Brief Report

Iranian Nursing Students' Perceptions of Nursing and The Ideal Career: A Descriptive Comparative Study

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Abstract

Background: Identification of the attributes of nursing and the ideal career, and their similarities and differences, as perceived by nursing students will help to plan strategies to train and retain future nursing workforce.

Objectives: This study aimed to compare the attributes of nursing with the ideal career, as perceived by nursing students.

Materials and Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted from April to June 2012 at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. The participants were 181 undergraduate nursing students (127 females and 54 males) selected using a census method. Data were collected using a questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, Spearman correlation, and Wilcoxon rank sign test.

Results: Perceptions of nursing and the ideal career were different in nineteen attributes (P < 0.001). Nursing students expected a career which provides them more respect, appreciation, safety, income, power, and facility. Both nursing and an ideal career share an altruistic nature, academic advancement, a desire to please God, and somehow low level of excitement.

Conclusions: Perceptions of nursing were significantly different from those of the ideal career in most of the attributes. Therefore, it is recommended that nurses' income, workplace safety, and sense of being appreciated and respected by all authorities should be improved.

Keywords: Career Choice, Education, Job Satisfaction, Health Occupations, Motivation, Nursing, Perception, Students

1. Background

The nursing profession in Iran is confronted with job dissatisfaction among nurses (1). Therefore, investigation of the extent to which it meets the ideals of its future professionals is essential. Altruism and a desire to help others have been considered the main motivators in the selection of a career in nursing (2). Other selection criteria, such as job security, employability (2-4), personal interest, and aptitude (3), have also been reported previously.

The areas of discrepancies between nursing and the ideal career were identified as financial rewards, respect, power, leadership, decision-making, working in a safe environment (5), caring for people, and career security (4, 5).

In Iran, entry to university programs is based on a competitive national higher education entrance examination (1, 6). So, it is possible that some applicants choose fields of study which are not desirable for them. In an Iranian study, interest in the nursing profession was very high among 10.8% of freshmen and 27.4% of senior nursing students, while 78.4% of freshmen and 11.5% of senior nursing students were uninterested in the profession (7). Thus, the question arises: what are the perceptions of nursing students regarding nursing compared to the ideal career?

2. Objectives

This study aimed to compare the attributes of nursing and the ideal career, as perceived by nursing students.

3. Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted from April to June 2012 at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. The participants (n = 181) were recruited using a census method from students attending a 4 year bachelor of science in nursing. The inclusion criteria were the desire to participate and being an undergraduate nursing student in the program. The exclusion criterion was experience in nursing before entering the program.

3.1. The Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected using a questionnaire developed by May et al. (5). Permission to use and modify the instrument was obtained from Sigma Theta Tau International, the publisher of the original study. The original instrument measures 17 parallel items of an ideal career and nursing. According to experts' suggestions, interviews with nursing students, and a literature review, five parallel items including: "to help others", "to please God", "not to have night work", and "to be considered by the family as important", were added to the instrument, and the item "to make good grades" was changed to "to gain high status". Responses are based on a 5 point Likert scale. The face and content validities of the Persian version of the instrument were evaluated by nine nursing experts. Reliability was assured using coefficient alpha 0.91 for the ideal career and 0.87 for the nursing career scale. The students completed the questionnaires during class time, except for senior students, who completed the questionnaire in free time during a session.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

Approval of the study was obtained from the ethics committee of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (Grant No. 10299; ethics code: IR.SUMS.REC.1394.S881). In addition, permission was obtained from the authorities of the nursing school. The aims of the study were explained to the students, which ensured anonymity and voluntary participation.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 11.5 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois). Descriptive statistics were used to describe sample characteristics and mean and standard deviation of the two career attributes. The correlation between the attributes of the careers and qualitative variables such as sex and marital status was tested using the Spearman correlation test, and their correlation with age was tested through analysis of variance. The Wilcoxon rank sign test was used to compare the mean scores of attributes of nursing and an ideal career.

4. Results

The study included 181 nursing students with a mean age of 20.85 ± 1.64 years. The majority of the students were female (70.60%) and single (70.9%). The percentage and number of students at each grade were as follows: first year students 33.70% (n = 61), second year students 30.40% (n = 55), third year students 14.90% (n = 27), and fourth year students 21.0% (n = 38). Attributes of nursing and the ideal career were significantly different in 19 attributes (Table 1). There was no significant correlation between nursing and the ideal career scale with respect to age, sex, marital status, and grade.

