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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Taking command of continuity—*An interview study with agency nurses*

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of the study was to describe continuity from the perspective of working as an agency nurse (AN).

Design: Qualitative design was applied using individual semi-structured interviews.

Method: Individual interviews with fifteen registered nurses working at agency companies were conducted in 2020. The interviews were analyzed with thematic analysis. The study followed the guidelines addressed in the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) framework.

Results: Thematic analysis yielded one theme - standing strong and taking command - and four categories: being competent and experienced, being prepared and at ease, ensuring an unbroken chain of care, and belonging on my own terms. The categories illustrated the engagement, professionalism, and natural leadership showed by the ANs to uphold quality and continuity.

KEYWORDS
agency nurse, continuity, qualitative design

1 | INTRODUCTION

In Sweden and globally, nurse shortages are a serious concern due to factors like the ageing population, with increased needs for care, and the ageing workforce (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2019; Smeds Alenius, 2018). Nurse-related factors have repeatedly been found to be associated with a range of patient outcomes. In addition, the work environment seems important for nurses' abilities to provide safe and high-quality care (Smeds Alenius, 2018). Having a sufficient number of competent nurses is essential to promote a favourable work environment and maintain patient safety and quality. To address these challenges, use of temporary nurses, also called travel nurses or agency nurses (ANs), provided by external agencies, is common (Birmingham et al., 2019; Manias et al., 2003a; Simpson & Simpson, 2019). In recent years, the use of private staffing agencies to supplement nursing staff has increased in Sweden (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2018). The use of agency staff, such as ANs, is often considered a failure and a disgrace to management. It is associated with poor continuity in care that is not performed or followed-up (Senek et al., 2020), considerable costs (Hurst & Smith, 2011; Manias et al., 2003b) and some nurse managers consider ANs to lack commitment in their professional work (Matlakala & Botha, 2016). This may negatively affect nurses' professional pride and role in general and their job satisfaction.

Several studies indicate that the extent of safety and quality might not be related to the presence of ANs. For example, one study showed that the use of ANs was not associated with nosocomial infections (Bae et al., 2015), and another that there were no statistically significant differences in overall quality when comparing wards with and without ANs (Hurst & Smith, 2011). One study even found that a higher number of ANs in nursing homes resulted in higher quality of care (Castle & Engberg, 2008). Furthermore, in a study

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by Aiken et al. (2013), the association between the number of ANs and mortality was statistically insignificant after controlling for work environmental factors. Interestingly, the authors concluded that the use of agency workers did not directly influence patient mortality but could alleviate nursing staffing problems that might lead to higher mortality. Even though negative perceptions of ANs have been argued to be unfounded (Aiken et al., 2007), several concerns seem to remain about the AN role.

Most research focusing on ANs' own experiences has addressed reasons for choosing to work as an AN and experiences of agency work in general. For example, reasons for not choosing permanent employment were lack of flexibility and respect for nurses in permanent roles and stressful work environments (Birmingham et al., 2019). A recent scoping review found that many nurses chose to work for agencies for several positive reasons, such as enhanced flexibility and control and less involvement in office politics (Simpson & Simpson, 2019). Flexible hours, greater independence, and getting enhanced clinical skills through a variety of clinical settings were other motives for choosing a career as an AN (Birmingham et al., 2019). Concerns have been raised about the use of ANs related to consequences in relation to continuity.

2 | CONTINUITY

The concept of continuity can be used and understood in different ways. In the nursing context, continuity is often discussed in terms of "care continuity," which is usually related to care being provided by a single person (Stifter et al., 2015). Care continuity is considered to be tied to care quality and satisfaction, but current literature provides no consensus on the concept. Vital aspects included are often linked to information, organization, and relationships (Haggerty et al., 2003; Uijen et al., 2012). Without a consensus on the concept, evaluation of its impact might be even more difficult and require more attention in research and practice. One study showed that permanent nurses perceived ANs as hindering continuity of care (Anderson et al., 1996). In another study, hospital managers perceived it as difficult for ANs to provide care continuity, since they might not be in the same place two days in a row (Manias et al., 2003b).

Another way of understanding continuity is related to an individual's personal continuity or self-continuity, which plays a fundamental part in identity and development. Self-continuity can be described as a subjective sense that past, present, and future time slices of one's identity are meaningfully connected (Becker et al., 2018; Sedikides et al., 2018). Self-continuity has been described as being bolstered by fulfilment of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Sedikides et al., 2018). Changes in morality have been found to be disruptive for self-continuity, meaning that it is crucial to maintain one's moral characteristics to preserve self-continuity over time (Molouki & Bartels, 2017). Self-continuity is crucial for personal development and our understanding and cognitive organization of our social worlds. Atypical employment, such as agency nursing, often involves a self-initiated and consciously chosen employment discontinuity, involving regular encounters with new environments. This could potentially have consequences for both self-continuity and care continuity. Still, studies directly investigating ANs' own perspectives on continuity are lacking. This study focuses on continuity in a broad perspective, including both care continuity and self-continuity.

