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What Factors Influenced Students' Decision to Choose Nursing?

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ABSTRACT

Nursing staff shortage has become a serious challenge worldwide while the number of applicants for nursing courses is decreasing. The identification of factors for choosing the profession is important for planning recruitment strategies. This observational quantitative study presents nursing students' perceptions of factors that had influenced their decision to apply for the nursing program. The aim is to produce knowledge that can be used to make the profession more attractive to potential workforce. Data was collected in March 2022 from 94 first, second and third-year nursing. The students responded to an online questionnaire with 12 quantitative items using the Likert rating. The data was analyzed using SPSS for Windows 27. Percentages, frequencies and measures of central tendency were used to present the results. The STROBE checklist for cross-sectional studies was used to help conduct the study. Intrinsic factors; desire to help the ill and suffering, in interaction with people, and the idea of being suited for the profession had been the most compelling motivators for the students. Some extrinsic factors; job security or favorable employment situation, had also significantly affected the students' decision to apply to the nursing program. Professional prestige, the social media or other people's opinions had not much affected the students' decision to apply.

Keywords: Nursing student, nurse education, motivation, attractiveness, quantitative research

INTRODUCTION

The nursing staff shortage has become a serious challenge worldwide. The number of applicants for nursing courses is decreasing [1, 2]. Fewer nurses entering the profession, combined with the expanding older population and aging healthcare staff, have led to a genuine workforce crisis [3]. The crisis has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic [4], by an increased turnover (nurses leaving an organization or the profession) and failure to recruit and train adequate staff to make up for the losses [5].

Further research on the career choices and perceptions of prospective nurses is required to examine what factors influence prospective nurses' perceptions, where the perceptions originate, why they persist and what could be done to address these concerns [2]. This study, conducted in Finland, presents nursing students' perceptions of factors that had influenced their decision to apply for the nursing program. The study aimed at producing knowledge that can be used to make the nursing profession more attractive to potential workforce.

BACKGROUND

It has been estimated that in addition to the current 27 million nurses and midwives, 9 million new professionals will be needed globally by the year 2030 [1]. In the United States alone, the health care industry has lost 20 percent of its workforce and 30 percent of its nursing workforce over the past two years [6]. Common reasons for leaving the profession include burnout or exhaustion and the wish to reach a healthier work-life balance. Other reasons involve staffing shortage, lack of appreciation and low pay [7-9]. Finland, the country where this study was conducted, has enjoyed a relatively high number of nurses; 13.6 per 1000 inhabitants in 2018 [10]. However, the government and researchers agree that by 2035, approximately 200,000 new employees will be required in the healthcare and social welfare sector in the country with a population of 5.3 million [11]. Simultaneous ly, the number of students applying for nursing courses at the Universities of Applied Sciences has decreased by thousands over the past few years [12]. The identification of factors for choosing the nursing profession is important for the planning of recruitment strategies.

A systematic review of 29 papers published between 2002 and 2013 revealed that the choice to study health care was commonly motivated by intrinsic factors, for example desire to help, or personal interest in health care [13]. The desire to help the ill and suffering has been repeatedly documented as a major motivating factor for choosing a career in nursing [14- 16]. The desire to help reflects what are considered the core values of nursing (altruism, autonomy, human dignity, integrity, honesty and social justice [17].

A number of studies have also reported that students choosing nursing have been influenced by family tradition [18] and prior healthcare exposure [19]. In addition, practical aspects play a role in career choices. Reasons for choosing nursing include, but a not limited to, job security and a steady income employment opportunities [19, 20], availability of training close to home [15], wish to work in other countries, relatively easy entry criteria, or failure to be admitted to another course [18].

The social status of nursing varies across countries and continents. A study involving 1244 first-year nursing students in the Netherlands reported that the students did not consider the stereotypical conception of nursing (female, subordinate, low status) a problem. It was also discovered that students with some earlier nursing experience, who had selected nursing as their first choice and whose aim was to make a career in nursing, were significantly more positive towards nursing than other students in the program [21, 22]. Similarly, the authors of a qualitative study conducted with 76 nursing students in Poland suggested that the new generation of nurses seemed to stress professionalism rather than vocation, and believe in improving the low prestige of the nursing profession [18]. In contrast, low professional prestige, has been found to be a barrier for choosing a healthcare profession for example in Saudi Arabia [23]. Nursing may be considered a course for students with poor academic abilities, as reported in a study conducted in Singapore [19]. In research carried out in Scotland, high academic achieving school pupils were not interested in a career in nursing because of the low status of the profession and because of negative influence of significant others [24]

Strategies suggested for nursing recruitment vary depending on the cultural context. Liaw et al. [19] suggested more exposure to nursing in early school years, more competitive salaries,

increasing the understanding of the role and career of registered nurses, and support for those interested in nursing but faced with opposition from their families. In Finland, research conducted on the attractiveness of old age care and nursing as a career found that wellbeing at work and the working atmosphere were among the most appreciated factors. For the practical nurses in the study, mutual help and sharing of knowledge, as well as workplace learning and mentoring increased the attractiveness of the profession [25]. The role of mentors, peers and role models in the formulation of career expectations has been emphasized before by Price [26]. Studies carried out with social and healthcare students and professionals in Finland have stressed the importance of community spirit, collaboration and mutual emotional support. Having influence over working times and work-life balance have also been listed as factors increasing the attractiveness of the profession [27, 28]. The various research results have been used to formulate improvements to be used in marketing and recruitment and in curriculum development [25]. A current challenge in nurse recruitment, as pointed out by Chicca and Shellenbarger [29], is to understand the thinking and behavior of generation Z students (born between the mid-1990s and 2012).

