

Original Article

Nursing Students' Interpretation of their Profession through their Internship in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study

Hediye Utli, PhD

Assistant Professor, Department of Elderly Care, Vocational School of Health Services, Mardin Artuklu University, Mardin, Turkey

Ahmet Butun, PhD

Assistant Professor, Department of Internal Medicine Nursing, Mardin Artuklu University Faculty of Nursing, Mardin, Turkey

Correspondence: Hediye Utli, Assistant Professor, Department of Elderly Care, Vocational School of Health Services, Mardin Artuklu University, Mardin, Turkey E-mail: hediyeutli@artuklu.edu.tr

Abstract

Aim: The COVID-19 pandemic should not be seen as a crisis but as a chance for nursing students to develop their professional identities. The aim of this study was the interpretation of their profession by final-year nursing students through their internship in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: A qualitative design was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 final-year nursing students by using Zoom software. Participants were selected by using a homogeneous sampling method. Data were collected between 21 June 2021 and 15 September 2021. The data were analyzed by using the thematic analysis method.

Results: Two main themes were emerged: (1) the meaning of the nursing profession, and (2) students' expectations of the profession. Increasing reputation and value, making sacrifices, motivating patients, empathizing, increasing autonomy, improving working conditions, prestige, self-improvement and the opportunity to migrate are emerging themes.

Conclusions: This study found that the COVID-19 pandemic process has allowed nursing students to develop their professional identities. The findings of this study including the expectations of students from the profession should be evaluated by policymakers, school administrators, educators, hospital administrators, human resources planners, public health experts, and researchers.

Keywords: COVID-19, internship, nursing student, profession

Introduction

Professional identity development is a repetitive and adaptive process, a personal identity that is constructed by one's internal values and morals molds and projects into the formation of the professional self, which encompasses role expectations and professional ethics (Ruan et al., 2020). Student nurses develop a professional identity through professional socialization during their nursing education they receive. During the socialization period, they learn the norms, values, behaviors, attitudes and cultures of the profession to which

they belong (Arreciado Marañón, & Isla Pera, 2015).

In a study conducted by Dos Santos (2020), nursing students stated that in the COVID-19 pandemic, they did not develop feelings of belonging to the profession because of personal altruism and financial reasons and that they had decided to leave the nursing profession.

The pandemic has had a strong effect on the professional identity among nurses in the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become more difficult to formulate a professional identity for nurses and nursing students (Shun,

2021). A perception of identity will emerge as a result of nursing students' views and attitudes to their profession from their internship experiences. The views of final-year nursing students, who will form the nursing workforce of the future, on their profession during the pandemic are needed.

The aim of this study was to define the professional identity of final-year nursing students, brought up as a professional group, from their internship experiences in the COVID-19 pandemic. We formulated the research question as follows: How did final-year nursing students interpret their profession from their internship experiences in the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

Study design: This study utilised a qualitative method using the phenomenological approach. Qualitative research aims to develop concepts to better understand social phenomena in natural settings (LoBiondo-Wood, & Haber, 2013). This study was designed and reported following the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

Participants: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 nursing students in their final-year studying in a state university located in XXXXX, Turkey. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in Turkey moved to a blended learning model in the education of nursing (Higher Education Council, 2021). Students had their internship experience in the institution where the research was conducted in the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year between February and August 2021. In the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year in the institution where the research was carried out; each nursing student received a maximum of 40 hours of online lessons (including compulsory and elective courses) and 8 hours of traditional face-to-face practical training.

Instruments: The interview schedule was developed and piloted by H.U., and A.B. before starting data collection. **Table 1** presents the interview schedule conducted with nursing

students. Interviews were conducted by the researcher (H.U.) between 28 June 2021 and 15 September 2021 by using Zoom software at a convenient time at the weekend. Both researchers have no relationship with the students in terms of being their lecturer or instructor. Their own instructor also have no control over their participation in this study. Data saturation was reached when similar issues repeatedly emerged and no new information was received.

