can air their views of the healthcare sector in general and the situation for nurses in particular. The focus in this study is the debate in Sweden on the shortage of nurses.

Design. Qualitative discursive study.

Method. A discourse analysis of media narratives about nurses and their working conditions published in several Swedish newspapers from 2009–2014. 1779 articles were included in the study. A selection (113 articles) of these articles was further analysed using a qualitative discursive psychological approach.

Findings. Nurses are portrayed as being good, concerned about and critical of healthcare managers and politicians for not taking action. The accused actors justify their actions by partially accepting or displacing responsibility. The shortage of nurses is framed as a social problem – a threat to patients' safety. Seven different types of metaphorical expression frame the problem as inevitable, beyond control, abstract, an individual and collegial problem and nurses as replaceable. In addition, nurses and patients are dehumanized and no-one is held responsible.

Conclusions. This study analyses the role of the media in emphasizing the seriousness or obscurity of the problem and possible solutions to it. Alternative narratives are needed to re-frame the nursing shortage and to find sustainable solutions.

Keywords: discursive psychology, metaphorical expressions, narratives, nurses, nursing shortage, the media, working conditions

Why is this research or review needed?

- By analysing metaphorical expressions the study facilitates an understanding of how problems, such as the shortage of nurses, are framed and described in the media and what the practical, political and professional consequences of such descriptions are likely to be.
- The study contributes knowledge about how the media's spoken and written language can obscure or provide solutions to the shortage of nurses.
- The study analyses and highlights descriptions of how nurses and their working conditions are portrayed in the media.

What are the key findings?

- One key finding is that the media, by its choice of metaphorical expressions, largely dictates how consumers perceive and react to an issue or problem.
- Another finding is how the question of responsibility is negotiated in the media by the involved actors – it is both present and absent at the same time.
- Metaphorical expressions in the studied articles make the topic clearer but also obscure what the problem is actually about, which makes it difficult to find sustainable working solutions.

How should the findings be used to influence policy/practice/research/education?

- The findings contribute to an understanding of how the media uses metaphorical expressions to draw attention to or demand change and to downplay problems or obscure possible solutions to them.
- The findings of this study draw attention to a need to reflect on how language is used when healthcare professionals, healthcare managers, politicians, journalists and researchers depict a problem. This may entail refraining from using metaphorical expressions that frame a problem as inevitable or nurses as expendable.
- The findings of this study can help healthcare professionals, healthcare managers, politicians and journalists to illustrate and re-frame narratives about the shortage of nurses, find sustainable solutions and provide a healthy working environment.

Introduction

Many scientific studies have been conducted over the years on how the media portrays nurses and how these portrayals impact their public image. Common images include 'the ministering angel', 'the battle-axe', 'the naughty nurse' and 'the doctor's handmaiden' (Bridges 1990). These are often

found in films and on YouTube (Hallam 2000, Summers & Summers 2004, Stanley 2008, Kelly *et al.* 2012). Some studies suggest alternative images (McGillis Hall *et al.* 2003, Kalisch *et al.* 2007). For example, on various Internet sites, nurses are depicted as respected, educated and 'concerned health authorities' (Kalisch *et al.* 2007). Despite this, calls have been made for more realistic media descriptions of nursing and nurses and their working situation (Hughes 1980, Kalisch & Kalisch 1983, Kelly *et al.* 2012, Ten Hoeve *et al.* 2014). In recent decades, one of the most recurrent themes in both the media and research in various countries is the shortage of nurses (Buchan 2002, Johnson *et al.* 2006, Oulton 2006, Hong *et al.* 2012).

It has been claimed that the shortage of nurses is a global issue and has a major impact on healthcare systems around the world (Buchan 2002, Oulton 2006, Hong *et al.* 2012). Studies depict the shortage as a well-known problem in newspapers, articles, research and on websites (Janiszewski Goodin 2003, Tierney 2003). Moreover, a substantial amount of international research has been conducted on nursing shortages in for instance Sweden (Gardulf *et al.* 2005, 2008, Sjögren *et al.* 2005), Finland (Flinkman *et al.* 2008), the United States (Nevidjon & Erickson 2001, Unruh & Fottler 2005, Goldfarb *et al.* 2008) and the UK (Buchan 2002, Finlayson *et al.* 2002, Oulton 2006). Despite this common concern, the different cultural contexts and structural conditions in the welfare systems of these countries dictate possible solutions to the nursing shortage. Therefore, accounting for contextual and structural factors is essential when analysing how the media depicts the nursing shortage.

