

Research Article

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Career Choice and Perception of Nursing Profession among Undergraduate Nursing Students: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study aimed to explore the reasons undergraduate nursing students in Pakistan choose nursing as a career and their perceptions of the profession.

Background: Nursing is frequently chosen as a profession driven by a desire to help and care for others. However, in Pakistan, nursing is often perceived negatively, discouraging students from pursuing it as a career. A realistic understanding of the profession is vital, as students with a clear perception of nursing are more likely to stay in the field.

Design: A qualitative descriptive exploratory design was employed.

Methods: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 final-year BScN students from public and private nursing institutions in Peshawar, KPK, Pakistan, using purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using Creswell's analysis approach.

Results: Three main themes emerged: reasons for choosing nursing, perceptions of the profession, and recommendations for its improvement. Participants cited family influence, interest in the medical field, and personal reasons as key factors in their decision. They acknowledged that societal stereotypes and a lack of updated nursing knowledge negatively impact the profession's image. However, nursing was viewed as a multi-dimensional and rewarding career. Participants suggested that prior exposure to nursing, educational initiatives, and mentorship by senior nurses could enhance the profession's status.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the need for pre-admission career counseling, seminars, and workshops to provide realistic insights into nursing. Media should avoid perpetuating stereotypes, and stakeholders should work toward standardizing the scope of nursing practice nationwide to improve its perception and professional growth.

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Introduction

There is a substantial number of new nurses graduating yearly in Pakistan. Still, lack of qualified nurses in the clinical settings is apparent; there is only one nurse for every forty people [1]. A study conducted by which revealed that, though there are 109 nursing schools and colleges in Pakistan, still, scarcity of nurses is a central problem of concern, with over 44,000 registered nurses in the country which results in reasonably very low nurse to population ratio that is, 1:3,043; This shortage of nurses becomes noticeable in the light of the reverse doctor to nurse ratio of 2.7:1

in the country [2]. This indicates that there is a need to enhance the number of nurses to fulfill the country's need.

The scarcity of practicing registered nurses in Pakistan is a significant and stimulating issue. According to Gul, multiple factors are assumed to be the reasons for the nursing shortage in the country, including dissatisfaction with the job, social, cultural and organizational factors [3]. Although the provincial government in Pakistan has given the authority to tertiary care teaching hospitals (Medical Teaching Institutions or constitutional institutions) for recruiting of new staff, the financial constraints of the government have limited the employment of new health care staff.

In the current scenario, healthcare institutes need to develop ways to enhance enrolments and retain nurses. The recruitment strategies need to be properly thought through, in order to attract students towards the nursing profession. These strategies may include, presentations by the nurses in the community, and providing student interaction opportunities with nurses at career fairs. The perceptions of nursing students change as they proceed in their course of studies.

Have reported that there is a difference in nursing students' perception at the beginning and at the graduation level, therefore, the enrolment policies should portray the actual image of the nursing profession and of nurses [4]. Whereas, Emeghebo, found that nurses working in hospitals do not have a good perception of their colleagues in their working areas. Moreover, in Turkey, the shortage of nurses in the country is mainly because of the negative image of the profession, and unfavorable working conditions are strongly associated with the nurse's decision to leave the profession [5-6]. Similarly, Bolan and Grainger found that students in Canada leave the profession because nursing is no longer their career of choice and that they entered the profession because of their wrong perception [7].

In Pakistan, nursing is predominantly a female profession, and the low status of women in the Pakistani context influences considerably the image of the profession in the society [3]. Besides, various socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, including an unfavorable image of nursing in the country, are thought to be responsible for the current status of nursing. Saudi students, younger than 20 years, hold a negative perception of nursing because of the feminist dominance in the profession [8].

Students leave the profession in Canada because nursing is not their career of choice and that they had chosen the profession-based upon others' opinions. However, after joining the profession, the students came to know that nurses' job descriptions, as well as working conditions, were different from their perception [7]. Similarly, in Turkey the shortage of nurses in the country is mainly because of the negative image of the profession, and unfavorable working conditions are strongly associated with the nurses' decision to leave the profession [6].

