

# Experience of Nursing Students in Mental Health Training in Kenya

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**Abstract:** *Introduction:* In Kenya, there are few psychiatric nurses available to provide mental health services. Few students pursue psychiatric nursing specialty.

*Objective:* The aim of this study was to investigate the factors affecting psychiatric clinical experience of students of nursing during mental health nursing placement and its influence on the choice of psychiatric nursing specialty training.

*Methods:* A descriptive cross sectional study was conducted with a sample size of 241 participants was carried out in 3 universities and 6 diploma training colleges in Kenya. Cluster and systematic random sampling was used to select the study participants. Statistical significance was set at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

*Results:* Based on two-sided t-test, a significant relationship existed between value of mental health and willingness to pursue psychiatric nursing. Students who liked psychiatric nursing had a higher mean in the domain of value of mental health with a mean of 4.8 (95% CI= 4.7-4.9) unlike their counterparts with a mean of 4.5 (95% CI=4.4-4.6);  $p < 0.0001$ . A significant relationship between the willingness to pursue mental health and preparation for mental health clinical placement existed. Students who had a valuable experience were willing to pursue mental health and they had a higher mean of 2.9 (95% CI = 2.9-3.0,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

*Conclusion:* The findings from this study show that psychiatric experience of students influences the desire of a student to pursue the specialty. All people responsible with the training of students should ensure that the students have a pleasant psychiatric experience.

**Keywords:** Attitude, career, mental health, psychiatric nursing, nursing student, placement.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) and other researchers, there is an estimated more than 450 million people affected by mental disorders, yet there is scarcity of psychiatric nurses to assist in the care and management of these people [1-3]. The Kenya National Commission for Human Rights (KNCHR) and other authors showed that few nurses are trained in psychiatric nursing and few nursing students wish to pursue further studies and specialization in psychiatric nursing and mental health nursing [4,5]. According to the Mental Health; Evidence and Research (MER) and other scholars, the few nurses who have trained in psychiatric nursing cannot match the service demands in terms of numbers [6,7]. In the developed world and according to the KNCHR [4] 2011, it had been noted that there is a decline in the number of graduates in nursing who opted to pursue career in psychiatric nursing [4,8,9]. The situation is not different in developing countries like Kenya which has approximately 418 psychiatric nurses, 77 consultant psychiatrists and 30 clinical psychologists to serve the entire population of approximately 45 million people in the year 2010 [4]. Delivery of mental health care in Kenya is largely done by the psychiatric nurses at the

county and sub county hospitals. Inadequate number of qualified psychiatric nurses poses a great challenge to effective delivery of mental health care to Kenyans [6]. As more psychiatric nurses retired compared to those graduating in psychiatric nursing, this situation is likely to worsen [4,6,9].

Admission into psychiatric nursing programmes both in higher education and healthcare has been recognized as one of the most challenging endeavours [10]. The role and skills of psychiatric nurses has been poorly understood and their profiles is low [5,10]. Stigma plays a great deal of negative impact on the image of psychiatric nursing leading to few students opting to pursue the specialty [9,11-13]. Researchers have pointed out that psychiatric nurses are viewed by the society as corrupt, evil, mentally abnormal and the same perception is passed onto the students [5,9,10,13]. Several other misconceptions about psychiatric nursing is observed elsewhere worldwide whereby a lot of stigma exists in psychiatric nursing [5,8,14]. Students and the qualified nurses had the perception that psychiatric nursing is of low profile in terms of career compared to other specialties in nursing and it was also viewed as a career with little knowledge and skill base [10,15]. Some students also think that when one specializes in psychiatric nursing, there is little opportunity for future growth in their profession [10,16,17]. According to some studies,

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some students argued that psychiatric nursing ought to have been a career choice after one had enough experience in other sectors of specialization in health care [10,15].

Psychiatric nursing is viewed by students to be traditional, less challenging and boring unlike the other specialties like critical care nursing which is perceived by the students to be more technical [10,16,17]. Herisko and other researchers suggested that nursing curricula should be infused with new advances in the scientific basis of mental disorders. This is to assist in addressing the lack of scientific/technical skills focus. It is therefore, imperative that psychiatric nursing theory learnt by students should include a wide range of theoretical encounters [5,15,18]. These should include neurosciences, the neurobiology of mental disorders, the genetic basis of mental diseases, psychoneuroimmunology and psychopharmacology with emphasis on mental disorders ranging from pediatrics to geriatrics and the acute to chronic aspects of mental illness [10,16].

