

# Explaining Professionalism and Professional Socialization Process in Nursing Students

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## Abstract

**Background:** Professional socialization is the process of accepting professional roles. Nursing students can undergo a transition from a student role to a professional nurse by gaining learning experiences and acquiring the necessary competencies of the profession. Accordingly, this study was conducted to explain the understanding of nursing students about the process of professional socialization.

**Methods:** The present qualitative study was conducted using the conventional content analysis method. The participants included 18 students who were selected using purposive sampling. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman's qualitative content analysis method.

**Results:** The analysis of the data led to the identification of one main theme and three subthemes. The core theme that emerged in this study was acquiring socialization skills and the subthemes included mental images and professional expectations, social status and professional values, and professional accountability and teamwork. These themes illustrate the participants' perception of professional socialization.

**Conclusion:** The findings showed that from the perspective of students, mental images and professional expectations as well as professional values and teamwork cause a sense of calmness, confidence, and professional belonging in them and improve their social responsiveness.

**Keywords:** Nursing students, Professional socialization, Social accountability, Qualitative content analysis

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## Introduction

Professional socialization is an evolutionary process in which adults entering a profession learn values and roles that help them evaluate new roles. These people are actively involved in the socialization process, learn the expectations of a new role, and enter the socialization process (1-3). Professional socialization is one of the important processes that occur to help an individual become professional during education. The purpose of professional socialization is to develop professional behavior. It refers to a set of learning and socialization experiences necessary for a person to undergo a transition from a student role to a professional nurse (4,5). Since professional socialization is vital for the development of nursing students and is considered an evolutionary process that begins initially during formal education and continues with the entry of the individual into the workplace (5), it cannot be left unnoticed. Rather, it should be consciously considered in all public nursing

programs.

Nursing is established as a profession and not just a job by the way nurses are socialized. Through professional socialization, a nursing student can gain the necessary commitment to this profession and act like a "nurse" by solving problems and developing a specific critical thinking system. Professional socialization is the process of accepting professional roles (6,7).

Part of the socialization process is shaped by education. Nursing education helps nursing students to develop intellectual background, correct professional and ethical values, and expand job awareness (8). Beginner students must adapt to the specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors of the nursing culture to develop their professional identity and philosophy and socialize in their profession. If nursing graduates are not ready to move on to their professional roles and enter the clinical environment, they will be more likely to suffer from physical and mental disorders. Thus, educational programs should



create a high level of science and skills in nursing students to meet the needs of the community and the nursing profession. Furthermore, given an increase in the number of nursing students due to the increasing needs of society and subsequently the admission of students with different cultures to this profession, there is a greater need to address the professional socialization of nursing students (9).

Only a limited number of studies have addressed nursing students' experiences of the socialization process. However, a qualitative study by Dinmohammadi et al on the concept of professional socialization in nursing showed that professional socialization is an inevitable, complex, variable, dynamic, permanent, and, at the same time, unpredictable process. Socialization in the nursing profession requires the availability of a suitable context and also arrangements in the field of services and education. Socialization can also be influenced by the culture and facilities of educational institutes (10). A nurse is required to communicate effectively with the patient to provide care. Gaining patient trust is a prerequisite for such interaction. As long as the nurses do not have confidence in themselves and their professional abilities, they cannot properly gain the patients' trust, establish an effective relationship with them, and take effective care of them. Having professional confidence helps the development of professional socialization in nursing students. The positive outcomes of professional socialization include the acquisition of professional identity, adaptation to professional roles, professional and organizational commitment, and thus the promotion of the quality of care for clients (9). According to these outcomes and given the nature of nursing as an academic field as well as the paucity of research on nursing students' experiences of the socialization process and the impact of culture and facilities in the research environment, the present study aimed to explore nursing students' understanding of the process of professional socialization.

## Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using the content analysis method to explain nursing students' understanding of the process of professional socialization. Qualitative content analysis is a basic method used to discover people's understanding of everyday life phenomena and interpret the content of subjective data in textual forms. In this method, based on the participants' descriptions, observable and hidden concepts are identified and the emerged data can be coded, summarized, and classified and the relevant themes can be extracted. Codes are extracted based on meaning units derived from the experiences of participants and then classified according to their differences or similarities (11).