METHODS

Study Design, Data Collection and Analysis

This paper presents the results based on quantitative data from an online survey. The paper is part of an observational cross-sectional study combining quantitative and qualitative data. The STROBE checklist [30] for cross-sectional studies was used to help conduct the study.

In March 2022, 168 nursing students representing 7 student groups at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland were contacted via e-mail. The students received a link to a questionnaire and a cover letter explaining study purpose and aims and the voluntary nature of participation. The response rate was 56% (n=94). The data collection occurred through Webropol, an online survey tool used to create questionnaires and analyze and report data. The tool provides readily available real-time data.

The questionnaire consisted of 3 background questions (age, gender and education), 12 quantitative items using the Likert rating and 3 open questions. The students were requested to assess if the 12 factors presented had influenced their decision to choose nursing as a profession very much (1), rather much (2), neither much nor little (3), rather little (4) or very little (5). We designed the questionnaire based on a systematic literature review on factors influencing the attractiveness of nursing. The literature review will be published later. The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS for Windows 27. Percentages, frequencies and measures of central tendency are used to present the results.

Ethics

Potential recruits received an e-mail containing a cover letter and a link to an electronic questionnaire. The letter explained the voluntary nature of participation. Returning the questionnaire was regarded as consent to take part in the study. Ethics committee approval was not required, because the study did not involve health service users [31]. The anonymity of the participants was ensured at all stages of the study.

The work was carried out in accordance with The Code of Ethics Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association [32]. Ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK [33] were observed.

The response rate of 56% (94 students in 7 groups of students) can be considered adequate for reliable research. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 6 students and 4 nurse teachers to increase content validity. The questions were considered clear and logical, so no amendments were required. The original data (in Finnish language) is available from the author on request. The results of this study can be relevant for both national and international settings. They can be used by educational organizations and nurse administrators to increase the attractiveness of nursing as a profession.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics

The participants were 94 first, second and third-year nursing students in Bachelor programs at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The majority of them (91.5%) were women. Their age range was 20-60 years, with a means of 28 years and a median of 25 years. The participants were requested to specify their highest education level. Their responses to this item are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' highest education level

Highest education	n	Per cent
Comprehensive school	0	0.0%
Upper secondary school	29	30.8%
Vocational qualification	29	30.9%
Post-secondary education	2	2.1%
Bachelor, University of Applied Sciences	33	35.1%
Master, University of Applied Sciences	0	0.0%
Bachelor, University	0	0.0%
Master, University	1	1.1%

More than third of the students had a Bachelor-level education from a field other than nursing. Almost a third had a vocational qualification; among this group, there were a few participants with a Practical Nurse (Enrolled Nurse) qualification. Another third had only attended general upper secondary education before enrolling into their current Bachelor program.

Students' Perceptions of Factors that had Influenced their Decision to Apply for the Nursing Program

Table 2 shows the distribution of responses for each of the 12 questions. The students had relatively clear opinions about what factors had influenced their decision to apply for the nursing program; the middle option (neither much nor little) was never the most frequently chosen response in this study.

Table 2. Students' perceptions of factors that had had influenced their decision to apply for the nursing program

Factor	very much (1)	rather much (2)	neither much nor little (3)	rather little (4)	very little (5)	mean	median
a. My wish to help people who are ill and suffering influenced my decision to apply	37.3%	46.8%	5.3%	8.5%	2.1%	1.9	2.0
b. Nursing being appreciated in society influenced my decision to apply	2.1%	17.0%	22.4%	41.5%	17.0%	3.5	4.0
c. My family's opinion influenced my decision to apply	0.0%	13.0%	19.6%	27.2%	40.2%	3.9	4.0
d. My friends' choosing nursing influenced my decision to apply	0.0%	3.3%	12.0%	29.3%	55.4%	4.4	5.0
e. People close to me sharing their experiences of working in nursing influenced my decision to apply	0.0%	9.7%	22.6%	34.4%	33.3%	3.9	4.0
f. Seeing people close to me in a patient's role influenced my decision to apply	7.5%	16.1%	14.0%	26.9%	35.5%	3.7	4.0
g. My experience of helping people close to me influenced my decision to apply	7.5%	20.2%	18.1%	28.7%	25.5%	3.4	4.0
h. My wish to have a job that involved social interaction and client service influenced my decision to apply	33.3%	48.4%	7.5%	10.8%	0.0%	2.0	2.0
i. My personal skills in supporting people who suffer influenced my decision to apply	29.8%	44.7%	20.2%	4.2%	1.1%	2.0	2.0
j. The good employment situation in nursing influenced my decision to apply	11.7%	35.1%	22.3%	19.2.%	11.7%	2.8	3.0
k. The student counselor's encouragement influenced my decision to apply	1.1%	6.4%	19.4%	26.9%	46.2%	4.1	4.0
l. The image of nursing in the social media influenced my decision to apply	0.0%	5.4%	18.3%	37.6%	38.7%	4.1	4.0