The nursing students perceive that the kind of preparation they receive for their mental health experiences is inadequate compared to the one they got before their medical–surgical experiences [19,20]. This causes anxiety due to inappropriate information they get from their peers [18]. Their peers could tell them that there was a lot of violence in psychiatry and it was not a nice field to specialize in [18,20]. Negative clinical experiences in mental health greatly influences the students' future career choice [5,21,22]. Contacts with mentally ill patients and psychiatric environments is thought to play a great role in alleviating anxiety and negative attitude towards psychiatric nursing [23]. In an Australian study, the researchers in this study postulated that contact, experience and choice of a health specialty played a role in relation to the attitudes of nurses towards mental illness [23]. Clinical experience had a big impact on the students' future nursing practice [21]. The amount of clinical time devoted to psychiatric nursing has been found to promote students' positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing. Students who have a longer exposure in psychiatric nursing tend to be less anxious in handling the mentally ill patients [21,24]. Another important factor in promoting positive clinical experience is the support given to the students by the staff in their clinical areas [16]. Students need to feel welcome, valued and supported while in their psychiatric nursing placement [23,25]. Hunter and other scholars pointed out that the perception of preparedness for practice in psychiatric

mental health played a role in building positive students' attitudes towards psychiatric nursing. From their study, they found out that students felt that they were not adequately prepared for clinical experience in psychiatric mental health nursing [16]. Students generally encounter mentally ill patients in a variety of settings, among them community setups, outpatient settings or even in the general wards [6,26]. This meant therefore, that it was important for psychiatric nursing to be introduced early in the nursing training [6]. This is to help reduce fear and anxiety among students for them to develop confidence in serving these kinds of patients and it would build positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing [26]. Psychiatric nurses needed to be role models to the students since students learn a lot from these staff [15]. It has been observed that health professionals taking care of psychiatric patients are treated by the public with stigma and also from fellow health colleagues a kind of stigma commonly referred to as 'stigma by association' [16]. This makes such kind of staff not to appear as role models to the nursing students since the perceptions created were related to their occupation. Such kind of stigma can be fought through educating the students about the role of mental health nurses in the care of patients [9,16]. Proper understanding of the role of these nurses would promote a positive attitude towards psychiatry [16]. This study therefore sought to investigate the factors affecting psychiatric clinical experience of students of nursing during mental health nursing placement and its influence on the choice of psychiatric nursing specialty training in Kenya.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This was a descriptive cross sectional study conducted at 9 sites in West Kenya where students undertook diploma and bachelor's degree training in nursing. The catchment population of the study site was approximately 5,397,782 according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [28]. The Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology institutional review board (IRB) and the Institutional ethical and research committee (IERC) approved this study vide ERC No. MMU/COR: 403009(38). All principles of research ethics were adhered to. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The specific sites where data was collected were the Great Lakes University and KMTC in Kisumu town and St. Joseph's Medical Training College, Nyabondo in Kisumu County. The University of Kabianga (UoK) and AIC Litein School of Nursing in Kericho and KMTC Webuye and Bungoma in Bungoma County. Other centres were

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST) and KMTC in Kakamega County. The population was sampled using cluster, systematic and simple random sampling techniques, comprising the diploma and bachelor's degree students of nursing who had already taken their theory and clinical exposure in psychiatric nursing. The "psychiatric/mental health clinical placement survey" questionnaire, a standardized tool, was used to collect data [28]. The questionnaire for socio-demographic characteristics was locally designed and pre-tested prior to commencement of this study.

## RESULTS

The majority (94.6%) of the students, who were pursuing nursing career at degree (92.9%) and diploma (95.7%) levels in Kenya, took up the training as their preferred choices of careers. The top three preferred nursing specialties by the students were maternal and neonatal/reproductive health (17.3%), psychiatry and mental health (15.6%) and intensive care unit (ICU)/Renal nursing (12.7%). Slightly more than one-third (38.8%) of the institutions sampled in this study had psychiatric units for inpatient management of patients within their training institutions. However, only 38.3% of the diploma and 39.4% of the university students of nursing reported that they were accessible to psychiatric units within their training institutions. More than four-fifths (83.3%) of the students were aware about the availability of post-basic training courses in nursing, the majority of whom were in diploma colleges (85.1%) compared to those in the universities (80.8%).

Asked about the nursing specialty they preferred, approximately a quarter (25.7%) were undecided on which one they wished to pursue after their basic training in nursing.