Further, aspects connected to personal development, work environment, and relationships, which could be understood as important for continuity, have been investigated only indirectly. For instance, ANs are found to experience a lacking sense of fellowship and belonging with colleagues, lack of communication with permanent staff (Birmingham et al., 2019; Simpson & Simpson, 2019), and lack of educational opportunities and training (Birmingham et al., 2019; Simpson & Simpson, 2019). Such aspects could be understood as "gaps" and sources of annoyance, that is discontinuities in care, as described and debated by Cook et al. (2000). These gaps also encompass losses of information and interruptions in delivery of care. Coping with or bridging such discontinuities is a core activity for healthcare staff, whether they are permanent staff or ANs, and anticipating any future discontinuity is often considered a high-quality performance in healthcare. Understanding the complex nature of discontinuities in healthcare is challenging, since everything appears to be interconnected (Cook et al., 2000). Investigating ANs' own experiences about continuity and discontinuity could help us understand this complex phenomenon. Thus, the aim of this study was to describe continuity from the perspective of working as an AN and the following research question guided the study; How is continuity described by AN?

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Design

This explorative qualitative study was based on individual interviews with Registered Nurses working at agency companies. The interviews were conducted in order to gather descriptions of the ANs' experiences of continuity and were analysed manually and thematically using an inductive approach. To adhere to the evaluative criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the research process was systematic, structured, and transparent. The study followed the guidelines addressed in the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) framework (Tong et al., 2007). This study is part of a larger project: "The ties that bind fragmented care- best practices, definitions, and measures of continuity of care."

(Dnr. Forte 2017–00202.)

3.2 | Setting

In 1993, legislative changes made it possible for both private and public employers to use hired staff in Sweden (Swedish Code of

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Statues, 1993:440). Of the total nurse population, only a small percentage currently work in temporary agency positions. Although there are differences between countries, temporary agency work can generally be seen as a relationship between the staffing agency, the nurse, and the client, that is the healthcare organization (Håkansson & Isidorsson, 2012). The AN has no guaranteed, fixed workplace and must be willing to work at various client organizations anywhere in Sweden. Because there are several private staffing agencies and each AN will have relationships with several organizations, the nurses included in this study were invited to participate through social media. The research group consisted of four females, one professor, two associate professors and one PhD, all with extended knowledge in qualitative research. There was no relation between researchers and participants.

3.3 | Participants

Participants were identified and recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2014). Criteria for participation were being a nurse working at a private agency company no more than 1 year ago, with care experiences from public healthcare. Those willing to participate were asked to return a signed consent form and provide contact details. A total of 15 ANs, 14 females and one male, chose to participate in an interview. The number of years working as a Registered Nurse ranged from 2 to 35 (mean = 14.3) in the sample, years as an active AN ranged from 0.5 to 13 (mean = 4.2), and the average length of assignments varied between 3 days and 4 years. All except one of the informants worked in hospital care. There were no dropouts.

3.4 | Data collection

Participants were recruited through social media, where an invitation letter with information about the study was posted twice, including one reminder. All interviews were conducted by telephone, to enable national dissemination. Data collection was performed in March to June 2020. All interviews lasted for 30–75 (mean = 45) minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Through the approach to recruit through social media, a broad variation of experiences from across the country was captured.

During the interview, open-ended questions were asked with a basis in an interview guide, developed to provide a basic structure for the interviews. The interview guide encompassed overarching topics, to visualize the concept of continuity in the role being an AN: continuity in the professional role, continuity in work as temporary staff, continuity and management, continuous competence development, and continuity in relation to the patient and their next-of-kin. Examples from the interview guide; "What does continuity mean to you in your professional role?", "Can you tell me about your experiences of continuity when working as an AN?" Additional questions and probes were asked when appropriate. Two researchers (ID, KS) were in charge of the contact with the participants and performed the interviews separately.

