

ORIGINAL PAPER

INVESTIGATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL SELF-CONCEPT OF NURSING STUDENTS IN SHIRAZ, IRAN

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Abstract

Aim: The study aimed to explore the professional self-concept of senior nursing students and evaluate its relationship with sex, age, clinical work experience, motivation for choosing nursing and average grade. **Methods:** In this descriptive cross-sectional study based on the census method, professional self-concept of 70 senior nursing students of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences was investigated. The data were collected using Cowin's 36-item questionnaire of professional self-concept which measures nursing self-concept in six subscales. The data was analyzed using statistical indices such as frequency, mean, standard deviation, and independent t-tests and ANOVA statistical tests. A significant p-value was set at 0.05. **Results:** The mean of professional self-concept of students was 192.71 ± 44.85 . There was a significant association between sex and interest in the nursing profession and professional self-concept, but the relationship between age, average grades and student clinical work experience and professional self-concept was not significant. **Conclusion:** The attitude of nursing students is greatly influenced by the image of nursing in the society, which makes them have low self-concept. Therefore, occupational and social support and counselling to the students can pave the way.

Key words: self-concept, professional self-concept, students, nursing.

Introduction

Self-concept is defined as a real understanding of oneself which influences having a good feeling of one, progress, and appreciating all the aspects of life (Cowin, Hengstberger-Sims, 2006, p. 60). It is in fact like a window through which one sees oneself as well as the others (Mlinar et al., 2009, p. 328). Humans are not born with self-concept; rather, it is a social phenomenon which occurs as a result of interacting with others (Taylor, Lillis, LeMone, 2008, p. 4-6) and depends somewhat on the others' viewpoint which might be right or wrong (Memarian, 2008, p. 226).

Professional self-concept is one of the issues concerning the nursing system. In addition, it is considered as the main concept in education, management, and clinical programs for improving the nursing profession since nurses must interact with the other members of the health care team and feel the

same rights and mutual respect (Arthur, 2007, p. 60-61).

Nurses' self-concept refers to information and beliefs about their roles, values, and behaviors (Takase et al., 2002, p. 197) and is used as a framework to determine their functions in social roles which directly affects their daily performance (Fagermoen, 1998, p. 434).

Nurses' professional identity is defined as the values and beliefs held by nurses that guide their thinking and actions. Nurses evaluate their performance as nurses positively; this positive self-concept is related to the professional socialization process. Nurses develop a professional identity through the skills, knowledge and values inherent in their profession (Hoeve et al., 2014, p. 303).

In fact, performing such special tasks in carrying out the procedures and quality of the performance require something beyond knowledge (Mlinar et al., 2009, p. 313). For instance, negative self-concept is an obstacle to independent and effective performance and those who possess a low professional self-concept are afraid

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of having authority, work routinely, avoid initiative, are resistant against changes, and have a negative attitude toward themselves. The society tends to view the nurses according to their personal traits but not their role skills, while this constant assumption that a nurse is just a nurse must be denied and their professional performances and roles should be taken into account (Leddy, Pepper, 1993, p. 62).

For instance, most people know that they cannot be hospitalized without the presence of a physician, but they do not know they cannot be discharged from the hospital without the presence of a nurse. Thus, both nurses and society should be aware of the importance of what nurses do and the profession they are serving in (Bonaldi-Moore, 2009).

Since the nursing students are concerned about their roles as nurses, especially in our culture where people consider some professions more respectable and favorable, professional self-concept is of high value. It is important how they view themselves and what their attitude toward themselves is.

Aims

The study aimed to explore the professional self-concept of senior nursing students of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences and its relationship with sex, age, clinical work experience, motivation for choosing nursing and average grade.

Methods

Design

The study with a cross-sectional design was performed on a sample of senior student nurses at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Iran.

Sample

The research population included all the senior nursing students ($n = 70$) studying at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in the second semester of the academic year 2012. Out of the 70 questionnaires distributed, 60 (85.7%) were received complete (56.7% females; 43.3% males).

The mean age of the participants was 21 ± 0.84 years. Besides, 65% of students had chosen nursing because of their interest in the field; the other 35% had not been interested. In Iran, students participate in an annual national entrance exam and select from 200 specialties. Since the entrance exam score does not allow all students to be admitted to fields they wish to study, some of them may not be interested in the field and study because they want to graduate from any university.

In addition, 76.6% of the subjects did not have clinical work experience, while 23.3% did. Students with clinical work experience were typically those working in hospitals as orderlies, doing bedside work, who had entered the college to complete their academic courses and get a bachelor's degree in nursing.