Data collection: The aim of this study was explained to the participants throughout Google Survey Form and a consent to participate in the study option was added. Participants who accepted the written consent option were included in the study. Interviews lasted between approximately 40 and 60 minutes. In this research, a homogeneous sampling method was used (final-year nursing students). In homogeneous sampling, there is a strategy of collecting small homogeneous groups; the aim of this is to describe in depth a certain subgroup. The essential point here is, by bringing together people with similar experiences, carrying out interviews on a topic which affect them (Yagar, & Dokme, 2018; Baltaci, 2018). The participants were selected based on the criteria of having experienced internship in the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year during COVID-19 pandemic. Voluntary participation, having no problems with the internet, and giving no permission for screen recordings were the criteria for inclusion in the study. One student whose internet connection was cut off was excluded from the study. The research team was not involved in evaluating the students' performance in any way.

Data analysis: In the analysis of the data, the transcripts of the interview of each student were encoded with a number from 1 to 16. Six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed in this study: phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data; phase 2: generating initial codes; phase 3: searching for themes; phase 4: reviewing themes; phase 5: defining and naming themes; and phase 6: producing the report. Both authors (H.U., and A.B.) carried out the data analysis

process independently and had regular meetings to discuss the emerging themes. The consensus was reached through discussion of all emerged themes. Encoding reliability was calculated using the percentage of agreement index. Coding reliability was found to be 0.86 between both researchers using the percentage of compliance. This means that coding reliability between two researchers (H.U., and A.B.) is at acceptable level.

Asking participants whether the study findings accurately reflect their own thoughts is called 'member checking' or 'respondent validation'. This strategy entails reaching out to some of the people to whom the data was provided or interviewed and asking for feedback on findings. Using participant confirmation, researchers asked participants to check the accuracy of interpretations. Participants were informed that the study findings reflected their own thoughts. The research findings were shared with the participants for their views, and feedback was obtained on the suitability of the themes. Member check was carried out with 11 participants to ensure the generated themes accurately reflected participants' narratives.

Ethical considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the Non-invasive Clinical Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Maltepe University (REF: 2021/17-17, dated: 18/06/2021).

Results

Three of the students were male and thirteen were female. The mean age of the students (n=16) was 22.93±4.10 years, and their grade-point averages were between 2.76 and 3.96. **Table 2** provided some other characteristics of participants.

The meaning of the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic was examined under two main themes and nine themes. The main themes and themes were provided in **Table 3**.

Main theme 1: The meaning of the nursing profession

Students are concerned about the COVID-19 process, both for themselves and for the patient. The anxiety they felt naturally affected their

professional values and autonomy. The changing value perceptions and autonomy of the nursing profession providing care services in the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to a new meaning of the profession. The findings showed that nursing students believed that professional reputation was strengthened during COVID-19 (increased reputation and value), independence in professional decisions was increased (increased autonomy) and new concepts (sacrificing and motivating) were added to professional recognition.

Theme 1: Increased reputation and value

Participants explained that the nursing profession is in the process of changing during COVID-19 and that they feel respect from the public. Participants reported that even when no one was around the patients, the nurses were there with the patients, that there was no other profession that cared so much about human life, that they were saddened and subjected to a difficult process. Participants believe that nurses have become heroes in the public perspective for being brave during this difficult process. This was illustrated by one participants as follows:

"I can see what burden nurses are working during the pandemic. A person's life is in their hands. I see how they help patients and how they behave. I see what a risk they're working during the pandemic. We never thought a thing like that would happen to us. We're going through a difficult period. And in this difficult period, we care about human life. In this period, respect for nursing has increased. I already had respect for the nursing profession, but in this pandemic, it's increased even more." (Participant 16).

Theme 2: Making a sacrifice

During the pandemic, healthcare staff have been working in a self-sacrificing way, putting their own health at serious risk when treating patients. As a result of this, they have been separated from their homes, their families and their loved ones. Participants explained that the

nurses were working in difficult conditions, were under a great burden, were tired and spent more time within the hospital than in their own homes. Participants reported that it is very important for nurses to give positive energy to people in pandemic conditions. The students spoke of the continuous sacrifice, effort and patience needed in their profession. This was expressed by two participants as follows:

"In many ways, we help by making sacrifices. We're in a time when we think more of other people's health than of our own. We spend more of our time and more of our lives in the hospital for them." (Participant 10).

"I have realized that the thing which brings the feeling of helping to the fore in us is sacrifice. We try to accommodate more to other people than to ourselves. We try both to fill them with positive energy and to care for and treat them." (Participant 15).

