

High School Students' Perceptions of Nursing as a Future Career Choice: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Understanding the perceptions of high school students, before entering the field of nursing, can be a basis for future planning in this regard. Accordingly, this study aimed to explain the perceptions of these students about nursing as a future career choice in Iran.

Methods: This qualitative content analysis study was conducted in four public high schools in Tehran, Iran. Participants included 28 students recruited using purposive sampling who were administered semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in 2019. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The method proposed by Elo and Kyngäs was used to analyze the data. Initially, semantic similarities and differences were reviewed and the subcategories were identified. After repeated reviews, the related subcategories were placed in one category.

Results: Data analysis showed students' perceptions of nursing as a future career could be classified into three categories and seven subcategories. The main categories included a *positive view of the nursing profession* (with two subcategories: *interest in the profession* and *being a supporter*), *barriers to choosing nursing as a future career* (with three subcategories: *the lack of professional independence*, *poor financial support*, and *negative evaluation of nursing*), and *cultural issues* (with two subcategories: *stigmatized public image* and *nursing as a gender-dominated profession*).

Conclusion: The results of this study showed high school students have positive and negative views towards nursing and the influence of cultural issues on the nursing profession. If those interested in nursing can enter this field, they will act as professionals who provide optimal patient care.

Keywords: Nursing, High school students, Perceptions, Profession, Qualitative research

Citation: Najafi Ghezeljeh T, Mardani-Hamooleh M, Seyedfatemi N, Keyvanloo S, Fooladi M. High school students' perceptions of nursing as a future career choice: a qualitative study. *J Qual Res Health Sci*. 2024;13(3):145–150. doi:10.34172/jqr.2024.21

Received: April 9, 2022, **Accepted:** June 27, 2024, **ePublished:** September 23, 2024

Introduction

Today, the popularity of nursing as a future profession has decreased for high school students (1). It seems that the public perception of the nursing profession is unrealistic at present (2). However, by examining the views of high school students over ten years, the researchers found that today, compared to the past, more students consider nurses to be scientists and professionals (3,4). This might be because nurses today, more than ever, use their intelligence, experience, and all-round concerns to help everyone in various fields (5,6). It must be acknowledged that among the various healthcare disciplines, nursing is not perceived as a discipline of interest by students. Therefore, there are many challenges in attracting students to this profession (7,8). Indeed, high school provides an opportunity for

students to plan for their future careers. Meanwhile, for students interested in the nursing profession, the initial encounter with this profession is controversial, hence the presence of professional counselors in schools can help students who are interested in this field (9,10). In addition, nursing teachers should be in touch with school counselors to identify students who are interested in nursing as a health-related profession (11,12).

Many studies have been conducted on choosing nursing and continuing education in this field. A study in Italy found that high school students' awareness of nursing helped them choose it as a field of study at university (13). Factors such as low income, low social esteem, and viewing nursing as a labor-intensive work have affected the high school students' choice of nursing as a future



profession in Poland (14). A study conducted in Singapore found that personal interest in caring and helping others was a strong motivational factor in choosing the nursing profession (15). Another study also showed high school students' perceptions of the nursing profession in Bahrain were strongly related to the cultural context of society and were influenced by the cultural beliefs of society; the social values of the nursing profession were also shown to depend on culture (1).

It seems that high school students' perceptions of nursing, as a profession in the future, are influenced by sociological factors. The researcher's experience as a nursing instructor suggests that in Iran, people entering the field of nursing do not have a proper understanding of the nursing profession and they come to this profession only through the national entrance exam. Moreover, people enter the field of nursing only to have higher education or, unfortunately, to build a bridge from the field of nursing to other fields in the master's degree which might lead to providing poor nursing care after graduation. Besides, there is a shortage of nurses, which can be affected by the attitude of high school students. Thus, this study aimed to explain the perceptions of high school students about nursing as a career choice in the future.

Methods

This study was conducted using a qualitative method via content analysis to identify the perceptions of high school students about nursing as a career choice in the future. Content analysis is performed by analyzing written, spoken, or visual communications through inferences from the raw data to summarize and categorize them. In inductive content analysis, the categories and their titles flow from the text (16), hence inductive content analysis was utilized in this study.

The study was conducted from February to June 2019. The study setting consisted of 4 public high schools (three girls' schools and one boys' school) affiliated with the Ministry of Education in Iran. Based on the information received after submitting a written application to the Ministry of Education in Iran, the schools in western Tehran were selected by purposive sampling. The inclusion criterion was being a student at a public high school and the exclusion criterion was not being willing to participate. The participants were also recruited through purposive sampling with maximum variation (in terms of gender, age, income level, and parental education and job) until data saturation.