Common suggestions for resolving this problem are that employers must provide nurses with continuous education, nurses must take joint action and politicians must work to ensure a sufficient number of nurses in the future (Janiszewski Goodin 2003). Other suggestions are local nursing recruitments (Tierney 2003) and improving nurses' working conditions in terms of higher wages, more flexible hours, less stress and a more satisfying workplace (Schalski 2002, Spetz & Given 2003, Coomber & Barriball 2007, Hong *et al.* 2012). Another suggestion is to stop saying that the shortage of nurses is a healthcare system problem and stop focusing on nurses or nursing as the problem (Buchan 2002, 2006).

Apart from attempts to objectively (i.e. quantitatively or intra-institutionally) approach this matter as a competence provision or an organizational challenge, the media context and its impact on how the shortage of nurses is understood and addressed must be accounted for (see Nevidjon & Erickson 2001). Thus, there is a need to highlight how

nurses and their working conditions are portrayed in the media and how the shortage of nurses is framed. Hence, with a focus on the Swedish news media, this study scrutinizes the ongoing discussion on the ‘shortage of nurses’ in Sweden.

From this it follows that the media is viewed as an arena where different stakeholders (e.g. nurses, unions, politicians and healthcare managers) can present their views of the healthcare sector and the situation for nurses in particular. We argue that there is a set of predominant and recurrent media narratives where stakeholders make use of a variety of rhetorical resources (e.g. metaphors and arguments) to depict the situation for nurses in Sweden. In doing this, the media does not simply transmit information about the state of the healthcare sector and the situation for nurses, but constructs narratives about it.

Background

Social constructionism forms the ontological and epistemological basis for the study. Taking social constructionism as a point of departure, a range of different approaches to discourse analysis are available (Wetherell *et al.* 2002, Burr 2003). The common ground for discourse analysis is the study of language – how language is used to construct reality (Potter 1996, Wetherell *et al.* 2002). This means that the focus is on the production of reality and how people construct versions of reality as being solid, credible and natural in both text and talk (Edwards & Potter 1992, Potter 1996, Abell & Stokoe 1999). As Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 32) put it: ‘people use their language to do things’. People’s accounts of past events and/or their inner cognitive states are analysed in a way that identifies what kind of social action is accomplished, such as blaming, accusing, defending, justifying and praising and also how the accounts are to be treated as credible in text and talk (Edwards & Potter 1992, Potter 1996, Abell & Stokoe 1999).

Against this background, theoretically and methodologically the study uses a specific kind of discourse analysis, namely discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter 1992, Wetherell & Potter 1992, Potter 1996). Discursive psychology aims to highlight which social actions are in focus in the media narratives relating to nurses and their working conditions in Sweden. The media plays an important role in constructing alternative versions of reality in that it legitimizes existing power relations in society and exposes wrongdoings in different social contexts (Fairclough 1995, Billig 1996, Thompson 2005, Spector & Kitsuse 2009).

Discerning how reality is (re)produced in the media texts involves identifying the rhetorical resources that are used in

the media narrative (Edwards & Potter 1992, Potter 1996, Abell & Stokoe 1999). In this study, the focus is on metaphors, or to be more precise, metaphorical expressions (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Semino 2008). Metaphors are used to relate to and illustrate ideas and experiences and to make people reflect on a topic (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Semino 2008). Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980/2003) classic work shows the existence of conventional metaphorical expressions in the English language and how everyday conversations are structured by the conceptual system of a given culture. Studies of the use of metaphors in educational material (Taber 2001, Cameron 2003) and in nursing education, practice, writing and research (Czechmeister 1994, McAllister & McLaughlin 1996, Wurzbach 1999, Goodman 2001, Cook & Gordon 2004) suggest that metaphors are useful teaching and learning strategies that make a topic clearer, facilitate new insights and impact nursing practice. In the exploration of nurses’ emotional work (Froggatt 1998) and patients’ experience of illness (Jairath 1999), other metaphor studies suggest that metaphors make it possible to talk about sensitive subjects and contribute to an understanding of practical experience. In this sense, when used in text and talk metaphors create reality.