The research setting in this study was the School of Nursing and Midwifery and the wards of hospitals

affiliated with Kerman University of Medical Sciences. The participants were selected through purposive sampling and the sampling process continued until data saturation. The criteria for selecting students were the completion of at least two years of their nursing program and the willingness to collaborate in the research project and narrate their experiences. The participants were 18 students at different academic levels who were selected with maximum variation (in terms of age, gender, marital status, and admission to the university).

The data in this study were collected using in-depth and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (12). Open-ended interviews allow the participants to describe their experiences with the phenomenon in question. All interviews were conducted by the main researcher. Each interview lasted on average 45 to 50 minutes. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the professional expectations of nursing students?
- How did they feel while playing the role of a nurse?
- Have they adapted to the clinical environment?
- How much do they value themselves and their work community in their professional life? What changes has the nursing profession made in their lives from different perspectives?

The collected data were analyzed using the steps proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (13). All interviews were recorded and then immediately typed word by word for analysis. The researcher listened to the interviews several times and reviewed their transcripts several times to gain a general understanding of their content. The interview text was divided into meaning units and primary codes were extracted. Then, the identified codes were merged and classified to discover the themes hidden in the data.

To check the trustworthiness of the data, the four criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba were used (14). To add credibility to this research, the researcher was interacting with the nursing students and professors for 2 years working on the research problem and data. During the execution of the research project, the researcher was always interacting with the participants. Before conducting each interview, the researcher met the participants to gain their trust and establish rapport with them for conducting in-depth interviews. The findings of the study were also reviewed and confirmed through member checks and external checks. For this purpose, parts of the interview text along with the relevant codes and the emerged categories were reviewed by several observers to check the analytical processes and comment on their accuracy. To ensure the dependability of the findings, they were shared with several professors and students who did not participate in the study and

they confirmed the dependability of the findings (10). Moreover, the participants were selected with maximum variations to enhance the transferability of the findings. Finally, the procedures and steps taken to conduct the study were recorded and described in detail to improve the confirmability of the findings and make it possible for readers to assess them.

To comply with ethical considerations, the protocol for this study was confirmed under the code of ethics IR.KMU.REC.1395.525. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were informed about the objectives of the study and the interview technique. They were also ensured of the confidentiality of their information. They were also told that they would be free to leave the study if they wished so. Moreover, written informed consent was obtained from them, and the interview time was arranged upon the participants' agreement to prevent any disruption in their routine schedules.

## Results

The participants of this study were 18 students, including 7 males and 11 females. Moreover, 1 participant was a Ph.D. student, 4 were master students, and 13 participants were bachelor students (Table 1).

Analysis of the interview data revealed three themes: "Mental images and professional expectations", "social status and professional values", and "professional accountability and teamwork". These themes showed the nature and components of nursing students' understanding of the process of professional socialization. The core theme that emerged in this study was "acquiring

socialization skills". In general, each theme describes a specific aspect of nurses' professional socialization (Table 2).

### *Mental images and professional expectations*

*Mental images and professional expectations* have extensive domains including professional aspirations and ideas, feeling of inner satisfaction, role contradictions, and a sense of respect and maturity. Professional socialization in nursing begins with the nursing curriculum and continues with the entry of the individual into the clinical setting, and is promoted by team care. With the start of educational programs, students gradually enter different educational spaces and professional communities and gain various experiences that reflect realized or suppressed expectations.

### *Professional aspirations and ideas*

The data from the participants' interviews indicated that professional ideas reflected in nursing programs significantly deviate from the professional reality in practice. According to one of the students, "*Most professors discussed a lot about the necessity and scientific status of nursing, especially in the course of the nursing process and nursing concepts. Thus, I had a great perspective on my job and developed a great interest in the nursing profession*" (Participant 5).

### *Feeling of inner satisfaction*

The results of the study showed that although the learning environment plays a role in strengthening or destroying students' motivation and inner satisfaction, the human sense of service delivery and spirituality plays a vital role in keeping them motivated. Accordingly, one student said: "*Despite some disappointing behaviors and attitudes in the clinical setting, as soon as I realize I can do something for patients and they pray for me, I feel heartfelt satisfaction*" (Participant 6).