In this study, 28 in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the students. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Before the interview, the researcher arranged the time of the interview with the students. With the permission of the school principals, the researcher interviewed the

students in empty classrooms when they were having physical education courses. The interviews started with certain questions including "What does 'care' mean to you?", "What do you think the value of nursing as a care career in our community is?", "What do you see as the positive aspects of nursing as a care career?", and "What do you see as the challenges or negative aspects of nursing as a care career?" The interviews continued with follow-up questions such as "What do you mean by...?", "Will you present more details?", or "Can you give me an example?".

The method proposed by Elo and Kyngäs was used to analyze the data (16). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then typed. The transcribed texts were reviewed several times and the smallest meaning units (i.e. codes) were developed. The codes were then reviewed to be placed in subcategories based on semantic similarities and differences. Subsequently, similar subcategories were merged to yield the main categories. To determine the robustness of the data, the criteria for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were utilized (17). To assess data credibility, the opinions of the research team were used during the process of interviewing and data analysis. Transcriptions of the interviews and the findings were shared with some students. To verify data dependability, the opinions of an individual who was not part of the research team, but was familiar with the subject matter and content analysis were asked for approval. To verify confirmability, all activities were documented and the procedures of the study were reported. To prove transferability, the results were shared with two students who were not part of the study but had similar conditions.

Results

Most of the participants in this study were girls. Moreover, the participants were aged 15-17 years and most of them had a middle income level. Their parent's education level varied from elementary school to bachelor's degree. In addition, most of the parents were workers (Table 1).

Analysis of the participants' narratives showed the students' perceptions of nursing as a future career could be classified into three categories and seven subcategories (Table 2).

A positive view of the nursing profession

Interest in the profession

According to students, the interest in nursing plays an important role in choosing it as a field of study in the future.

"If we love nursing and can work with an interest in this profession, it can be a good choice among other fields" (Participant 5).

"Nursing is a profession that you have to live with for a lifetime, so I think interest in this field is very important"

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

No.	Age (y)	Gender	Income level	Father's education level	Mother's education level	Father's job	Mother's job
1	17	Female	Middle	Diploma	Less than diploma	Worker	Housewife
2	17	Male	low	Elementary school	Diploma	Worker	Worker
3	17	Male	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Electrical technician	Housewife
4	15	Female	low	Diploma	Elementary school	Worker	Worker
5	17	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Teacher	Housewife
6	17	Female	Middle	Diploma	Diploma	Worker	Worker
7	17	Male	Middle	Diploma	Diploma	Worker	Housewife
8	16	Female	low	Less than diploma	Less than diploma	Tailor	Housewife
9	17	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Diploma	Worker	Housewife
10	17	Male	Middle	Diploma	Bachelor's degree	Shopkeeper	Housewife
11	17	Female	low	Less than diploma	Elementary school	Worker	Housewife
12	17	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Less than diploma	Shopkeeper	Housewife
13	17	Male	Low	Diploma	Diploma	Gardener	Housewife
14	17	Male	High	Diploma	Less than diploma	Shopkeeper	Housewife
15	16	Female	Middle	Diploma	Diploma	Worker	Worker
16	17	Female	High	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Engineer	Teacher
17	17	Male	Middle	Diploma	Diploma	Worker	Housewife
18	16	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Engineer	Nurse
19	17	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Elementary school	Worker	Tailor
20		Female	Middle	Diploma	Bachelor's degree	Worker	Housewife
21	17	Male	low	Diploma	Diploma	Worker	Worker
22	16	Female	Middle	Diploma	Bachelor's degree	Worker	Housewife
23	16	Male	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Diploma	Shopkeeper	Housewife
24	17	Female	Middle	Diploma	Diploma	Teacher	Worker
25	17	Female	High	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Engineer	Lawyer
26	17	Male	Middle	Diploma	Less than diploma	Worker	Worker
27	17	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Engineer	Housewife
28	17	Female	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Diploma	Teacher	Teacher

Table 2. Results of data analysis

Categories	Subcategories
A positive view of the nursing profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interest in the profession Being a supporter
Barriers to choosing nursing as a future career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lack of professional independence Poor financial support Negative evaluation of nursing
Cultural issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stigmatized public image Gender-dominated profession

(Participant 12).