3.5 | Data analysis

The analysis was influenced by the Braun and Clarke guide for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis is used for qualitative data reduction and sense-making of qualitative material, to identify patterns or themes (Patton, 2014), through a process of coding data without trying to fit them into a pre-existing frame of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research group is experienced in qualitative research and has published many studies using this design. Prior to the coding process—including taking notes and marking ideas for coding—all interviews were transcribed verbatim and read by the researchers to become familiar with the data. Then, with the aim of the study in mind, the researchers reread and extracted data from the interviews. Two of the researchers (KS, ID) performed the initial analysis. The contents of all interview data were organized into initial codes. All data extracts were read and discussed to get transparency in the coding process and analysis. In this phase, the different codes were sorted into potential themes, and the relevant coded data extracts were organized in the identified themes. To check probably themes in relation to the coded extracts, a thematic map or matrix was generated. The coding and initial codes were again discussed in the entire research group to reach consensus. The data extracts were then reviewed, and the codes were refined and organized into themes to identify the essence of each theme. The analysis constantly moved back and forward between the entire dataset, the coded extracts, and the analysis of the data produced. The analysis was performed both separately and, in the group, decreasing the risk of bias resulting from the researchers' pre-understandings and potential overinterpretation in the coding process. The interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analysed in Swedish, then the results were translated into English.

4 | RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr 2018/23-31). All the participants were informed about the study verbally and in writing and gave informed consent.

5 | FINDINGS

5.1 | Standing strong and taking command

The analysis resulted in an overarching theme, standing strong and taking command, constituting the abstracted content of the themes: being competent and experienced, being prepared and at ease, ensuring an unbroken chain of care, and belonging on my own terms. The themes illustrated the engagement, professionalism, and natural leadership showed by the ANs to uphold quality and continuity. A prerequisite for an AN to be the carrier of continuity was to get a thorough introduction ahead of working in a new workplace. This

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contributed to and facilitated teamwork, which were essential for continuity according to the ANs. However, the wish of belonging for the sake of personal continuity was sometimes contradicted by a wish of not becoming too involved. The analyses of the ANs' descriptions are presented below for each theme and illustrated with quotations.

5.2 | Being competent and experienced

Having competence and solid professional experience as a nurse was described by the ANs as the core of continuity, both from their personal perspective and for patient safety. They often perceived themselves as the most experienced and competent nurses at the ward and were—in their own view—necessary for ensuring continuity. The ANs emphasized the importance of being confident and professional in patient encounters, having knowledge of co-workers' competence, and gaining trust from co-workers, patients, and their families to maintain continuity. They considered themselves to have a pronounced will to step up, make themselves heard, and lead the work based on their own knowledge and professional experience.

> ... and I am one of the people with most experience and competence at my current workplace.
>
> (4).

> Yes, but as I said, at the places I have been working, I have been the one who had to train others, as regards both medicine and practice.
>
> (8).

Responsibility, control, autonomy, and self-confidence were described by the ANs as vital for the experience of continuity. They also said that taking responsibility for their own competence development reflected their inner drive to offer care of high quality and their commitment to the work near the patients. Being self-confident also helped the ANs in the nurse role and to uphold high ethical and moral standards.

> I have ... I have always managed my own competence development. I do it myself, it isn't something the agency provides, they think it is good if you are interested, but nothing more than that ...
>
> (4).

5.3 | Being prepared and at ease

To establish continuity, the ANs wanted to be as prepared for and acquainted with a new workplace as possible. Getting a thorough introduction before starting a shift and the manager being present and visible were considered vital to continuity. Further, the routines and guidelines available had to be clear and up-to-date, which the ANs stated gave them a sense of security.

According to the ANs, they often had to make sure that an introduction took place and they had to ask about local routines themselves. They said that an introduction was also an opportunity to get to know the workplace and the co-workers, which were both considered important for maintaining continuity.

> It is important to have job descriptions or instructions at the workplace, so we know what they do, like 'we work in this manner' and 'we have these routines.' I also think you should always ... regardless of how long you have been working, always get at least one work shift as an introduction, where you can go around and look at the premises, check the routine documents. and just talk to the other staff.
>
> (11).

Although an introduction was considered to be an important part in maintaining continuity, the ANs mentioned various reasons why introductions were not always prioritized. These could be financial reasons, where neither the ward nor the agency wanted to pay for the ANs' time. There could also be expectations that the AN would be skilled and manage the new situation without any introduction. This, together with an unspoken expectation to do a little more and perform better than regular staff, was sometimes perceived by the ANs as overwhelming.

> I have also experienced coming to a workplace where no introduction was offered at all, and when meeting the manager, he just gave me a computer, assigned me to four beds, and then left ...
>
> (3).

> ... you have to ... you have to be a little bit more ambitious, you have to be a little bit nicer, you can't really go to work and just be there and do your work, you always have to do that little bit extra.
>
> (3).