### *Role contradictions*

The students pointed to role contradictions and conflicts when describing their experiences. Role contradictions cause a feeling of lack of confidence in their abilities and prevent them from understanding the usefulness of what they have learned during their academic studies. Many participants stated that ignoring the scientific evidence of nursing as well as the disregard for the abilities and role of nurses in care and treatment would lead to an inner sense of professional incompetence over time. Analysis of the participants' experiences reflected a gap between what students have learned and job duties and their performance in the professional environment. One student said, "*At first, I did not know about the profession. I was very enthusiastic about the profession based on the materials presented in the courses and scientific materials*

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant code	Gender	Age (year)	Education
1	Female	25	Bachelor student
2	Male	22	Bachelor student
3	Male	23	Bachelor student
4	Female	21	Bachelor student
5	Female	22	Master student
6	Male	26	Bachelor student
7	Female	24	Bachelor student
8	Female	23	Bachelor student
9	Female	20	Bachelor student
10	Male	21	Bachelor student
11	Female	25	Ph.D. student
12	Male	22	Bachelor student
13	Male	23	Master student
14	Female	21	Bachelor student
15	Female	22	Master student
16	Male	23	Bachelor student
17	Male	24	Bachelor student
18	Female	23	Master student

**Table 2.** The main theme, subthemes, and categories related to nursing students' understanding of the professional socialization process

Main theme	Subthemes	Categories
Acquiring socialization skills	Mental images and professional expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional aspirations and ideas</li> <li>Feeling of inner satisfaction</li> <li>Role contradictions</li> <li>A sense of respect and maturity</li> </ul>
	Social status and professional values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social expectations</li> <li>Professional attachment and belonging</li> <li>Acquisition of skills in a real environment</li> <li>Role models</li> <li>Professional identity</li> </ul>
	Professional accountability and teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Satisfactory psychological support</li> <li>Supportive educational and clinical structures</li> <li>Responsible educational feedback</li> <li>Educational communication and trust-building professional interaction</li> </ul>

*presented by the professors, and I had different ideas about nursing. But my view was very different from what I saw in the clinical setting” (Participant 3).*

#### *A sense of respect and maturity*

Most participants stated that the main outcome of professional competence and skills is a sense of respect and maturity. One of the participants said, “*When I talk to postgraduate students in nursing or I get help from them about my studies, I have a special respect for being with successful, competent, and capable nurses. It increases my sense of effort and ability in the nursing profession*” (Participant 2). The academic qualifications of nursing professors, their up-to-date knowledge, and successful professional models play an important role in promoting students' professionalism. According to one of the master nursing students, “*When I see my professors and nursing students at higher academic levels, I feel very good that I chose the field of nursing*” (Participant 4).

#### *Social status and professional values*

As students become more exposed to the real world, they seek greater confidence and a broader view of the nursing position. At this stage, professional values and beliefs are internalized while working with the care team in a real environment. Social status and professional values were divided into 5 categories of social expectations, professional attachment and belonging, acquisition of skills in a real environment, role models, and professional identity.

#### *Social expectations*

According to the majority of the participants, professional roles, values, and professional culture are better understood in interaction with peer groups and satisfactory psychological support. Social expectations are also better understood through such interactions. Accordingly, one participant stated, “*Social views and*

*public expectations of the nursing profession are very important because every time I expected and sought social support in my field, I also came up with a good feeling*” (Participant 7).

#### *Professional attachment and belonging*

Playing a professional role can also indicate students' professional attachment and belonging because the entry of nursing students into the professional role in the clinical setting and being accepted as a nursing student in the clinical environment promote the nature of the new profession in them. Thus, the students consider themselves a member of the nursing professional community. A student said, “*I have started the nursing profession with love and the humane and moral aspect of nursing has made me love my profession and serve people*” (Participant 1).

#### *Acquisition of skills in a real environment*

Although nursing students are trained in simulated environments during their studies, on-the-job activities and real experiences in the clinical setting have a different and important role in the formation of practical nursing skills. One of the participants said, “*From the first semester, I was very interested in gaining clinical skills and during the internship, and I did my best to do things well* (Participant 2). Another student said, “*I’m trying to get a student job. Work experience has helped me a lot to achieve professional skills*” (Participant 8).

#### *Role models*

Socialization and professional identity are formed based on role models in which one sees oneself as a nurse. Learners imitate some of the positive behaviors and role models as well as the negative models they observe in the clinical setting, which in turn influence their professional outlook as reflected in their behavior. A student stated, “*I remember once a head nurse who was very busy helped a patient to eat*



food and devoted her valuable time to the patient. Thus, I decided to become such a good nurse” (Participant 10).