Being a supporter

Participants stated that nurses are the helpers and supporters of patients, and they enjoy helping patients.

“A nurse is someone who is inherently supportive of patients and is always alongside them. Nursing means caring for people and having the power to support them” (Participant 18).

“I think by entering this field, I can help people who are disabled and unable to take care of themselves due

to various diseases, and I can enjoy helping people” (Participant 1).

Barriers to choosing nursing as a future career

The lack of professional independence

The students perceived nursing as a profession that has limited professional independence, and this had a deterrent effect on their choice of nursing as a field of study.

“No matter how hard nurses work and how professional they are, they still have to work under the supervision of physicians. This is the biggest limitation of nursing in our country, which can even affect our decision about choosing nursing” (Participant 16).

“Nursing is not an independent field like medicine, pharmacy, or physiotherapy, and if I am honest, this has made nursing subordinate and dependent on other fields ... On this account, I will not enter this field myself” (Participant 21).

Poor financial support

According to the students, those who enter the nursing profession do not receive strong financial support. Thus, nursing will not be selected as a field of study in the future by students.

"I definitely will not choose nursing for my education, because nurses work very hard but receive a small salary compared to the amount of work they do" (Participant 2).

"There is a big difference between nursing and other professions, such as medicine, in terms of income. ... I can say that nurses' living conditions are not good at all, and they have to work in two different places" (Participant 9).

Negative evaluation of nursing

The worthlessness of the nursing profession was evident in the students' statements, so much so that, according to the participants, physicians have more value for everyone, but nurses are considered worthless. Furthermore, the students' narratives referred to the worthlessness that governs the structure of the nursing profession in Iran.

"Nurses, like doctors, work hard to be qualified and study at prestigious universities, but in the hospital, people value doctors more and have more respect for them. This has made nursing a profession that is not popular for us" (Participant 28).

"I would like to choose other fields such as medicine because no one values nursing professionally. Everyone thinks that when someone is accepted as a nurse, it means that he/she has a low grade in the entrance exam, and this field belongs to those who are weak in terms of education" (Participant 17).

"I remember when my cousin was accepted as a nurse, our neighbor asked, do you have to go to university to become a nurse?" (Participant 25).

"In Iran, we use the term nurse to refer to a number of people, even those who go to people's houses and do their cleaning and cooking. This is while nursing is a structured profession and a nurse is a specialist who works in different wards of the hospital like ICU" (Participant 26).

Cultural issues

Stigmatized public image

In Iran, nursing is a profession that is strongly influenced by the culture of society which leads to some problems. The use of the metaphor "famine" (severe shortage or deficiency) is a sign of these cultural problems that have plagued nursing.

"Once when I was talking at home about choosing a field of study, I said I wanted to choose nursing. Then my mother asked me, 'Is there a famine you want to go and study nursing?'" (Participant 15).

On the other hand, there were some culturally rooted concerns for students in this regard. For example, there was concern about the problems that could arise for a female nurse to marry.

"I am so worried about getting married. Because no man wants his wife to work at night in a hospital, a place where there are so many men, even if they are colleagues of his wife...I think it's like nursing is a stigma" (Participant 19).

Gender-dominated profession

The participants stated that nursing in Iranian culture is a special field for women, and men feel tormented in choosing this profession.

"Nursing is accepted in the Iranian society in such a way that all families call a nurse 'a sister'... In the films that show nurses, everyone also calls nurses sister" (Participant 3).

"We went to the hospital to visit my grandfather who had a heart attack. I understood from the way one of the men was dressed that he was a nurse. When I asked him if he was a nurse, it was as if I had insulted him, and he did not answer ... Well, that means our society has a problem ... That day I decided that as a boy I absolutely would not think about this field of study" (Participant 23).

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of high school students of choosing nursing as a profession in the future. According to the students, there is a positive view about the nursing profession, and what is important in this regard is to have an interest in nursing, which plays an important role in choosing it as a field of study and working in this profession for a long time. It seems necessary to motivate high school students to choose nursing as a long-term job (18). In addition, participants stated that nurses are helpers and supporters of patients, and they enjoy helping patients. High school students choose nursing as a profession because they want to help others (7). In this regard, the results of a study in Malaysia showed that although high school students' attitudes toward the nursing profession were positive, few of them were interested in choosing nursing as a future job (19). On the other hand, according to students, there are some barriers to choosing nursing as a future career in Iran including limited professional independence, poor financial support compared to other disciplines, and negative evaluation of nursing. Nurses have poor financial support despite a lot of work, and this is a social problem. Considering that the parents of most of the students were workers and did not have a good economic situation, they understood the problem well. Therefore, they preferred to choose another field that would have a higher income. Nursing has a weak value, is worthless compared to other fields such as medicine, and is not worth pursuing at university. Besides, anyone who performs a non-specialist service in the community, even if he is a house cleaner, is considered a nurse. This may be because nursing has not yet received full recognition from society and the public view of it is not positive (13). In this regard, nursing researchers stated that although nursing is the most trusted profession in the United States, there