Theme 3: Motivating patients

Participants mentioned about the importance of communicating with patients during the pandemic, communicating with patients to calm down them, and providing them with morale and motivation. Participants believe that patients cannot cope with the fear of uncertainty and therefore they need support. Participants think that the care or treatment provided without providing psychological support will not be effective. The findings indicated that providing patient with motivation is a priority. It is important to be with the patients at the most difficult time and to relieve their psychological problems. One participants stated that:

"During the pandemic, not only applying treatment, but also being able to talk to patients is the way of helping them and make them feel comfortable. For example, there were patients who came and talked to me, saying that it was very good for me. The patient wants to heal as soon as possible and sees us as a mediator to heal. When we are in constant dialogue with the

patient, we increase their hope for recovery. Even we can not prescribe medications to patients, giving that positive energy to the patients could help them to feel better." (Participant 9).

Theme 4: Empathizing

Participants explained that the ability to empathize was one of the most important necessities of nursing during the pandemic. According to the students, nurses are the occupational group that spends the most time with the patient in pandemic conditions and remains active in contact. Participants reported that even when no one was around the patients, the nurses were there with the patients, that there was no other profession that cared so much about human life, that they were saddened and subjected to a difficult process. One participant stated that:

"In people's most difficult times, when emotions peak and you question life, the one by the side of the patient is the nurse. The person's family may not even be with them at that time. The person closest to them may not be there. But the nurse is by their side. Even on their deathbed or when they get the worst news, when there's no one with them, the nurse is there. I didn't know that nursing was so valuable and so sacred. It just meant someone looking at you with gratitude when some small intervention was performed." (Participant 3).

Theme 5: Increased autonomy

New wards have been put into service to take the pandemic under control, and healthcare staff taking care of patients with COVID-19 have been faced with unfamiliar patients and work environments. New and unfamiliar working environments have allowed nurses to prove their existence. Students observed increased independence in the powers and responsibilities of the nurses in the clinic. They noticed that the nurses spend much more time with the patients from hospitalization until to be discharged. In

this context, participants reported that it is up to the nurse who is in the clinic 24/7 to fully recover in every sense, whether it is care, treatment or psychological support. One participant reported that:

“Nurses are not doctors’ helpers or people who do what the doctor asks for. The doctors see patients, make a medical diagnosis, and after that, hand over that patient completely to the nurses. Therefore, that patient’s recovery is completely dependent on the nurses, because it’s the nurses who carry out the treatment. Patient care is carried out according to nursing diagnoses and in communication with the patient. Sometimes the nurse is someone who provides psychological support by talking to the patients, listening to their problems, and trying to help them.” (Participants 11).

Main theme 2: Students’ expectations of the profession

In the COVID-19 pandemic, nursing students witnessed challenging working conditions. Students who witnessed difficulties and challenging working conditions caused them to rethink their expectations and dreams for the profession. They questioned their commitment to the profession during the pandemic. Four themes were emerged: improvement of working conditions, prestige, self-improvement and the opportunity to migrate.

Theme 1: Improvement of working conditions

During the pandemic in Turkey, being exposed to difficult working conditions, long working hours, working for a long time with protective equipments, the emotional and psychological effects of the pandemic, sometimes having to go into quarantine because of a positive COVID-19 test, and being away from family members and loved ones have caused difficulties for nurses and healthcare professionals. Final-year nursing students, who are the workforce of the future, have witnessed such situations, any of which can be a source of stress for a student.

Students stated that they expected an improvement in working conditions and the work environment. This was illuminated by one participant as follows:

“If working hours could be improved and reducing the shift hours, it would be better. People would be more willing to carry on the profession. It would be better if the profession could be conducted under better conditions.” (Participant 6).

Theme 2: Prestige

Students think that nurses provide care to patients that even patient’s children can not provide in the conditions of the pandemic. They want their profession to be appreciated because they have put so much effort into it. The heroization of nurses by the press and social media and the growing respect of society increases the power of nurses. The public applauded the healthcare staff during the pandemic. Positive news regarding the healthcare staff in the press and social media motivated nursing students. The students mentioned that the need to recognize the value and respect to which the nursing profession had a right. One student described that:

“My expectation is that they should show us respect. Our profession is very valuable, and I want that value to be known. It’s not easy. You’re in direct one-to-one contact with people. Nurses perform care that they wouldn’t or couldn’t do for their families. Especially if you think of intensive care nurses during the pandemic... They’ve touched patients that no one else could. People have started to understand the value of health care workers. Everyone has seen that there is a need for them. All healthcare staff have acted with great altruism. During this time, neither doctors nor nurses have been able to see even their children. This time has made people realize certain things. Respect to healthcare staff is increasing.” (Participant 4).