#### *Professional identity*

Professional identity and use of professional capabilities enhance students’ motivation and self-confidence when performing professional responsibilities. Some participants stated that they did not consider the nursing profession a good choice for themselves, and sometimes believed that some kind of involuntary coercion and guidance were effective in their entrance into the nursing profession. In contrast, some participants stated that they selected nursing as their informed choice and their preferred job but there was still a gap in their professional identity. For instance, one student said, *“Despite the long period of study and the great effort we have gone through to gain our professional experience, we do not have a defined position in the healthcare team”* (Participant 11).

#### *Professional accountability and teamwork*

The students understand their professional roles, values, and professional culture in participating in clinical work and professional activities. Professional accountability and teamwork covered four categories including satisfactory psychological support, supportive educational and clinical structures, responsible educational feedback, and educational communication and trust-building professional interaction.

#### *Satisfactory psychological support*

A majority of participants in this study believed that the acquisition of professional skills and participation in clinical and professional affairs lead to a pleasant sense of learning and also create a sense of inner satisfaction that provides reassurance and peace of mind that is necessary for effective nursing services. A student stated, *“I come up with a pleasant sense of satisfaction and self-confidence when junior students ask me clinical questions and I have the ability and skill to answer their questions”* (Participant 13).

#### *Supportive educational and clinical structures*

From the participants’ point of view, clinical and educational structures such as clinical facilities, hospitals, and experienced instructors can increase professionalism, trust, and a sense of belonging in nursing students. One of the students stated, *“When we had a good instructor in a good hospital, I felt I had a good supporter to rely on. Of course, we could learn better when we were well treated and supported by the medical staff”* (Participant 12).

#### *Responsible educational feedback*

The participants in this study stated that the feedback

from diligent and caring professors was inevitably effective in developing professional accountability and teamwork. Professors’ sense of responsibility and their attendance at the patient’s bedside with responsible and timely guidance and feedback supported by up-to-date knowledge and evidence can enhance the scientific and practical abilities of nursing students. Accordingly, one student stated, *“Nursing professors’ evaluation of how I work and progress is very important to me, and of course, the feedback I sometimes received from the learning environment was often constructive or even disappointing”* (Participant 14).

#### *Educational communication and trust-building professional interaction*

Team learning and group dynamics pave the way for the transition from the student’s passive role to an active learner and reflect the educational communication and trust-building professional interaction. One of the participants stated, *“In the Clinical Skills Center and the Symbolic Pharmacy, professors usually divided us into groups. It was a very good experience for me. Even when we were divided into clinical groups during the internship, we did the patient’s clinical work and we had more peace of mind and self-confidence”* (Participant 16).

### **Discussion**

This study explored Iranian nursing students’ understanding of the process of professional socialization. The interviews with the nursing students revealed three themes including *mental images and professional expectations, social status and professional values*, and *professional accountability and teamwork*.

The findings of the study indicated that the students’ mental images and professional expectations derived from professional ideals and perceptions, feeling of inner satisfaction, role contradictions, and a sense of respect and maturity can play a key role in the process of skills acquisition and socialization. The students also highlighted the inconsistencies between their expectations and initial mental images, theoretical materials covered during their academic studies, and social and professional reality. Analysis of the students’ experiences indicated that nursing students have ideal mental images of the profession. Newly admitted students seek professional information and language from a variety of sources, and as they study in the classroom and learning environment, they become familiar with new concepts, words, behaviors, and attitudes associated with the nursing profession to gradually grow and become dynamic and ultimately self-confident. Mackintosh stated that individual perceptions of nursing depend on different attitudes, beliefs, values, and experiences that affect their future role and that the

main reason for choosing the nursing profession is the effective role of this profession in helping or caring for humans (15). The initial perception of nursing is usually formed by seeing clinical nurses. Observing nurses in a clinical setting or hearing nurses' descriptions such as job positions and earning a good income, employment opportunities, and informal encounters between nurses or with their friends in the media are some of the factors that influence the decision to enter the nursing profession (16).