are still challenges in attracting high school students to enter this field because there is a perception that nursing is not valued compared to other healthcare jobs (20).

Students also believed that cultural issues influenced their choice of nursing as a discipline. The mentioned cultural issues included using the metaphor of 'famine' by a family when talking to a student about nursing, the problem of night shifts for the female nurse, which is culturally reprehensible, and the existence of a mixed work environment that affects the female nurse's marriage. The analysis of African American and Latina adolescents' views on the choice of nursing as a future job showed their ideas in this regard are influenced by the family (21). The findings of a study in Saudi Arabia showed that some cultural and social barriers affect society's image of nursing. In the eyes of people, nursing is not considered a respectable profession and families feel ashamed if they have a family member who is a nurse (22).

In the present study, the students referred to nursing as a gender-dominated profession, which is culturally reprehensible for men in Iran, and society and the media have made nursing more desirable for women and less for men. In this regard, the narratives of African American and Latina adolescents about nursing showed their thoughts on the subject were influenced by the media (21). Nursing researchers also state there is evidence that the general perception of nursing can be influenced by the media and this may discourage some people from choosing nursing as a job (23,24). Moreover, the analysis of parents' views on the choice of nursing for students in Bahrain showed that this profession is more important for female students. However, parents believed that engaging in the nursing profession was dangerous for their daughters, especially on night shifts, and could pose risks to their children which is not culturally acceptable for them. The results of this study showed that in Arabic culture, public perceptions about nursing are strongly related to the cultural context of society and are influenced by the cultural beliefs of the region and the social values of the nursing profession for Arab regions are dependent on culture (1). In line with the results of the present study, a study in the United States also found that the nursing profession was, from the students' point of view, a gender-dominated profession often practiced by women (25).

The results of this study and other studies show the positive and negative views of society towards this profession and the influence of culture on the nursing profession. It seems that some cultural issues have formed the public view of nursing. In the present study along with the positive view of nursing, there were also some negative attitudes toward nursing like the sense of worthlessness of the profession, lack of job security, low income, limited independence, and lack of media attention to nursing. The cultural structure of most hospitals in Iran causes nurses to have a position inferior to physicians and to

depend on them at all times. Consequently, dependence which is one of the main features of this profession is undermined. Although the media can provide a more appropriate image of nursing for the public and show that nursing is for both genders, they have failed to provide such an image. On the other hand, the lack of attention to the nursing position by society caused participants to consider nursing as a job that has a low social and financial status with no independence. It seems that if the society's view of nursing is not changed, it will be hard for people to view nursing as a positive profession, and for students to choose nursing as a field of study at university. Therefore, people need to know that today, nurses with higher education, in addition to working alongside physicians, are responsible for delivering high-quality care to patients. In this regard, an important challenge that needs to be overcome is people's view of nursing, which must be changed. To provide a proper image of nursing, nursing officials and the media should work together to inform people of the important status of nursing in society.

Given that the findings of the present study emphasized the influence of culture on the perceptions of high school students about choosing nursing as a future career, further studies are recommended with an ethnographic approach to clarify the culture of the students in this regard. It is also recommended to conduct action research to address the issues caused by choosing nursing as a career for students to probably be able to solve the problems.

The participant recruitment approach and the nature of the present study limited our ability to generalize the presented findings.

Conclusion

The attitude of society toward nursing as a profession is not always positive. It is necessary to examine and promote the society's image of nursing to increase high school students' interest in the nursing profession. Developing educational programs with cultural context can be beneficial to enhance the public view of the status of nursing. These programs can be publicized in the media by inviting experienced and successful nurses.

Acknowledgements

The researchers are thankful to all those who participated in the present study.

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Competing Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the ethics committee of Iran University of Medical Sciences under the code IR.IUMS.REC.1398.984. The participants provided written consent after being informed about the objective of the study. They were also assured that their information would remain confidential and that they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Funding

None.

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