This study uses the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) to identify metaphorical expressions in newspapers. MIP has been influenced by Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980/2003) conceptual metaphor theory, which suggests that metaphors are identified in language by a systematic set of overlapping domains. This means that what is actually talked or written about (target domain) in a given context is structured in terms of a different domain (source domain). For example, in the metaphor ‘life is a journey’ the target domain is life, whereas journey refers to the source domain (Semino 2008). As most metaphorical expressions are highly conventional, one is not always aware of their metaphoricity when producing or interpreting them (Semino 2008). In MIP it is therefore essential to establish the contextual meaning of a lexical unit. This means taking into account what comes before and after the lexical unit. It also needs to be decided whether the contextual meaning contrasts with its basic meaning but can be understood as a comparison, e.g. the metaphorical word ‘battle’ (physical battle) used in a context to highlight verbal disagreement. If a lexical unit is understood as a comparison it is a metaphorical expression (Pragglejaz Group 2007, Semino 2008). Moreover, it is important to identify the discourse structure of news media and the general media narrative (about nurses and their working conditions) to grasp the

context and what is conveyed (van Dijk 1988, Billig 1996, Bell 2001).

When metaphorical expressions are identified their function as rhetorical resources for making a media narrative credible and trustworthy is analysed (Billig 1996, Potter 1996, Semino 2008). Here, media narratives direct people's attention in a certain direction. Trustworthy or newsworthy narratives entail having at least two actors in the plot and describing events that correspond to the socially and culturally expected/unexpected characteristics of the actors (Potter 1996, Bell 2001).

The media has been criticized for setting the agenda of 'the newsworthy' and excluding alternative versions or/and exaggerating certain events or phenomena (Fairclough 1995, Billig 1996, Best 1999, 2013). Having said this, media coverage helps to shape and launch social problems (Best 2013), which in this case highlights the shortage of nurses, nurses' stories about unreasonable working conditions and the lack of patient safety that results. In this respect, an analysis of media texts facilitates an understanding of how problems are framed when different actors describe the problem from their perspectives.

By identifying metaphorical expressions and what they convey, this study contributes with knowledge about how the media relates to and (re)produces a problem in text and talk. How the media frames a problem influences how people make sense of it (Bennett 1982, Fairclough 1995, Billig 1996). To accomplish this, it is essential to identify how spoken and written language obscures or provides a solution to problem of the shortage of nurses. Our aim is to examine how the media depicts a 'problem' and how rhetorical resources make such depictions credible. In line with a study on the media coverage of how the *Clostridium difficile* outbreak in the UK was represented in the media (Burnett *et al.* 2014), it is important to show how narratives are constructed and how they impact healthcare professionals. We also would like to spotlight the narratives that portray the current state of affairs in the healthcare sector and the 'situation' for nurses in Sweden. Given the global shortage of nurses (Buchan 2002, Oulton 2006, Hong *et al.* 2012), the knowledge that is generated here could be useful in other national contexts and for other professions, such as social workers and teachers.

The study

Aim

The overall aim of the study is to uncover and reveal how nurses as a profession and their working conditions are

dramatized and portrayed in Swedish media narratives concerning what is often referred to as a shortage of nurses. The research questions are:

- How is the general media narrative about nurses constructed?
- What do the metaphorical expressions used in the media narratives convey?
- Which social actions are highlighted in the media narratives?

Design

A discursive approach (Edwards & Potter 1992, Fairclough 1995, Billig 1996, Potter 1996, Bell 2001) is used to reveal which social actions are highlighted in the media and what is conveyed by the metaphorical expressions (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Potter 1996, Pragglejaz Group 2007, Semino 2008) used to frame the 'shortage of nurses' problem.

Sample and data collection

The sample is made up of ($n = 1779$) articles published online. The criteria used for the selection of the articles are:

- They must be part of the discussion relating to the shortage of nurses.
- They must be about nurses.
- They must in some respect discuss nurses' working conditions.

The above criteria were formulated by the study's two researchers and one of the two ensured that selected items met the inclusion criteria. A Swedish media database called Retriever was used to collect empirical material relating to the time period 2009–2014. This time period was chosen because it gives a relatively up-to-date overview. Different keywords were used to show how the nurses and their working conditions were dramatized and portrayed in several national and local newspapers in Sweden. The selection of keywords was based on our assumptions about nurses and the Swedish healthcare situation today. The keywords were selected from different types of articles, such as news reports, editorials and letters to the editor. The empirical material is presented in Table 1.

It is clear that in 2013 the frequency of articles increased. A possible explanation for this lies presumably in the media logic. In traditional news media, political and social news coverage intensifies (Strömbäck 2009, Esser & Strömbäck 2014) around the time of elections and effects the political

Table 1 Overview of the empirical material ($n = 1779$).