### Clinical Experience and Attitude Towards Psychiatric Nursing

The findings in this study, based on two sided t-test showed a significant relationship between the willingness to pursue mental health and preparation for mental health clinical placement ( $p=0.0001$ ). Students who were willing to pursue mental health had a higher mean of 2.9 (95% CI = 2.9-3.0.). This implied that the students who were willing to pursue mental health courses felt well prepared for psychiatric nursing placement, they had a good understanding of the role of a psychiatric nurse, they felt confident in their ability to care for mental patients and their theoretical

components of psychiatric nursing had prepared them well for their clinical placements. The former group of students also scored a higher mean (4.8) in the domain on value of mental health illness (95% CI = 4.7 - 4.9) compared to their counterparts with a mean of 4.5 (95% CI = 4.4 - 4.6,  $p=0.0001$ ). Values considered highly by those willing to pursue mental health were: psychiatric nursing made a positive contribution to the health of people with mental illness, clinical placement in psychiatric nursing would provide valuable experience for my nursing practice and mental health services provided valuable assistance. The students who were willing to pursue psychiatric nursing reported higher mean of 2.9 (95% CI = 2.8 - 3.0) in relation to their psychiatric clinical experiences during clinical placement compared to those who were not willing with a mean of 2.7 (95% CI=2.7-2.8,  $p=0.0006$ ). The former felt that they were encouraged by the teaching staff to consider psychiatric nursing as a career, they enjoyed psychiatric/mental health placement, nursing staff demonstrated a high level of clinical skills, nursing staff treated patients with dignity and respect and the nursing staff were responsive to their requests for clarifications or assistance.

## DISCUSSION

The study established that psychiatric nursing appears not to be a less popular career choice among the respondents than other nursing specialties. However, it is evident that a quarter of the students who participated in the study were not yet decided about which kind of course they would wish to pursue (Table 1). The findings, therefore, may have been influenced by the large number of undecided students hence the increased popularity of psychiatric nursing specialty. The findings presented above is contrary to the findings of Stevens and his colleagues, who found out that most students would wish to pursue other courses other than psychiatric nursing [9]. They also found out that the nursing students were being encouraged by their lecturers to pursue specialties such as medical-surgical nursing and critical care nursing of which the lecturers perceived that there was more utilization of technology unlike psychiatric nursing which they perceived that there was less utilization of technology. Other studies have also pointed out that psychiatric nursing is the least preferred career choice by the nursing students [22,27]. This wrong perception is likely to negatively impact on the recruitment of nursing students into the field of psychiatric nursing specialty.

**Table 1: Course Preference by Type of Nursing Training Institution**

Variable	Category	Diploma		University		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Had interest in nursing after finishing secondary school	Yes	134	95.7	92	92.9	226	94.6
	No	6	4.3	7	7.1	13	5.4
	Total	140	100.0	99	100.0	239	100.0
Has a psychiatric unit within the training institution	Yes	54	38.3	39	39.4	93	38.8
	No	87	61.7	60	60.6	147	61.2
	Total	141		99		240	
Aware of post-basic training courses available in nursing	Yes	120	85.1	80	80.8	200	83.3
	No	21	14.9	19	19.2	40	16.7
	Total	141	100.0	99	100.0	240	100.0
Preferred Course in nursing training	Psychiatry	20	14.5	17	17.2	37	15.6
	Anaesthesia	5	3.6	1	1.0	6	2.5
	Biomedical sciences	4	2.9	9	9.1	13	5.5
	Community Health	3	2.2	2	2.0	5	2.1
	Oncology	4	2.9	1	1.0	5	2.1
	ICU/Renal	21	15.2	9	9.1	30	12.7
	Medical education	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Medical surgical	6	4.3	8	8.1	14	5.9
	Maternal and Neonatal Health & RH	25	18.1	16	16.2	41	17.3
	Paediatric	8	5.8	10	10.1	18	7.6
	Theatre	7	5.1	0	0.0	7	3.0
	Undecided	35	25.4	26	26.3	61	25.7
	Total	138	100.0	99	100.0	237	100.0

According to this study, preparation for psychiatric nursing clinical placement showed a significant relationship with the desire of the students to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Students who felt that they were prepared to work in psychiatric care programmes showed a greater aspiration to pursue psychiatric nursing. Another observation was that the students who had adequate theoretical preparation showed a greater interest in psychiatric nursing than those who felt that were not adequately prepared theoretically (Table 2). Students whose health training institution had a psychiatric unit were less anxious when dealing with psychiatric patients than the students who didn't have the unit (Table 1). It was therefore, imperative that students should have been exposed early to psychiatric patients for them to develop confidence in handling psychiatric patients [26]. This was a prelude for promoting confidence in handling of psychiatric patients by the nursing students.