In nursing, the relationship between the retention of students and professional identity is yet to be evaluated; however, it is

believed that a compatible professional image may lead to a positive personal and professional identity. A poor public image of the profession leads to an insufficient number of students choosing nursing education programs [9-10]. However, found that most of the fresh graduate nurses were comparatively optimistic regarding their job life and were found to be dedicated to the profession [11]. Moreover, nursing students are optimistic about nursing because of the humanistic nature of the profession [12].

Multiple factors guide a career choice, including the status of the profession in society, job, and career prospects [13]. Based upon current status and future opportunities within nursing and healthcare, the individuals need to make an informed choice about the profession. Moreover, Assisting the students with career choice by involving nurses at the early stages of career decision may result in the enhancement of recruitments as well as retention of newly enrolled students within nursing. Therefore, to achieve insight into professional satisfaction within the millennial cohort, it will be necessary to understand their career preferences and perceptions about the nursing profession.

One of the common influencing factors why students choose and pursue a career in the nursing profession is suggestions from family, friends, school peers, nurses, and students enrolled in nursing education programs [14]. Whereas found that students with previous interactions with nurses have significantly contributed their choice of nursing as a profession; as these nurses provided positive motivation to students to pursue a career in nursing [15]. The main reason was the positive attitude and compassion shown by these nurses while caring for the patients; that attitude was noticed by the students, which became an inspiration for them to pursue a career in nursing.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) informed the research aim to explore career choice and perceptions of undergraduate students about the nursing profession (figure 1). In the reviewed literature, students did not prefer the nursing profession due to the existing perceptions in society, which in line with the environmental factors of Krumboltz's theory of social learning, a career with regards to decision making. Two of the many reasons regarding social disapproval of the profession were found to be feminine dominance in the profession, and the lower status of women in Pakistan and the Arab countries, which seems to have influenced the image of the profession in the society.

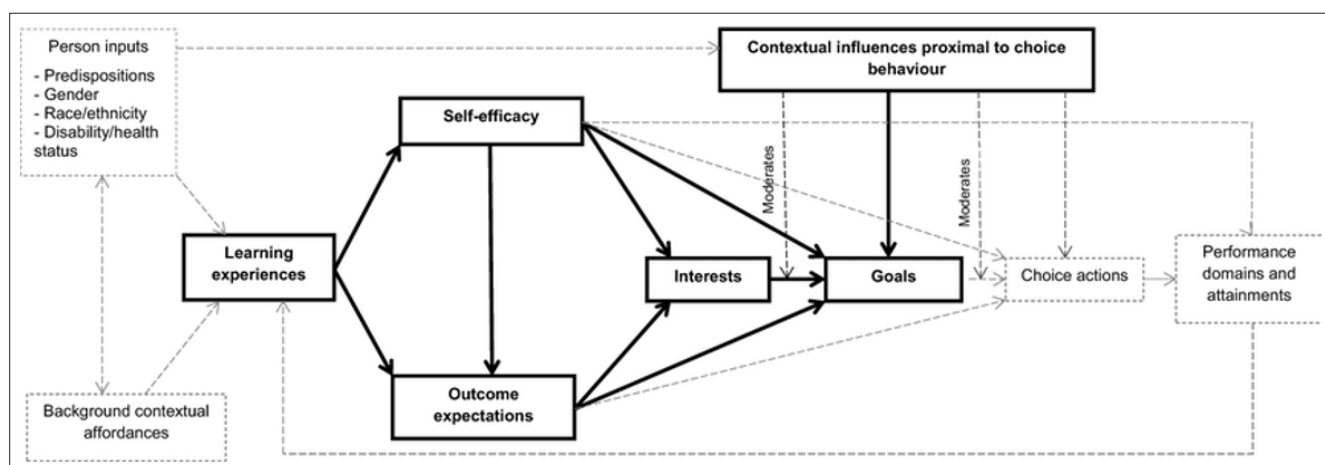


Figure 1: Social Cognitive Career Theory

Methodology

The qualitative descriptive exploratory design was used for the study. This study design helped explore and collect rich and thick data from undergraduate students related to their perceptions regarding the nursing profession and their choice of nursing as a career. It helped explore the students' lived experiences and their knowledge associated with the phenomenon under study [16].