Keywords	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Nurses + stress	79	113	72	181	292	188
Nurses + Work environment issues and organization	1	2	–	3	2	1
Nurses + Work environment issues	9	11	4	12	29	19
Nurses + organization	105	148	128	101	141	138
Total number of articles of relevance: 1779 (during the chosen time period)	194	274	204	297	464	346

agenda-setting at the aggregated and individual levels (Shehata & Strömbäck 2013). In Sweden, European elections were held in May 2014 and national, regional and local elections in September 2014. In 2014 the frequency was also high, which could either reflect the above named elections, or growing interest in and concern about what has come to be known as the Swedish healthcare system crisis.

After determining the frequency and identifying an overall pattern in the media coverage, a selection of 1779 articles was made.

Criteria used for refine the initial sample were:

- articles displaying a typical general media narrative and
- articles displaying a richness of metaphorical expressions.

The articles were then analysed using a discursive approach.

The total number of articles analysed was 113.

Ethical considerations

Data were collected from public media sources and the conducted research is in accordance with Swedish ethical guidelines (Gustafsson *et al.* 2005).

Data analysis

The data were analysed in several steps. First, the media's narrative structure was scrutinized to identify the quoted actors, which events were reported, which social actions were conveyed by the actors and which rhetorical resources were used to do this (Potter 1996, Bell 2001). This procedure of using and answering analytical questions for each article was well documented in mind-maps that could then

be compared (Bell 2001). Second, MIP was used to identify accounts that could be regarded as metaphorical expressions (Pragglejaz Group 2007, Semino 2008) in the given context. In MIP it is essential to define and account for the context, i.e. what the article is about (target domain) and which metaphorical terms the quoted actors and journalists use to discuss the topic (source domain). In this interpretative process we were able to see an overlap between the metaphorical expressions. Third, during the compilation process a general media narrative became clear as to how the actors were portrayed and which social action was accomplished (Table 2). The data were in Swedish and had to be translated into English for the purpose of this article. As metaphorical expressions are often difficult to translate, we consulted a native English speaker who is also a professional language editor about equivalent English expressions (Appendix 1).

Rigour

The study was conducted in accordance with the validity and reliability criteria recommended for qualitative research, e.g. practising and showing openness and transparency (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008). The analysis of the mind-maps and the metaphorical expressions was discussed with researchers in the discourse group at Stockholm University. Appendix 1 presents the metaphorical expressions in Swedish, the equivalent expression in English and the idiomatic meaning in English.

Findings

Initially, the general media narrative and the social actions accomplished in and by the narrative are presented. Thereafter focus is on the identified metaphorical expressions and what they convey.

The general media narrative

In the articles several actors were quoted to make the narrative and its statements trustworthy and legitimate (Potter 1996). Generally speaking, nurses are first portrayed in an article accompanied by a photograph of them inside or outside a hospital building. The same newspaper then follows up (Bell 2001) the article a few days later and allows other actors to present their views of the problem. Who the actors, how they are portrayed, what kind of social action they accomplish in the narrative and which rhetorical resources are used for this purpose is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 The general media narrative and its follow up.

Quoted actors	How are the actors portrayed?	Which social actions are accomplished?	Rhetorical resources used
Nurses	Loyal to colleagues and patients. Are 'good', take moral responsibility and show concern.	Draw people's attention to nurses' working conditions and highlight the consequences for the public. Questioning, criticizing, accusing politicians and healthcare managers of not improving the working conditions and blaming nurses for the shortage of nurses and its consequences.	Detailed stories, metaphorical expressions, time (past/present), recruiting a third person –patient (often elderly/children) – as part of the story. The threat to patients' safety – everyone can become a victim when mistakes are made in the healthcare system.
Union	Loyal to members and patients. Strong actor who is concerned about, reveals and discusses unreasonable workplace conditions in the media.	Same actions as nurses.	Detailed stories, metaphorical expressions, statistics, pronoun (we/one). The threat of not guaranteeing patients' safety.
Politicians	Show interest in the problems. Rhetorical balance between recognition and reducing the seriousness of the problem.	Responding to accusations/criticisms by justifying their actions: show responsibility or display responsibility to the healthcare manager. Playing down the seriousness of the situation, which implies that nurses are replaceable.	Pronoun (we), time (past/present), general categories/terms, statistics.
Healthcare managers	Show interest in the problems. Rhetorical balance between recognition and reducing the seriousness of the problem.	Responding to accusations/questioning by justifying their actions: show responsibility or display responsibility to politicians or nurses for resigning, complaining or exaggerating. Reducing the seriousness of the problem, which implies that nurses are replaceable and expendable.	Pronoun (we), time (past/present), general categories/terms, statistics.
Patients/relatives	Victims of mistakes made in the healthcare system. Vulnerable, powerless.	Complaining, accusing and showing how unfair the system is. Praising some nurses for their individual care efforts in spite of unreasonable working conditions.	Detailed stories, metaphorical expressions, rhetorical questions.