According to the results of this study, social status and professional values that are derived from social expectations, professional attachment and belonging, acquisition of skills in a real environment, role models, and professional identity are effective in the socialization process gained by students through trial and error. It seems that when students are exposed to the real world of clinical education, they seek to increase confidence and develop a broad view of the position of nursing in the real environment. Thus, they try to seek their professional identity through modeling and communicating with senior students, educators, and clinical nurses, and by gaining skills and internalizing professional values and beliefs. In line with the findings of this study, Tahmasebi et al. investigated nurses' experiences of professional socialization using a phenomenological approach and found that professional socialization is a complex concept that is internalized through the experience of nurses in practical independence, clinical dynamics, competency buoyancy, social support, and professional attachment. They also showed that professional socialization is a concept that manifests itself differently with time, context, and individual and social characteristics. For nurses to be socially effective and successful in their profession, it is essential to take some measures such as comprehensive training programs, benefiting from competent role models, supportive educational and clinical structures, and providing job opportunities to gain experience and provide constructive feedback (17). Accordingly, Walsh stated that internship has a positive effect on the process of professional socialization and can increase the knowledge and skills of students and enable them to apply their previous knowledge about the nursing profession in practice (18). Socialization is therefore an inevitable process in any profession and plays an important role in the development and promotion of professional identity (19,20). In another study, Walsh examined the effect of internship on nurses' socialization and showed that the internship course has a positive effect on the process of professional socialization and increases students' knowledge and skills, and enables them to put into practice what they have learned previously. Besides, internship programs enhance students' confidence and sense of belonging to the work environment and play

an effective role in developing a sense of belonging in students and their successful transition to professional roles (18).

Following the results of this study, it can be argued that professional accountability and teamwork are derived from satisfactory psychological support, supportive educational and clinical structures, responsible educational feedback, and educational communication and trust-building professional interaction. Thus, learners will learn educational materials more effectively if they receive psychological and educational support and are supported by facilitative structures. Consequently, learners are more likely to experience growth and develop competency by acquiring educational skills combined with constructive group interactions. In such circumstances, professional roles, values, and professional culture will be understood and acted upon via participation in clinical work and professional activities. To this end, in their qualitative study, Dinmohammadi et al examined the concept of professional socialization in nursing and showed that professional socialization is a complex process with four characteristics of learning, interaction, evolution, and adaptation (10). Research also shows that group synergy and professional socialization are the consequences of team training (11). Another study conducted in 2010 examined the professional socialization of Japanese nursing students and found that students' professional socialization is a multifaceted phenomenon affected by issues such as getting to know others, having communication, doing teamwork, assessment and reflection, and attending extracurricular and educational programs. A comparison of the findings of the present study with other similar studies showed that cultural differences have a very important effect on students' socialization (12). However, other studies have acknowledged that the professional socialization of students may vary from country to country due to cultural differences and inconsistent educational programs (21,22).

Given the growing emphasis on the professionalism of nursing, the healthcare system needs nurses who successfully communicate with multidisciplinary team members, patients, and their families (14,23). Moreover, nursing professors play a vital role in developing professional socialism due to their responsibility for presenting theoretical instructions, how to apply theoretical materials in clinical settings, helping students to gain clinical experience and professional development, as well as ensuring the quality of nursing care for patients (24). For learning in formal educational settings to lead to effective professional development and socialization, professionalism must be reflected in nurses' thinking, skills, and behavior. Thus, professionalism

can be achieved through professional policy-making, an interactive educational atmosphere, and support from professional and service institutions.

Since the factors affecting the socialization process are influenced by the facilities, equipment, and even the cultural conditions of each environment, the findings of this qualitative study conducted in a college in the southeast of Kerman, cannot be generalized to other communities. Thus, similar studies need to explore professional socialization in other communities.

### Conclusion

As the results of this study indicated, nursing students' professional socialization is a multifaceted issue that can be rooted in mental images and professional expectations, social status and professional values, and professional accountability and teamwork. Familiarity with the educational environment, communication and interaction with others, effective team training programs, and teamwork are the most important factors in the social process that can contribute to developing professional socialization of nurses as an important outcome of nursing education programs. Thus, it seems that educational policymakers should pay attention to professional socialization because socialization and the development of professional identity affect the learning process of students and can help educators and educational administrators in training nursing students.

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### Competing Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the ethical committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences under the code of ethics IR.KMU.REC.1395.525

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