The study population comprised of 14 final year baccalaureate (BScN) nursing students (male and female). Two public and two private nursing institutions were selected as the study settings for the data collection. Purposive sampling was adopted for selecting study participants. Polit and Beck propose that those participants (key informants) should be chosen who knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest [16]. The phenomenon of interest was explored thoroughly the researcher until the achievement of data saturation, this aided in sample size estimation for the study.

The period of the data collection process was between July and August 2020. Keeping in view the COVID 19 pandemic, the data was collected virtually through in-depth interviews.

With the participants' consent, the interviews were conducted and recorded on the phone. An interview guide was used for data collection. The interview questions focused on the choice of profession and perception of students about nursing; additional information was extracted using probes.

Each interview lasted for 25-30 minutes. The participants were asked to mention their names at the start of the interview to ensure verbal consent. These names were later replaced by pseudonyms.

Data were analyzed using qualitative analysis approach [1]. Qualitative research follows a systematic pattern of collecting, recording, and analysis of the data. Following this, first, the texts with words, phrases, and ideas are essential to the study were carefully highlighted. Next, similar words, phrases, or ideas were grouped together and arranged to form codes. After that, the codes were grouped to form categories, and finally, themes were generated from categories. The researcher regularly shared these with supervisor and thesis committee members.

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study by granting approval from head of the institutions. Ethical Review Committee (ERC) Approval has been taken from the Aga Khan University (ERC# 2020-3445-11037). Informed consent taken from the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained by assigning pseudo codes. Study Rigor was maintained by criteria of trustworthiness [17].

Results

A total of 14 undergraduate nursing students studying in the final year of BSc Nursing were recruited in the study. The majority of the students ranged between 22-24 years, with a mean age of 23.5 years. Out of these study participants, 64.3% (n=9) were male students and 35.7% (n=5) were female students. Moreover,

data was obtained from both single, 85.7% (n=12), and married, 14.3% (n=2), participants. The study participants were recruited from both government, 42.9% (n=6), and private, 57.1% (n=8), nursing institutions. All the participants (n=14) were studying in the 8th semester of BSc Nursing. Besides, most participants, 64.3% (n=9), spoke Pashto, while the remaining 35.7% (n=5), had a mother tongue other than Pashto, Urdu and Punjabi.

The highest education degree of most of the participants was Intermediate. Also, all the participants had English as their medium of instruction. Besides, 28.6% (n=4) had family members in the health profession. In comparison, 71.4% (n=10) did not. Except for one, the father was the family's earning member, 92.9% (n=13). The demographic characteristics of the participants and the overall descriptive analysis of the data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Number of Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
22 years	1	7.1
23 years	5	35.7
24 years	8	57.2
Gender		
Male	9	64.3
Female	5	35.7
Marital Status		
Single	12	85.7
Married	2	14.3
Current status of the institution		
Private	8	57.1
Public	6	42.9
Current Semester of study		
7th	-	-
8th	14	100
Highest education level		
Intermediate	14	100
Diploma	-	-
Bachelors	-	-
Medium of School Last		
Attended		
English	14	100
Urdu	-	-
Members of family in the health profession		
Yes	4	28.6
No	10	71.4
Earning person of the family		
Father	13	92.9
Brother	-	-
Other	1	7.1

The in-depth analysis of the interviews helped the researcher to identify three main themes and eight categories (Table 2).