Table 2 shows that nurses are portrayed as good, moral, loyal to colleagues and patients, concerned and able to take responsibility for patients' health. This image of nurses is to be socially expected – the profession remains associated with the 'Florence Nightingale spirit' (Hallam 2000). However, they are also portrayed as proactive when they question, accuse and criticize healthcare managers and politicians for not improving their working conditions. Nurses use accounts such as: 'The politicians have to wake up. What should we do with everyone in need of care?' or 'Our supervisors say that they are going to solve the problems, but nothing ever happens.' By portraying nurses as 'persistent complainers', their criticism is dismissed by healthcare managers. At the same time the nurses may justify their complaints in the following way: 'Yes, we are complaining, but we are concerned about the children we nurse. We have to do something before the children get hurt'.

Moving on, the nurses depict their working conditions as both a problem and a threat to patient safety. Here, the shortage of nurses is framed as a social problem (Spector & Kitsuse 2009, Best 2013). In the media social problems are defined by moral statements, situations or events that should not exist but do and highlight that something must be done to overcome the wrongdoings. Another feature is to convey a sense of the immanent risk that everyone is a potential victim of wrongdoings and their consequences (Spector & Kitsuse 2009, Best 2013, Blomberg & Stier 2015). The rhetorical resource of recruiting a third person (Potter 1996, Blomberg 2010) (e.g. patient or relative) and accounts about 'threats to patient safety' are used to dramatize the seriousness of the situation and to portray nurses as good and moral characters. Coming across as trustworthy witnesses, patients' accounts serve to legitimize the state of affairs conveyed by the nurses. The patients'

detailed stories are important for gaining support and understanding for their own and the nurses' situation among Swedes.

At least two actors are quoted in the media narrative, one of which supports one party's version of reality (nurses and unions) and another who contradicts it (politicians/healthcare manager and nurses). By framing the narrative in this way a trustworthy media narrative is created where the actors are able to convey different accounts about the situation (Potter 1996). The accused actors justify their actions by accepting responsibility, displacing responsibility to other actors, or reducing the seriousness of the problem with accounts such as: 'nurses quit their jobs for many different reasons and we see no reason to worry'. Playing down the seriousness of the situation indirectly conveys that nurses are expendable.

The general media narrative sets the scene as to whether wrongdoings in the workplace can be talked about or not and at the same time limits what can be said. Even if certain actors are accused, no-one is singled out as directly responsible. Accounts like 'it is a national problem' imply that the healthcare managers or politicians are not responsible, but that the problem is larger, more abstract and beyond anyone's control. The question of responsibility is a delicate issue for those involved and is presented in different ways in the articles.

Metaphorical expressions in how the media frames the problems

In the articles we identified seven different types of metaphorical expressions that were used to frame the problem of the shortage of nurses. These are: illness metaphors, body in action metaphors, body as a machine metaphor, journey metaphors, natural metaphors, health as container metaphors and industrial metaphors (see Table 3). These expressions were not only used by journalists, but also by trade unions, politicians, healthcare managers and nurses. A full list of the Swedish and English expressions is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 3. Summary of metaphorical expressions in the media texts.

These metaphorical expressions convey several things. For example, the 'illness metaphors' signal disrepair, corruption, weakness and generate fear (Sonntag 1978) and suggest that something is wrong or is spiralling out of control. Another common example in the media is to refer to illness in military terms – e.g., 'taking up the fight with cancer' – suggests that illness is living its own life and that it sneaks up on you when you least expect it (Sonntag 1978,

Semino 2008). In this sense, metaphorical expressions indicating that the Swedish health service is bleeding or that the hospital is unwell obscure who is responsible for the crisis in the Swedish healthcare system and suggest that no-one is to blame (Sonntag 1978, Semino 2008).

The tendency to embody cultural images is common when talking about experiences of an event or condition. One can discern how bodily experiences are accounted for in 'the body in action metaphors', which concretise and convey a message to others (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Gibbs *et al.* 2004). In this case, the use of body in action expressions emphasizes and concretises the nurses' experiences of their working conditions and the seriousness of the situation. The use of expressions such as 'chasing your tail' or 'people breathing down your neck' means that the problem is limited to the body and is an individual and collegial problem and nothing to do with healthcare managers or politicians. From this it follows that is up to the nurses themselves to organize their work, without support from 'the system'.