These findings supported the previous work of Happell and Gaskin which found out that students who had more clinical placements and more theoretical hours showed more positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing and showed less anxiety towards psychiatric patients [21]. The design of the curriculum was proposed to be in a manner that it exposed students early to the psychiatric nursing experiences [29]. This is thought to assist in fighting off the negative perceptions the students held towards psychiatric patients and fight anxiety among students in psychiatric placement [29,30]. Students who had prior contact with psychiatric patients had less anxiety and a more positive attitude towards psychiatric nursing than the students who didn't have prior contact with the patients, before their theoretical classes [31].

According to this study, it was evident that students who were not well prepared for psychiatric nursing were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2).

**Table 2: Clinical Experience and Attitude Towards Psychiatric Nursing**

Dimensions	Willingness or unwillingness to pursue psychiatric nursing	n	Mean	SD	df	t-test	95% CI	P value
Preparation for mental health clinical placement	Yes	37	2.9	0.1	239	2.3	2.9 – 3.0	<0.0001
	No	204	2.8	0.3			2.8 – 2.9	
Knowledge of mental illness	Yes	37	2.8	0.3	239	0.6	2.7 – 2.9	0.5000
	No	204	2.7	0.3			2.7 – 2.8	
Perception of mental illness	Yes	37	2.8	0.4	236	1.3	2.7 – 3.0	0.2000
	No	201	2.7	0.5			2.7 – 2.8	
Anxiety surrounding mental illness	Yes	37	2.4	0.5	239	1.2	2.3 – 2.6	0.2000
	No	204	2.3	0.6			2.2 – 2.4	
Value of mental health nursing	Yes	37	4.8	0.3	235	3.0	4.7 – 4.9	<0.0001
	No	200	4.5	0.5			4.4 – 4.6	
Experience during clinical placement	Yes	37	2.9	0.2	239	2.1	2.8 – 3.0	0.0006
	No	204	2.7	0.4			2.7 – 2.8	

It was also found that students who felt uncertain on how to act toward mental patient were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Other studies have revealed that poor delivery of the specific content within the psychiatric nursing curriculum was likely to influence how students perceived such the course [18]. The design of curriculum should therefore be able to promote positive images about psychiatric nursing.

Another finding from this study was that attitude towards mental illness has a significant role towards the choosing psychiatric nursing as a career. Students who had unpleasant experiences during their clinical placements showed less interest in pursuing psychiatric nursing as a career (Table 2). The findings in this study supported the previous works of Hoekstra and collaborators which showed that when nursing students had negative perceptions about psychiatry, they were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing studies [32]. Students who believed that psychiatric patients were unpredictable were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing course (Table 2). This kind of perception needed to be fought by preparing students adequately for the psychiatric nursing placement [9,18]. Students needed to understand early in their training that mental illnesses were treatable and the mentally ill patients could live worthy lives and be productive members of the society [5]. From this study, anxiety towards mental illnesses had an impact on the desire of the students to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Students who felt safe and were adequately prepared theoretically on how to handle the mentally ill patients were likely to pursue psychiatric nursing specialty

(Table 2). It was also observed that students who had psychiatric units within their training institutions were less anxious in working with psychiatric patients. McCann and colleagues found out that students form images based on the content and nature of delivery of the curriculum [33]. In this case, students who were exposed to people with mental illnesses at early stages in training were less likely in future to be anxious when dealing with such patients. It was therefore, vital that the lecturers in nursing deliver the psychiatric nursing content in a manner that portrayed psychiatric nursing in a good image so that the students don't form negative perceptions about the profession.

Students' experiences during clinical placement had been shown to play a significant role in influencing their attitudes towards psychiatric nursing [22]. Students who felt supported by specialized psychiatric nurses during their clinical placement were more likely have more positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing [18,22]. In this study, students who were encouraged to pursue psychiatric nursing by psychiatric nurses had a positive attitude towards psychiatric nursing and more likely to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). It was also noted that students who were supported by psychiatric nurses developed positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Other studies confirmed that students who were guided and supported well by the mental health staff were likely to have a desire to pursue psychiatric nursing as a specialty [5,32,34].