Table 2: Themes, Categories, and Sub-Categories

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories
Reasons for selecting nursing as a profession	Influences to join nursing profession	Family and relatives influence in joining nursing profession
		Friends and peers influence in joining nursing profession
		Nurses' influence in joining nursing profession
	Interest to pursue career in medical sciences	Desire to help people
		Interest in medical field
		Failed to continue education in other disciplines of study
	Personal reasons	Practical motivation
		Own interest to study nursing
		Professional development
Perception towards nursing profession	Image and status of nursing profession in society	Negative image of nursing in the society
		Lack of knowledge regarding nursing in the society
		Stereotypes in society regarding nursing profession
	Diverse role of a nurse	Diverse role at hospital
		Caring profession
		Skilled professionals
		Advancement in nursing profession
		Nursing as an emerging profession
Way forward for nursing profession	Prior information regarding nursing profession	Importance of prior information regarding nursing profession
		Prior information leads to satisfaction
		Lack of prior information leads to dissatisfaction
	Enhance image of nursing in society	Creating awareness in society
		Educating nurses
		Nurses' acts as a role model
	Scarcity of professional skills and education among senior nurses	Lack of leadership and administrative skills
		Lack of role models among senior nurses
		Lack of inspiration from senior nurses

The three main themes that emerged are

1. Reasons for selecting nursing as a profession
2. Perceptions regarding nursing profession
3. Way forward for the nursing profession.

Reasons for Selecting Nursing as a Profession

The data analysis helped the researcher to categorize the reasons for choosing nursing as a profession into various influences, interest in medical sciences, and personal reasons.

The first category that is Influences that led to joining the nursing profession. And the sub category is Family and relatives' influence in joining the nursing profession. In this study most of the students identified family and relatives' influence in selecting nursing as a career.

“The primary reason was the influence and wish of family members, because they praised the nursing profession a lot and regarded me as a lucky person to have been selected in BSc Nursing. Therefore, I have received motivation and encouragement from my family

members upon admission in nursing” (CODE-008).

Some participants shared their thoughts and verbalized the influence of nurses in their decision regarding joining nursing as a career. They verbalized that they had been informed about the nursing profession by nurses.

“I came to know from nurses that nurses never remain jobless because of ample job opportunities. The next motivation that I received from them was that nurses handle critical patients. This elated my feelings; handling severe patients makes one proud and provides an opportunity to do something special for those who require care. My interaction with the nurses encouraged and motivated me” (CODE-010).

Many participants stated that they joined the nursing profession because they have the desire to care for people.

“Suppose someone in the family gets injured and requires continuous care and monitoring. In that case, nursing is the best

profession because it provides the knowledge and skills for taking care of the patient in the hospital as well as at home” (CODE-005).

The participants stated that theirs and their family’s interest in the medical field led them to choose nursing as a profession.

“I decided to study and pursue a career in nursing. My family and I were interested in the medical field. Nursing provides an opportunity to be in the medical field” (CODE-004).

Practical motivation refers to job security, good salary, and various job opportunities. Most participants stated that job security and opportunities were the main reasons for pursuing a career in the nursing profession.

“Everyone wants to be financially stable and support their families. In Pakistan, nurses are paid a meager amount. Therefore, why not move abroad, where nurses earn a lot by doing the same job and are more respected and valued” (CODE-007).

Most participants reported that they joined nursing out of their own choice and interest. There was no influence of force from anyone else. They believed that this profession provides financial stability and opportunities for professional development, as well.

“The final decision to join nursing as a profession was purely mine, because I saw nurses and their behavior with patients. My aim for choosing this profession was to serve my family members, community, and do something for my country” (CODE-011).

Perceptions Regarding Nursing Profession

Theme two emerged from two categories, i.e., i) Image and status of the nursing profession in society, and ii) Diverse roles of a nurse. These two categories emerged from several sub-categories.

The participants shared the reasons they considered, which led to the low status of the profession’s profession. Most participants believed that the lower status of the profession in society was due to the negative image of nursing in society, a lack of knowledge regarding the nursing profession in the society, and stereotypes in society regarding the nursing profession.

“I believe that nursing is regarded as a low-status profession because of a lack of awareness about what it takes to become a nurse. Most of them think that students just learn some particular skills and practice them at the bedside. They are unaware that nursing has its own governing body and offers four years of bachelor’s degree awarded by a university” (CODE- 013).