Similarly, 'the body as a machine' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003) emphasizes and concretises the nurses' bodily experiences and feelings, albeit in a slightly different way. These expressions imply that the mind has an on-off state and can produce or run out of energy. That a machine can break down and cease to function is a 'fact' that comes across as both concrete and logical (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003). Machine metaphors refer to mental states and bodily experiences, such as 'the spark has gone out of me'. These signal the seriousness of the situation and point to a reality out there (Potter 1996). Statements about reality seem natural to most of us (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003). Based on factual claims, metaphorical expressions like this convey a reality that is difficult to undermine (Potter 1996). In their everyday interactions people unconsciously use expressions like this to justify their mental state, e.g. fatigue, depression, happiness etc. In this sense they are integral to how we make sense of ourselves and the world we live in (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003).

Journey metaphors expressions are common in narratives about politics (Musolff 2004, Semino 2008), love (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Kövecses 2000) or illness (Sonntag 1978, Kövecses 2000, Semino 2008). The journey metaphor implies movement toward a destination. There are also different ways of travelling, e.g. by boat, train, on foot etc. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003). Journey expressions illustrate a process and a relationship to something – in this case the nurses and the Swedish healthcare system. The expression nurses 'reached a crossroads' marks the seriousness of the situation and a need for change. Other expressions illustrate how nurses leave, 'flee from' or 'escape' the

Table 3 Summary of metaphorical expressions in the media texts.

Illness metaphor expressions	Body in action metaphor expressions	Body as a machine metaphor expressions	Journey metaphor expressions	Natural metaphor expressions	Healthcare as container metaphor expressions	Industrial metaphor expressions
'The hospital is bleeding competent staff'	'Running ourselves into the ground'	'The spark has gone out of me''	'Reached a crossroad'	'It's a disaster area'	'The clinic has been under extreme pressure with many more patients than normal'	'Nurses are in short supply this summer'
'The health service is itself showing signs of illness'	'It feels like a nightmare'	'I have no energy left'	'It's become a vicious circle'	'A storm is raging in the emergency department'	'The pressure is increasing'	'An inquiry into the supply and demand of care workers shows that the shortage of nurses is great'
'The Swedish health service is bleeding to death'	'People breathing down your neck'	'Bodies that break down'	'The hospital is a sinking ship'	'It's a disaster scenario'	'It's bursting at the seams'	'We can produce more healthcare'
'The hospital is not well'	'We are doing everything in our power to satisfy the needs of our patients'	'The staff are slowly worn down'	'Nurses are leaving the profession in droves'	'The organization has been slimmed down to such an extent that it can no longer breathe'	'We are under extreme pressure to take in patients'	'So far has the reduction in staff has not affected the production of healthcare'

health service. 'Escape' and 'flee' imply that there are no longer any other options. The seriousness of the problem is reinforced by expressions such as 'the hospital is a sinking ship'. Another way of conveying the seriousness of the situation is 'it's become a vicious circle'. This connection to a journey frames the problem as a movement towards the inevitable, obscures possible solutions and implies that no-one is to blame.

Natural metaphor expressions such as 'it's a disaster area' and 'a storm is raging in the emergency department' obscure accountability and reinforce a sense of inevitable and unstoppable problems. The metaphorical use of 'disaster' and 'storm' produces a reality that is beyond human control – neither a storm nor a natural disaster can be stopped.

Container metaphor expressions reflect the relationship and possible tension between a 'surface' and an in-out orientation (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Semino 2008). This is about conceptualizing bodily experiences as entities, e.g. when talking about one's body or the membership of a group, community or nation there is a contrast between the inside and the outside (Lakoff & Johnson 1980/2003, Semino 2008, Blomberg 2010). In this case, the container is

the Swedish healthcare system where patients are placed. The expressions 'it's bursting at the seams', 'the clinic has been under extreme pressure with many more patients than normal' and 'the pressure is increasing' depict the health service as having a limited capacity and unable to cope with the current volume of patients. This conveys a tension between patients and the ability to take care of them. The container can be filled until there is no space left in it, i.e., when the healthcare system cannot care for any more patients because it has reached its full capacity. Similarly, the expressions depict reality as inevitable. Also, by using expressions like 'bursting at the seams' and 'pressure increasing', patients are dehumanized.