Theme 3: Self-improvement

The students talked about wanting to succeed in more things by changing themselves in the nursing profession because of the pandemic. The findings suggest that the research and learning process is increasing in students who are facing a new and unknown environment. Students stated that they have gained the habit of reading articles on the internet during COVID-19 process. They also think they have revised their information based on the updated research results. However, they observed that nurses were unable to improve themselves due to intensive working conditions. In this context, it can be concluded that nurses do not have enough time to improve their knowledge. This was described by two interviewees:

“We are confronting a new situation. Therefore of course there’s a change in our practices. For example, in the beginning, the drug groups that we used changed. Even the drugs we used, the ones we were very accustomed to, groups that we had previously used a lot, even those changed. For that reason, we’ve entered into a time of constant change. We have to get used to change.” (Participant 14).

“I want to develop myself and learn new things as much as possible. I think nurses aren’t given enough opportunities for scientific research. Maybe it’s because of long working hours or because they don’t want to do research. In fact, my expectation of this profession is to do scientific works.” (Participant 3).

Theme 4: The opportunity to migrate

Students consider that nurses have difficult working conditions in Turkey (low wages, intensive working hours, increased violence against healthcare staff etc.). Some students reported that they were not able to adapt to the existing condition in Turkey, that they were struggling and worried. If they have the opportunity to work in better conditions abroad, they consider emigration. In this context, it can be said that there is a commitment to the nursing

profession in Turkey, but due to poor working conditions, a labor crisis may occur in the nursing profession.

“My expectation of this profession is that it will benefit me in daily life as much as I learn and use information. If I have to go to another country, I think I’ll use this profession. I’ll have my diploma ready.” (Participant 1).

Discussion

Final-year nursing students are the professionals of the future who will be able to deal with the future pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic should not be seen as a crisis, in contrast, it is a chance for nursing students to restructure their professional identity. This study aimed to show how final-year nursing students interpreted their profession in line with their internship experiences during COVID-19 pandemic.

Nursing students have a feeling of unfulfilled professionalism as well as personal inadequacy (Nie et al., 2021). In studies by Swift et al. (2020) and Seah et al. (2021), it is stated that nursing students are professionally and personally valuable and that their efforts are applauded. In the study of 158 nursing students by Tas and Dalcali (2021), it was determined that their motivation increased with the increase of professional reputation during the pandemic process.

The nursing students participating in this study also thought that the value accorded to them was more than before. The time of COVID-19 was a period of socialization in which students passed into a newly qualified status and in which they adapted their values and identities to the organization (Swift et al., 2020). In this way, it can be said that the pandemic increased their professional relationship ties. Their experiences of this crisis will enable students to adapt to and cope with difficulties, and also it will increase recognition and approval of the nursing profession in society.

Some existing studies (Dos Santos, 2020; Seah et al., 2021; Canet-Vélez et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) found that nursing students have

talked about altruism and establishing empathy, which these results are in line with the results of this current study. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of altruism or making a sacrifice becomes more meaningful. As regards

to the difficult conditions relating to COVID-19, the students thought that healthcare staff were making the necessary sacrifices. Students have encountered the COVID-19 pandemic unprepared.

Table 1. Interview Schedule

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked their gender, age, class, and grade point average.

Question 1: Please tell me about your internship experiences during COVID-19?

Question 2: How did you feel on the first day of your internship during COVID-19?

Question 3: How do you feel now?

Question 4: What difficulties have you had during COVID-19 pandemic?

Question 5: How you dealt with difficulties during COVID-19?

Question 6: What outside support have you received during this process?

Question 7: What other support do you need?

Prompts for all questions:

Can you give me more information about that?

Why?

How?

Tell me more?