Most of the participants shared the stereotypes related to the profession. For instance, nursing is a feminine profession.

“I believed that nursing is solely a feminine profession, and males cannot take nursing school admission. The profession is limited to hospitals only, and that they administer injections only” (CODE-004).

Most of the participants responded that nurses are professionals who perform diverse roles at hospitals.

“I realized that nurses’ responsibilities at the hospitals are beyond administering medications; they perform critical roles in the communities by educating, creating awareness among

the people regarding the prevention of diseases, and promoting health” (CODE-013).

Most of the participants believed that nursing has advanced as a profession through the implementation of evidence-based practice. However, the proper utilization of their skills and knowledge is still limited due to various reasons.

“The nurses should implement evidence-based practice. Although they know most of the things, however, they hardly utilize their abilities to promote the patients’ health due to lack of confidence. Although novice BScN prepared graduate nurses are knowledgeable and skilled, our hospitals’ culture does not allow them to practice according to our professional code of conduct” (CODE-007).

Way Forward for the Nursing Profession

Most of the study participants responded with different recommendations to improve the current perception of people regarding the nursing profession in society. From different study participants’ responses, the theme “way forward for the nursing profession” has been derived.

Most of the participants pointed out the importance of prior information regarding any profession before joining.

“Prior exposure helps to understand different aspects of the profession, and the student will be aware of his/her future. It will be easier for the student to select goals in terms of what he/she wants to achieve in a particular profession” (CODE-001).

The study participants proposed that the image of nursing has to be enhanced in society.

“The profession’s image will be improved if they understand nursing. Education and awareness of people regarding the nursing profession are essential, and it is the need of the time. As nurses, we should present ourselves as role models to the community through our knowledge, practice, and positive behavior with patients, attendants, and healthcare teams” (CODE-007).

Some participants stated that most senior nurses lacked leadership and administrative skills, which needs to be addressed.

“If I talk about the current administrative positions in nursing, we came to know that all the positions like nursing directors, principals, etc., are occupied by senior nurses who lack both knowledge and evidence-based practice. Although, currently, there are many masters prepared and Ph.D. qualified nurses in the field, but those senior nurses do not allow them to make a real change in the profession” (CODE-006).

Discussion

Reasons for choosing nursing as a career has been identified as one of the major themes in this study, and this can be associated with the concept in the SCCT. The main concepts, in theory, are those career choices are formed based on personal efficacy development, skills refinement, practice, feedback, and expectations of satisfactory outcomes [18]. In addition, the same author found that students tend to develop an interest in careers that are well- matched with their perceived capabilities and desired outcomes.

It was found that most of the participants came to know about nursing through their family members and friends, followed by

media. Similarly, other sources of information about nursing included work experience, being in a hospital as a patient, and schools [19]. In addition, the same study suggested that students should not leave the profession on the basis of what family, friends, or advisers tell them or how the nursing profession is represented on the media. It is also suggested that such recruitment strategies be implemented that may enhance students' awareness of the various pathways in nursing. In the present study, 71.4% (n=10) of the participants learnt about nursing through societal trends, senior school mates, friends, and the social media. Therefore, the media should portray a positive image of nursing in society.

The findings of the current study revealed that the desire to help people was one of the frequently stated reasons for interest in medical sciences. The participants reported that they chose the nursing profession due to its caring nature and the various opportunities it presented to help and care for the patients suffering from illness, in hospitals and in the community. A quantitative cross-sectional study in South Africa, conducted by Lagarde and Blaauw, reported a positive association between the dedication of student nurses towards patients and nursing as a career choice [20]. In addition, the study found the students with altruistic nature as well as willing to sacrifice their benefits for specific populations, including patients and poor people, have a strong tendency to join nursing. The findings of the study are consistent with the current study, as providing care and altruistic nature were amongst the reasons for interest in the medical field due to the culture of the participants that helps them to develop altruistic and humanistic behavior.