For the participants of this study, intrinsic factors seem to have been more decisive than extrinsic reasons when deciding to apply for the nursing program. The desire to help the ill and suffering, the wish to work in client service, in interaction with people, and the idea of being

suited for the profession had clearly been the most compelling motivators for the students. The clear majority of them, over 84%, reported that their wish to help the ill and suffering had influenced their decision to apply very much or rather much (mean 1.9; median 2.0). Similarly, nearly 82% of the students found that their desire to have a job that involved social interaction and client service had affected their decision very much or rather much. In addition, the majority of the participants (74.5%) seemed to believe in their skills to support people; this belief had affected their decision to apply very much or rather much.

In contrast, professional prestige or other people's opinions had not much affected the students' decision to apply to the nursing program. Less than one in five (19.1%) respondents thought that appreciation for the nursing profession had contributed to their decision to apply. Interestingly, only 5.4% of the students found that the image of nursing in social media had affected their decision to choose nursing.

The family's opinion had been of some importance to just 13% of the participants, their friends' career choices had been of significance to even fewer (3.3%; Likert scale mean 4.4; median 5). Having familiar people sharing their experiences of nursing work had impacted on few students (9.7%). Student counselors had not played a significant role either; their opinion had affected the decision-making of 7.5% of the participants. Although most nursing students had been motivated by the desire to help and alleviate suffering, less than one third of them (27.7%) reported earlier experience of helping family members or other significant others as factors affecting their choice of profession. Less than a fourth of them (23.6%) found that having witnessed illness in the close ones had influenced their decision.

The currently favorable employment situation can be considered an extrinsic factor that had most significantly affected the students' decision to choose nursing as a profession. Nearly 47% of the participants agreed that the employment situation had influenced their decision very much or rather much. Compared to most other items in the questionnaire, there was more variation in the responses to this question; 19.2% of the respondents found the employment situation had affected their decision to apply rather little and 11.7% reported it had affected their decision very little (mean 2.8; median 3).

DISCUSSION

For the majority of the 94 nursing students involved in this quantitative study, intrinsic factors - the desire to help, work in client service, interaction with people, and being suited for the profession - had clearly been the most compelling motivators for applying for the program. This finding is in agreement with a great deal of previous literature [13, 22] and it reflects the altruistic core values of nursing [17].

Unlike in some earlier research [19], prior healthcare exposure had not been an important factor for the students in this study when choosing nursing as a career. Experiences of seeing a family member in a patient's role had had little effect on their choices. On the other hand, a few participants were already practical (enrolled) nurses upgrading their education to the tertiary level. Their motivation may have been based on the desire to grow in their career and take on more responsibility.

Secondly, in contrast with several other studies [18, 21], the students' choice to study nursing had not depended on role models from friends or families. It is possible that in an individualistic country like Finland, students tend to rely less on the family's opinion. In addition, the current generation Z (born between the mid-1990s and 2012), as the previous generation of Millennials, may be more independent than earlier generations. Their attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and behaviors are likely to require changes in education and practice for many years [29] and make it necessary to explore what meaningful work involves for these new generations. On the other hand, some of the participants in this study were mature students with earlier education and work experience. These students had probably already passed the phase of emerging adulthood and the most intense period of identity development and were not much influenced by family and friends.

Among what can be considered extrinsic factors; job security, or the favorable employment situation, had significantly affected the students' decision to choose nursing as a profession. The same finding has been reported in earlier research as well [21]. The students had not sought social prestige when selecting nursing as a profession. The likely interpretation is that, as in earlier research [22] students were well aware of the relatively low status of nursing, but it did not stop them from entering the program. A preliminary analysis of the qualitative data of this study supports this idea.

Somewhat surprisingly, in this study the social media had had little effect on the students' decision to apply to a nursing program. Earlier research supports the notion that social media can be useful in increasing the attractiveness of nursing organizations [34-37]. On the other hand, the public image of nursing is rather diverse. It is still to a great extent based on misconceptions and stereotypes and does not meet the professional image of nursing [38]. It may be carefully concluded that individuals influenced by negative comments in the media had not sought to enter the nursing program. More research is required on the effect of negative publicity on the recruitment of nursing students.

The fact that the study was conducted in a single University of Applied Sciences in one country can be considered a limitation. The response rate, however, was adequate (56%) and the number of participants relatively high (94). The results can be generalized nationally and possibly internationally.

CONCLUSION

It is a positive finding that the desire to help people and alleviate suffering is still the most compelling motivator for entering the nursing profession. Such intrinsic motivation can counteract dissatisfaction and carry nurses through difficult times. It is also important that nursing students feel suited for interaction with people; interaction skills are an essential part of high quality work with clients. Based on the results of this study, it can be carefully suggested that nursing students are well aware of factors that affects their suitability for the profession.

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