5. Discussion

Nursing was significantly different from the ideal career in most of the attributes. The attributes with the greatest discrepancies between nursing and the ideal career were respect, appreciation, working in a safe place, making money, not having night work, being powerful, making decisions, and working with high technology.

Several studies have reported that nursing is perceived as a profession with deficiencies in some attributes, such as respect, appreciation (5, 8), making money (2, 5, 9), decision-making (10), and power (11). It has also been shown that nursing is considered to be a difficult job (2, 5). In the present study, nursing students identified the main characteristics of the ideal career as "appreciation", "to please God", "knowledge", "respect", and "the value given to the career by the family". These findings are consistent with previous studies in which "respect", "appreciation" (5), and "the value given by the family to the career" (9), were identified as important attributes of the ideal career.

Amongst the highest scores of the attributes of the ideal career, only "to please God" and "to help others" were among the most highlighted attributes of nursing, as perceived by nursing students. These findings indicate that one attractive aspect of nursing is its spiritual component. In another Iranian study, nursing students perceived spiritual domain as the third most important domain of caring behaviors (12). The lowest mean scores for the ideal career were "working with hands", "being busy", "working hard", "being excited with the work", and "caring for people". Caring is traditionally considered to be an integral part of nursing, so it is surprising that the nursing students wish the ideal career to have low levels of caring for people. This is in contrast with a previous study (13).

The findings support the idea that "altruism" and "a desire to help" are important characteristics of nursing (2, 13). However, Cho et al. found that none of the nursing students chose serving society as a factor in their choice of occupation (3). The findings of this study do not support those of previous studies in which job security and employability were reported as important attributes of nursing (2-4).

The quantitative design of the study limits conclusions about how an attribute of nursing or the ideal career are perceived by students. A study with mixed method research could help better clarify the students' opinions. In addition, the existence of differences between nursing

Table 1. Comparison of Mean Scores of The Ideal Career and Nursing as Perceived by Nursing Students

Attribute	Ideal Career[a]	Nursing Career[a]	Z[b]	P value
Having respect	4.77 ± 0.61	2.67 ± 1.09	-10.88	< 0.001
Being appreciated	4.82 ± 0.53	2.39 ± 1.26	-10.84	< 0.001
Working in a safe place	4.65 ± 0.74	2.61 ± 1.07	-10.82	< 0.001
Making a lot of money	4.21 ± 0.94	2.06 ± 0.94	-10.78	< 0.001
Not having night work	4.02 ± 1.19	1.48 ± 0.95	-10.64	< 0.001
Being very powerful	4.44 ± 0.82	2.52 ± 1.12	-10.26	< 0.001
Making decisions myself	4.63 ± 0.67	2.81 ± 1.11	-10.13	< 0.001
Working with high technology	4.45 ± 0.77	2.92 ± 1.06	-10.03	< 0.001
Knowing a lot	4.80 ± 0.48	3.64 ± 0.94	-9.96	< 0.001
Gaining high status	4.33 ± 0.94	2.61 ± 1.11	-9.66	< 0.001
Working with hands	3.33 ± 1.02	4.38 ± 0.67	-8.90	< 0.001
Being a leader	4.31 ± 0.82	3.10 ± 1.18	-8.73	< 0.001
My family consider it important	4.77 ± 0.49	3.71 ± 1.12	-8.69	< 0.001
Being very busy	3.35 ± 1.09	4.32 ± 0.77	-8.09	< 0.001
Using my brain	4.36 ± 0.75	3.50 ± 0.98	-7.37	< 0.001
Working very hard	3.48 ± 1.09	4.33 ± 0.86	-6.86	< 0.001
Caring for people	3.93 ± 1.02	4.42 ± 0.70	-5.05	< 0.001
To please God	4.81 ± 0.59	4.46 ± 0.80	-4.75	< 0.001
Always having a job	4.49 ± 0.80	4.10 ± 0.79	-4.50	< 0.001
Helping others	4.68 ± 0.57	4.57 ± 0.62	-1.95	0.051
Being excited with my work	3.82 ± 1.14	3.62 ± 1.13	-1.47	0.203
Going to college	4.61 ± 0.69	4.58 ± 0.65	-0.53	0.422

[a]All of the data are presented as mean (SD).
[b]Results of Wilcoxon signed rank test.

students' perceptions regarding "helping others" was rejected based on a P = 0.051, so it can be considered with caution. The study of effective ways to improve nursing students' perceptions on nursing and its important attributes, such as care and helping, and also the study of ways to cope with night work as a possible component of the students' future profession, are recommended. It is recommended that nurses' income, workplace safety, and sense of being appreciated and respected by all authorities should be improved.

Acknowledgments

Footnote

References

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