The healthcare system (Rowe & Hogarth 2005) can also be metaphorically understood as a machine. The machine and industrial metaphors overlap, in that the both the organization and the nurses are portrayed using expressions such as 'nurses are in short supply this summer', 'we can produce more healthcare' and 'an inquiry into the supply and demand of care workers shows that the shortage of nurses is great'. Industrial metaphor expressions dehumanize nurses and reinforce them as replaceable or expendable components

of a machine. The problem is framed in objective terms and the logical argumentation indicates a true depiction of the problem and a forthcoming solution. However, the use of industrial metaphor expressions maintains a distance between politicians, healthcare managers and nurses and reproduces a reality where economic interests are prioritized.

Discussion

In portraying and dramatizing the nurses and their working conditions in terms of a shortage and a difficult situation the media depicts them as good and moral characters. The media also frames the shortage as a social problem with consequences for patient safety. Although this theme is not new (Janiszewski Goodin 2003, Tierney 2003), it has not been taken as seriously as some of the involved stakeholders had hoped. We argue that the explanation for this is to be found in the media's strong influence on public opinion and its construction of social problems and in particular in how it uses metaphorical expressions to frame the shortage of nurses as: 1) inevitable, 2) beyond control, 3) abstract, 4) an individual and collegial problem, where 5) nurses are replaceable, 6) nurses and patients are dehumanized and 7) no-one is held responsible.

These seven 'framing characteristics' illustrate the complexity of the nursing shortage and the difficulties of finding sustainable solutions. Researchers, the unions and the nursing profession all stress the need to improve nurses' working conditions by providing better wages, more satisfying workplaces, training opportunities and so on (Schalski 2002, Janiszewski Goodin 2003, Spetz & Given 2003, Coomber & Barriball 2007, Hong *et al.* 2012).

The main contribution of this study is an understanding of how the shortage of nurses and similar social problems are framed by the media. Consistent with research on metaphors (Czechmeister 1994, McAllister & McLaughlin 1996, Wurzbach 1999, Goodman 2001, Cook & Gordon 2004), another contribution is a deeper understanding of what such descriptions of reality convey. The metaphorical expressions used in the studied articles can either make the topic clearer or *obscure* what the problem is actually about, both of which can make it difficult to find sustainable solutions.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is that only four variations of the keywords were used to collect the data. Another limitation is the difficulty of translating Swedish metaphorical expressions into English and in this respect having to rely on an equivalent English expression.

Conclusion

When it comes to highlighting and framing the shortage of nurses, the media's influence on both the debate and the actors involved is profound. On the one hand the media plays a contradictory role, in that it uses metaphorical expressions to draw attention to and demand change. On the other hand, its use of metaphorical expressions can either downsize a problem or obscure possible solutions to it. In the former instance, nurses and presumably patients are beneficiaries, whereas in the latter it is the healthcare managers and politicians who may benefit – at least the short-term. The media also contributes to the reproduction of power-relations in society (Fairclough 1995).

Moreover, the framing and meaning of the shortage of nursing staff is not only reproduced in and by the media, but ultimately by everyone who reads and talks about it. Nurses, healthcare managers and politicians all help to construct reality and what is believed to be true (Potter 1996, Wetherell *et al.* 2002), for example when they negotiate, argue for a solution, address questions of responsibility, express healthcare preferences, try to change the working conditions, or share personal doubts as to whether they should enter, stay in or leave the nursing profession. Further, by addressing this topic as researchers, we are also co-constructing the discourse about the shortage of nurses.

Against this background, healthcare professionals, healthcare managers, politicians, journalists and researchers need to reflect on how they use language when depicting a problem. In practice this may mean not using metaphorical expressions that frame a problem as inevitable or, as in this case, nurses as expendable. Notwithstanding, there is a need for alternative narratives that illustrate and re-frame the problem of the shortage of nurses and make it possible to find sustainable solutions. As long as there is *talk* about a problem, a crisis or a lack of patient safety, the healthcare system and those responsible for it cannot turn a deaf ear.

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Author contributions

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- drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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Appendix 1

Illness metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Sjukhuset blöder kompetent personal	The hospital is bleeding competent staff	The hospital is losing valuable and competent staff
Det har gått från dåligt till akut	Things have gone from bad to worse	That things were bad but have now got a lot worse
Sjukvården själv visar tecken på sjukdom	The health service is itself showing signs of illness	Something is wrong and is causing concern
Sjukhuset mår inte bra	The hospital is not well	Something is wrong
Svensk sjukvård blöder	The Swedish health service is bleeding to death	The health service is in dire straits.
Sjuk av vården	The health service makes you ill	To illustrate that the nurses who should be nursing are instead the ones in need of help
Sjuksköterskor slår larm	Nurses raise the alarm	Something is seriously wrong (whistleblowers/warning to others)
Receptet för sjukvårdskrisen	The cure for the health service crisis	The solution to the crisis