Preparation of the students to work in a psychiatric nursing program showed a significant relationship with

the aspirations of the students to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). It was also noted that the kind of theoretical preparations students received had significant role in shaping the students' attitudes towards psychiatric nursing (Table 2). The kind of clinical support a students of nursing received while undertaking their clinical experiences played a significant role in the decisions of the students to pursue psychiatric nursing as a career (Table 2). This was in agreement with the findings of Stevens and other researchers that found out that students need to be well prepared for clinical placements for them to have a more positive attitude towards psychiatric nursing [9]. Support by the nursing staff and the mentors/clinical instructors was significantly associated with the desire of the students to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). This finding was in tandem with the work of Karimollahi that found out that students who were well supported by the nursing staff and the mentors in their clinical experiences tended to develop positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing [20].

A significant relationship existed between the students' perception that psychiatric nursing contributed positively to mental health patients and their wish to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). From this finding, it was deduced that the kind of attitude students had about the value of a career influenced the choice of the careers by the students. This was likely to impact on the likelihood of the nursing students choosing or not choosing psychiatric nursing career [10,15]. This therefore, meant that every effort ought to be made by the stakeholders such as the psychiatric nurses and psychiatric nursing lecturers to portray a positive image of the profession and strive to ensure that the students understood the importance of psychiatric nursing [30]. This was supported by the findings of Stevens and colleagues who argued that some of the nursing students wouldn't wish to pursue psychiatric nursing because of the perceptions that there was less use of technology in mental and psychiatric nursing [9]. This was to ensure that the students of nursing changed their perception about the profession and thus an adequate number of nursing students were attracted to psychiatric nursing and thus the number of psychiatric nurses would in turn increase as time went by. Students who perceived that the mentally ill unpredictable were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Also, the students who wouldn't tell anyone if they developed psychiatric illness were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). From this study also, it was found out that the students who had a feeling that the mentally ill

patients couldn't handle many responsibilities were less likely to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Furthermore, students who perceived that the mentally ill patients were more likely to commit crime were less likely to apply for a post basic course in psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Such negative perception about the mentally ill patients by the students was likely to have a role in the low interest of most of the students to pursue psychiatric nursing [18]. A good theoretical preparation as earlier outlined was therefore important in allaying such anxiety [9,35].

Experiences of the students during clinical placement play a significant role in the choice of psychiatric nursing as a career [18]. In this study, students who were encouraged by mental health nursing staff to pursue psychiatric nursing showed an improved desire to pursue psychiatric nursing (Table 2). Students who enjoyed psychiatric nursing placements showed a greater desire to pursue psychiatric nursing than those who didn't enjoy the placement (Table 2). These findings corroborated with the findings of Happell and colleagues who found out that the kind of experiences students had in their psychiatric placements had influence on the choice of psychiatric nursing [35].

According to a survey conducted by Cleary and colleagues, nursing graduates in Singapore reported that psychiatric nurses were overworked, they had poor support in the work place and there was lack of clear career progression in the psychiatric nursing career. These are likely to discourage students from pursuing psychiatric nursing [36].

Another finding from this study was that students who had a psychiatric unit within their training institution were less anxious in dealing with patients who had mental illnesses unlike their counterparts. This is corroborated to the findings of Ewalds-Kvist and other scholars who found out that students who had prior contact with patients with mental illness had a more positive attitude towards psychiatric nursing than the students who didn't have prior contact with the patients experiencing mental illnesses before their theoretical classes [18,37].

## CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the experience of nursing students in psychiatric nursing. The findings from this study have shown that the kind of preparation in psychiatric nursing and the experience in psychiatric

nursing influenced nursing students' perception about psychiatric nursing.

Strategies to increase the number of nurses in this field should be put in place. Positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing should be inculcated in students in order to ensure that more students are attracted to the psychiatric nursing field. Based on the research findings, the researcher recommends that career sessions for the nursing students should be done by the training institutions in order to assist the undecided students make an informed choice on the specialty they would wish to pursue. Other recommendations are that every effort should therefore be put in place to ensure the delivery of content of the curriculum is appropriate and the practicing nurses in psychiatry, alongside the lecturers in psychiatric nursing should ensure that there is the use of modern technology in psychiatric nursing. Since it is evident that the attitude the nursing students held towards psychiatric nursing was likely to influence their wish to pursue psychiatric nursing, every effort needed to be put in place to ensure that positive attitudes are encouraged and imparted on students. This will assist in attracting more nursing students to the psychiatric nursing profession. Since this is a cross-sectional study, the researchers recommend that a longitudinal design be utilized to ascertain the experience of nursing students of students across successive training years.

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#### ADHERENCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Permission to conduct the study was sought from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology institutional review board (IRB) and the Institutional ethical and research committee (IERC) which approved this study vide ERC No. MMU/COR: 403009(38)

#### DISCLOSURE

On Behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest

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