5.4 | Ensuring an unbroken chain of care

The ANs described continuity as something ongoing, a feeling of coherence about both time, work, and place. When an AN worked intensively in an assignment, continuity was positively affected, as this improved the conditions for the AN and regular staff to get to know each other and to improve teamwork. Returning to the same workplace and working with the same nurses and physicians increased both an AN's knowledge and their feelings of trust, security, and safety.

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> Continuity means … having a workplace where you sort of have continuity in your work … and you feel safe, which includes both the work environment and the people you work with, but also the patients you are taking care of …
>
> (13).

In the ANs' experiences, continuity for the patients was not affected by how long the AN assignment was, as each patient's length of stay was generally short. The ANs saw no reason to present themselves as ANs to the patients, as there was usually a large turnover in regular staff too.

> So … when it comes to patients and relatives, it is not strange for them that I come instead of the regular staff, they just see me as any nurse …
>
> (8).

5.5 | Belonging on my own terms

Being invited, involved, and part of a context was described by some of the ANs as important for their personal sense of continuity and thus for the overall continuity. Feeling needed and appreciated by the regular staff was seen as significant and increased the willingness to return to the same workplace. When an AN was known and appreciated by regular staff, it led to increased confidence and facilitated work.

> That you become a part of the staff group, that they welcome you and see you as an equal colleague.
>
> (1).

> A lot of it is about being invited … into everyday nursing care activities.
>
> (3).

However, the willingness to belong was to a certain extent on each AN's own terms, as belonging could lead to a greater involvement in workplace problems. This was something that the ANs wanted to avoid, in favour of working close to the patients and using competence and experience to contribute to continuity and high-quality care.

> So, I am like hired staff, I am there to work for the patients, but you get so much more responsibility.
>
> (4).

There were times when neither the workplace nor the agency considered a nurse's competence or specific knowledge of the assignment in question. The AN could then get the feeling of being just an external resource called in to deal with the situation that had arisen, creating a sense that continuity was not prioritized.

> So, it differs a lot depending on the assignment, but if it is a short assignment, I think that you … then you are only seen … as a … as an external person who will come in and it is also expected that you know everything …
>
> (3).

6 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to describe continuity from the perspective of ANs. Findings showed that the core of continuity for ANs was being competent and experienced in their profession. As they were often among the most experienced nurses on the ward, they saw themselves as a prerequisite for continuity. The participants emphasized the importance of trust and professionalism in meetings with patients, relatives, and family, but also for gaining the trust of co-workers in order to maintain continuity. Professional competence as a nurse is defined by Valizadeh et al. (2019) as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitude, encompassing several domains like relationships with patients, teamwork and cooperation, and moral action.

According to the ANs, another prerequisite for maintaining continuity was getting a comprehensive introduction to each new assignment, including a presentation of co-workers and their competence. This gave the ANs a sense of security and safety in patient care. By understanding each other's skills, exchanging experiences, and collaborating, nurses can rely on each other's competence and thereby support continuity for patients (Östman et al., 2021).

The participants in our study emphasized their willingness to go back to the essence of nursing practice, for example caring for patients. A finding, which is in accordance with Jansson and Engström´ study among agency critical care nurses. For them the ability working close to the patient was one of the advantages of being a AN (Jansson & Engström, 2017). Yet, another study has found that nurse managers perceive ANs as task oriented and only fairly attached to the actual patients (Gan, 2020), which is contradictory to what the ANs in our study feels. Nurses had often experienced ethical problems associated with protecting patient rights, autonomy, and advanced planning. Protecting patients' rights has been described as one of the basic tenets of the nursing profession (Ulrich et al., 2010). A person's moral traits are considered important for their identity and sense of personal continuity. Morality is often treated as a defining feature of oneself and maintaining one's morality is essential in preserving personal continuity over time (Molouki & Bartels, 2017). In the present study, having direct patient time and going back to the essence of nursing could be interpreted as preserving one's moral characteristics as a nurse and thus preserving personal continuity. Maintenance of self-continuity has important implications for personal well-being, which might be one reason why some nurses consider work as an AN as beneficial for both care continuity and personal continuity. Furthermore, the ANs in our study underlined the importance of having solid professional experience to uphold the

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quality of patient care. Recently graduated nurses are less probably than nurses with several years of experience to meet assessment expectations (Aiken et al., 2009; Fero et al., 2009; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2019; Taylor, 2002). An experienced nurse responds differently than a less experienced nurse to subtle changes in a patient that signal a significant, underlying problem (Hill, 2010).