In Pakistan, a descriptive correlational study conducted by Gul, found that the positive characteristics of nursing are overshadowed by the negative characteristics that create a negative image and perception about the profession in the country [3]. The study also identified that a dichotomy in society's attitude towards the profession has been created by a lack of respect from doctors, unsafe working environment, low socio-economic status of nurses, and very nature of nurse's work. However, the respondents in the current study regarded nursing as a noble and humanistic profession, and they were motivated and positive with regard to recommend nursing to their relatives and friends.

For enhancing the image of the profession in society, creating awareness regarding nursing is the need of time, which can help to improve the current image and perceptions regarding the profession. Similarly, it is of utmost importance that nurses acquire higher education and act as role models. The findings of the study are compatible with the study in Poland [21]. The study found that there was a need to create awareness in the nursing community regarding knowledge, skills, and higher university education. Besides, nurses should become more active and perform tasks autonomously in the nursing profession.

The findings of the present study reported the scarcity of professional skills and education among senior nurses. The study participants responded that lack of achievements in the nursing profession contributes to developing a negative image, therefore, educating senior nurses is important. Also, the scarcity of the mentioned skills needs to be addressed. Moreover, senior nurses need to present themselves as role models and become inspirational for students as well as junior nurses by acquiring leadership and administrative skills.

The findings of the current study are consistent with a qualitative study conducted in Finland, by Glerean, Hupli, Talman, and

Haavisto, the study identified that for becoming inspirational and role models for other nurses, senior nurses need to showcase patient-centered attitude, good knowledge of nursing skills, implement evidence-based practice, and must be involved in decisions related to the patient course of treatment [22]. The study further revealed that involvement in the decision-making process enables nurses to develop their leadership and administrative skills, which not only benefits the profession but also leads to better health outcomes for the patients.

To the best of researcher's knowledge, it is first study of its kind in Pakistan which exploring career choice and perceptions among UG nursing students. Both private and public sector institutions were included in the study. Moreover, the participants provided rich information, which helped to maintain the rigor of the study. The information generated from the study could be employed for future research studies, as this study is limited to career choice and the perceptions of undergraduate students. The interviews of the study were conducted by the researcher, himself. The data of the study was obtained from four educational institutes situated in Peshawar (KPK), Pakistan which helped to maintain the rigor of the study.

The current study explored reasons for career choice and perceptions of nursing students, while disciplines other than nursing was not involved. Therefore, future researches need to be conducted on various degree fields, other than nursing. The interviews of the participants were conducted via phone, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the researcher was neither able to take field notes.

Prior information about nursing profession should be portrayed in the form of orientation session, seminars, workshops, and career counseling sessions, with regards to its value in society, job description at hospitals and other health care settings, career opportunities, and opportunities for professional development. Media should portray a positive image of nurses and the nursing profession, and avoid propagating stereotypical images of the profession.

Healthcare organizations need to develop and emphasize certain strategies that could promote nurses' dignity, such as professional autonomy and empowering nurses. Engagement of nurses in multidisciplinary seminars, conferences and symposiums as most of the time medical seminars/conferences are only offered for doctors.

Quantitative studies could be carried out to examine the level of satisfaction and to identify the factors that will help enhance or affect motivation to stay in the profession. Also, to examine the level of satisfaction among nursing students before and after attending the orientation sessions, as well as the effectiveness of orientation session. Moreover, New tools could be developed through quantitative studies to measure factors associated with career choice and perceptions.

Effective recruitment strategies need to be developed to enhance enrollment of new students to counter the existing shortage of nurses in the country. The major stakeholders, such as the Pakistan Nursing Council (PNC), should focus on the development of a uniform scope of practice for nursing across the country. As well as define and strengthen nursing roles in clinical, education and research. More scholarship opportunities could be provided by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan to nursing

graduates and undergraduates for higher education.

Conclusion

The study concluded that various factors involved in the decision-making process of the students regarding the nursing profession. Students with altruistic nature, and those in search of financial gains and professional development tended to attracted towards nursing. The lower status and the stereotypes about nursing are the major contributors to the negative image of the profession in society. Lack of administrative and leadership skills, along with the scarcity of professionalism, among senior nurses in Pakistan remains an issue.

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