Table 2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=16)

Students	Gender	Age	Class	Grade average
S1	Male	37	4	2.93
S2	Female	20	4	3.44
S3	Female	21	4	2.78
S4	Famale	23	4	3.01
S5	Male	23	4	2.76
S6	Famale	21	4	3.07
S7	Female	23	4	3.16
S8	Male	22	4	3.29
S9	Female	21	4	3.17
S10	Female	21	4	3.47
S11	Female	22	4	3.96
S12	Female	27	4	3.22
S13	Famale	20	4	3.18
S14	Female	22	4	2.99
S15	Female	23	4	3.15
S16	Female	21	4	3.02

Note: According to the student's grade point average of 4

Overall Academic Grade Point Average (OAGPA) AA:4.00, BA:3.50, BB:3.00, CB:2.50, CC:2.00

Table 3. Main Themes and Themes

Main themes	Themes
The meaning of the nursing profession	Increased reputation and value
	Making sacrifices
	Motivating patients
	Empathizing
	Increased autonomy
Students' expectations of the profession	Improvement of working conditions
	Prestige
	Self-improvement
	The opportunity to migrate

Discussion cont.

At the same time, having a good role model supporting emotional and social welfare is essential (Canet-Vélez et al., 2021). The development of identity in nursing students is gained by interaction with older healthcare professionals (Zhang et al., 2021). It can be said that the students participating in this study had the opportunity to work with a good role model. Healthcare staff went into the uncertain and changing conditions of the pandemic with fearless and brave altruism. The students observed nurses quickly adapting to the situation. Therefore, nurses in the pandemic were a good role model for the students.

Migration is a choice made in the face of a particular situation. COVID-19 has caused burnout in nurses and caused them to leave their jobs, and this is progressively increasing the shortage of nurses. Conditions of burnout in workplaces may affect nursing students' career decisions (Lin et al., 2021). No studies were found in the literature discussing the theme of migration by nursing students in the pandemic, but there was discussion of the theme of

migration by doctors. In a study by Humphries et al. (2021), doctors stated that they moved to Ireland because work conditions were not improved.

In Turkey, students who experienced hospital conditions in the pandemic found that work conditions were difficult. During the pandemic, there was a need for nursing staff in many countries (Swift et al., 2020). One of the main findings of the World Nursing Report published at the beginning of 2020 was that there was a shortage of nurses estimated at six million (World Health Organization, 2020a). Considering the current shortage of nurses and the ageing population, it is thought that more than thirteen million nurses will be needed in the next few years (International Council of Nurses, 2022). In Turkey, there are 18,670 nursing graduates for every 100,000 people, and the number of patients per one nurse is 431 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The number of patients per nurse in Turkey is quite high. The increased burden of care can cause burnout in nurses. In this context, the "global nurse crisis" may arise

in Turkey as well as all over the world. This research findings have found that nursing students who will be future healthcare professionals have a tendency to migrate. It is necessary for policy-

makers to focus on the reasons underlying the desire of nursing students, who are the workforce of the future, to migrate. Better working conditions, education and career development opportunities should be provided in the healthcare system to nurses who choose to stay in Turkey.

Limitations: Using qualitative approach allowed to explore the experiences of nursing students during COVID-19 by using their own words as they describe their feelings and experiences. Using such approach enable participants to answer the questions freely and broadly without limitation. However, the research data was limited by the characteristics of the time in which the study was conducted. Since the data were collected by using Zoom software, slow internet speed, the sound being interrupted, and the internet cutting off were other limitation of the study. At the stage of transcribing the interviews, interruption of the students' voices and difficulty of understanding made it necessary to listen to recordings many times and this lengthening the transcription process.

Conclusion and Recommendations: The COVID-19 pandemic should not be seen as a crisis but as a chance for nursing students to develop their professional identities. It is important for final-year nursing students, who are the workforce of the future, to develop their own values with which they give meaning to their profession in the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has given nursing students who have come to know the pandemic the opportunity to develop their professional identity. It was shown that the concepts of increased esteem and value, self-sacrifice, establishing empathy, and increased autonomy that emerged from this study developed professional identity. This study found that the COVID-19 pandemic process has allowed nursing students to develop their professional identities.

It could be necessary to reconsider the current curriculum and human resources to overcome the potential human resource gaps in the nursing profession caused by COVID-19 pandemic. The themes of increased reputation and value, making sacrifices, motivating patients, empathy, and increased autonomy revealed in this research provided insights into how professional identity acquisition could be improved and allow students to add new concepts to the professional identity meaning.

The findings of this study including the expectations of students from the profession should be evaluated by policymakers, school administrators, educators, hospital administrators, human resources planners, public health experts, and researchers. Consideration of the proposed expectations for the elimination of professional problems will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the care provided to the community. The findings of this could be combined with other studies for organizational leaders to address issues impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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