Body in action metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Springer benen av oss	Running ourselves into the ground	Overworked
Det känns som en mardröm	It feels like a nightmare	The situation is extremely unpleasant
Sparkrav stressar samvete och fötter	The need to save money wears you out	Putting money before people is unfair
Med stressen flåsande i nacken	People breathing down your neck	Feeling harassed and pushed around
Vänder ut och in på oss själva för att kunna ta hand om våra patienters behov	We are doing everything in our power to satisfy the needs of our patients	We cannot work harder than this
Att sätta ned foten	Put my foot down	Stop, enough is enough
Vi kan inte slå knut på oss själva	We cannot tie ourselves in knots	We cannot do the impossible
Går till jobbet med ångestklump i magen	The very thought of going to work makes my stomach ache	Terrified of the work situation and what will happen next

Body as a machine metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Gnistan har tagit slut	The spark has gone out of me	Lack of enthusiasm for the work
Energin har tagit slut	I have no energy left	State of exhaustion
Tappat gnistan	Lost the spark	No longer interested in the work
Kroppar som går sönder	Bodies that break down	Close to breakdown
Personalen nöts sakta ned	The staff are slowly worn down	Constant stress is wearing
Men till slut tar det stopp	Things grind to a halt	Enough is enough

Journey metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Står vid ett vägskäl Det har blivit en ond cirkel	Reached a crossroads It's become a vicious circle	A change of course is necessary Things go round and round without hope of change
Länssjukhuset är ett sjunkande skepp	The hospital is a sinking ship	If something isn't done to stop the rot it will be too late.
De (sjuksköterskorna) flyr krisen inom sjukvården Vården är på väg att braka Stress och utmattning gör att personalen strömhoppas från sina jobb En massflykt är ett faktum	Nurses are leaving the profession in droves The health service is about to crash Stress and exhaustion are forcing the staff to resign A mass exodus is a reality	Nurses are leaving because the situation has become unsustainable A crisis point has been reached Large numbers of people are leaving
Sjuksköterskeflykten Det känns fel att överge skeppet	Mass exodus of nurses Abandoning ship feels wrong	All the options have been exhausted and the only way out is to leave Nurses are leaving in droves Show feelings of loyalty and at the same time knowing that there is only one option left
Sjukhuset i fritt fall	The hospital is going downhill fast	Little can be done to stop the rot

Natural metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Nu är det katastrof Det stormar kring akutmottagningen	It's a disaster area A storm is raging in the emergency department	Something is in a terrible state Feelings are running high in the emergency department
Scenariet är katastrof Organisationen har slimrats till den mildra grad att det inte finns någon luft kvar Ett nytt kaos hotar vården	It's a disaster scenario The organization has been slimmed down to such an extent that it can no longer breathe More chaos threatens the health service	Things are out of control There is very little room left for manoeuvre. Things are in danger of getting out of control
Många flyr	Many are fleeing	Staff are leaving

Health care as a container metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Kliniken har haft ett ovanligt högt tryck med fler patienter än normalt Trycket ökar	The clinic has been under extreme pressure with many more patients than normal The pressure is increasing	The workload has been much heavier than usual The workload is increasing
Det är proppfullt överallt Vi har ett högt tryck av att ta emot patienter	It's bursting at the seams We are under extreme pressure to take in patients	There are so many people it's difficult to cope with them The staff have no choice but to cope with the situation
Trycket har varit extremt högt Det är högt tryck på akuten	The pressure has been extremely high There's a lot of pressure on the emergency ward	The workload has been much heavier than usual An external force is determining the (working) conditions
Trycket in är så stort att vi stressar hem patienterna	The pressure is so great that we having to send patients home early	The numbers are such that we are forced to make room for incoming patients

Industrial metaphorical expressions.

Metaphorical expressions in Swedish	Equivalent expressions in English	The idiomatic meaning of the metaphorical expression in English
Sjuksköterskor är en bristvara i sommar	Nurses are in short supply this summer	There is a shortage of nurses
En undersökning av efterfrågan och tillgång på vårdpersonal visar att bristen på sjuksköterskor är stor	An inquiry into the supply and demand of care workers shows that the shortage of nurses is great	To state and legitimise a lack of nursing staff
Vi kan producera mer vård	We can produce more healthcare	The capability for action is there
Så långt har inte personalminskningen inte påverkat produktionen av vård	So far has the reduction in staff has not affected the production of healthcare	The nursing shortage has not affected the levels or quality of care

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