The length of stay for patients in hospital care is generally short and the participants in our study mentioned that working as an AN was not a problem in this regard. Long-term relationships in hospital care are hard to create and perhaps not even necessary. Already, Krogstad, Hofoss, & Hjortdahl (2022) wrote: "It is important to recognise that continuity of care when the carer is an institution differs in important aspects from continuity when the carer is a person." Instead, continuity should be created at a system level. Östman et al. (2021) found, when interviewing nurses with experience of heart failure care, that continuity was related to a trustful and caring relationship, but not necessarily a personal relationship. As long as a patient had someone, they could turn to who made them feel confident and who could coordinate their care, they seemed to be satisfied. This is in line with what older patients emphasize as important for care continuity, namely competence and knowledge, rather than meeting the same personnel (Ljungholm et al., 2021; Salisbury et al., 2009). This is in contradiction to Saultz and Albedaiwi (2004) who describe that long-term relationships between healthcare staff and patients as the core of creating mutual trust and continuity and have been well-studied in primary care setting.

Taking responsibility, being autonomous, and being self-confident were vital parts of maintaining continuity, according to the ANs. This made them step up and lead the work. Stanley (2006) showed similar results, where passion for patient interaction and direct involvement in and responsibility for patient care were motivators for clinical nurse leaders. Without deep insights into leadership, they underlined the importance of a nurse leader being clinically skilled, competent, and a role model providing a high standard of care (Stanley, 2006). Further, having a long professional experience and higher job satisfaction were significant for informal leaders among nurses (Douglas Lawson et al., 2019). Thus, the ANs in the study would be well-placed to take on a leadership role. Moreover, feeling autonomous and competent are important aspects for the construction and maintenance of personal continuity, with implications for motivational states, such as need for fulfilment (Sedikides et al., 2018). This indicates that when nurses feel strong, self-confident, and have the courage to take command, personal continuity can be maintained and improve motivation and the sense of fulfilment at work. These results might have important implications for nurse management and nursing practice, as they highlight the importance of nurse autonomy and leadership.

7 | STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The study included a national sample of ANs, but the use of social media for recruitment may have created a bias, since not every AN is connected to digital social networks. Although all participants but one was female, the sample consisted of a heterogeneous group varying in age and length of time as an AN. The majority of the nurses had long experience of the care profession, which may have influenced their responses about safety in their professional role. The long experience may also have given them the opportunity to reflect on their situation as ANs and compare it with being a regular nurse as regards continuity. The study participants' experiences were most often related to hospital-based in-patient care, which needs to be taken into account when interpreting the results. In this type of care, continuity can be understood differently compared with, for example, in community care, where care relationships are generally longer. This may be considered about transferability. The research process was performed in a structured way and the results were compared with raw data from the interviews and code scheme, ensuring compliance and credibility (Patton, 2014). When data are interpreted, scientific rigour is crucial, but the subjectivity of the researchers involved may weaken trustworthiness (Patton, 2014). All the researchers were nurses and one had experience of being an AN. To avoid the risk of being affected by pre-understanding, continuous reflections were conducted in the research team throughout the analysis. Participants' quotations were presented to illustrate the themes identified in the analysis of data and improve the confirmability of the study.

8 | CONCLUSION

ANs are important contributors to continuity as a result of their competence and experience and through strong commitment to the core of nursing: working close to the patients. In the in-hospital context, this may be more important for continuity than having the same person care for a patient over time. Further, in a work environment with high turnover of regular staff, ANs might be the carriers of continuity, ensuring safe and high-quality care. An important prerequisite for ANs to be able to contribute to continuity is a thorough introduction in preparation for work in a new workplace, including knowledge about co-workers' competence. Working intensively during an assignment affected continuity positively, by providing better conditions for the ANs and regular staff to improve teamwork. Vital parts in the experience of continuity for the ANs were responsibility, control, autonomy, and self-confidence. This, together with their experience and knowledge, made the ANs prepared to step up and lead the work.

8.1 | Relevance to clinical practice

The findings indicate that the management should pay attention to the unique competence that the agency nurse brings to the assignment, while at the same time there need to be an awareness of the fragility of being a novice to local routines in the department in question.

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Findings from this study underline the importance of a thorough introduction for ANs to become familiar with local guidelines and the competence of co-workers, to enable continuity, safety, and high-quality care. Intense work shifts during an assignment affected continuity positively by providing better conditions for ANs and regular staff to get to know each other and improve teamwork. Furthermore, maintaining self-continuity was found to have important implications for their well-being.

8.2 | What does this paper contribute to the wider global clinical community?

- Agency nurses' experiences and knowledge might be more important for care continuity than having the same nurse provide care over time.
- Agency nurses maintain continuity through their strong commitment to the core of nursing: working close to the patients.
- Agency nurses underline that having solid professional experience to uphold the quality of patient care is essential for continuity.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available in Swedish.

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