Moreover, the average grades of 6.7%, 81.7% and 11.7% of the students were 13.99 or less, 14 to 16.99 and 17 or more, respectively. The Iranian grading system at secondary schools and universities is similar to that of France; the grades range from 0 to 20. The passing grade is 10. Graduate programs require 12 and 14 as passing grades for Master's and Ph.D. programs, respectively. Iranian grades are not directly convertible to the 4.0 GPA scale. Usually, grades 17 or more are considered excellent, grades 14 to 16.99 are considered good and grades 10 to 13.99 are considered acceptable. Students having 9.99 or less fail.

Data collection

Institutional review board authorization was gained from the Human Subjects Committee at the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Iran. The researchers contacted the university's Vice-Chancellor for Communication and Director of Fatemeh (PBUH) School of Nursing in Shiraz to ask for permission to use a questionnaire in the classes. Once the permission was obtained, the consent form and questionnaires were distributed by an instructor not involved directly in teaching the students. The students were instructed not to write their name on their questionnaires. Those who voluntarily consented completed the nurse self-concept questionnaire. The responses to the questionnaire were self-reported by the participants. The questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned during classes.

The data were collected using Cowin's 36-item questionnaire of professional self-concept which includes 6 subscales of nurses' self-esteem, knowledge, care, leadership, staff relations and communication. Each item is expressed positively and scored from 1 to 8 based on the Likert rating scale. The total scores of each subject ranged from 36 (the lowest) to 288 (the highest) and the higher the score, the greater the self-concept. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire have been confirmed in some studies performed abroad. Hensel and Stoelting-Gettelfinger conducted a study in 2010 and reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87-0.91 for its various dimensions (Hensel, Stoelting-Gettelfinger, 2011). Also, the Cronbach's alpha was reported between 0.82 and 0.92 in a study conducted by Cowin in 2008 (Cowin et al., 2008). Reliability and validity of the Persian version of the Nurses' Self-Concept

Questionnaire (NSCQ) using the Spearman-Brown correlation coefficient and Cronbach's alpha were determined to be 0.84 and 0.97, respectively (Badiyepeymaye Jahromi et al., 2013).

Data analysis

All the statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS v. 16 statistical software. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics including independent sample t-test and one way analysis of variance to determine the relationship between professional self-concept and the demographic factors. A significant p-value was set at 0.05.

Results

The mean and standard deviation of different subscales of the professional self-concept among the students are presented in Table 1. The highest and the lowest scores were related to self-esteem and communication subscale, respectively.

Table 1 Mean and standard deviation of the NSCQ and its subscales

NSCQ total and subscales	Mean	SD
NSCQ total	192.71	44.85
Nurse self-esteem	26.93	10.19
Nursing care	33.38	7.07
Nursing knowledge	33.41	9.06
Staff relations	32.11	8.98
Communication	37.08	7.04
Leadership	29.78	11.64

The results of the t-test showed a significant relationship between professional self-concept and sex ($p = 0.013$). In addition, the professional self-concept of female students was better than that of male students. Also, a significant relationship was found between professional self-concept and interest in nursing ($p < 0.001$) and the students who were interested in nursing obtained higher scores in professional self-concept. However, no significant relationship was observed between professional self-concept and age, average grade, and non-student clinical work experience (Table 2).

Discussion

Students enter nursing school with the foundations of a nurse self-concept that has arisen from life experiences, personal philosophies, role models, and religious beliefs (Hensel, Stoelting-Gettelfinger, 2011, p. 292). But how they perceive themselves within their

Table 2 The relationship between the demographic factors and the NSCQ total score

Demographic variable	Group	Mean± SD	p value
Sex	Male	176.58±49.02	0.01*
	Female	205.06±37.60	
Age	20-22	197.67±42.85	0.24
	23-25	183.52±48.07	
Clinical work experience	No	194.19±46.01	0.64
	Yes	187.86±42.08	
Interest in nursing	No	149.14±38.89	<0.01*
	Yes	216.18±26.71	
Average grade	<13.99	185.75±51.82	0.95
	14-16.99	193.16±45.95	
	>17	193.57±38.91	

* Significant at alpha level of 0.05

work environment is cited as a significant source of problems relating to professional identity, recruitment, and retention (Cowin, 2001, p. 313). Professional self-concept affects their personal performances and development of their professional roles (Björkström, 2008). So professional self-concept of nursing students should be measured, and its relationship with demographic factors should be explored. Thus, directors of nursing would be able to make major decisions when choosing nursing students.

The present study showed that the nursing students had low professional self-concept and their scores were lower than the scores in Hensel and Stoelting-Gettelfinger's study (2011) entitled "Changes in stress and nurse self-concept among baccalaureate nursing students", Cowin and Hengstberger-Sims's study (2006) entitled "New graduate nurse self-concept and retention: A longitudinal survey", and another study by Cowin et al. (2006) entitled "A longitudinal study of student and experienced nurses' self-concept".

In a study conducted by Moatari et al. (2005), nursing students' self-concept was poor. Similar results were obtained in a study by Dibaj Nia (2005) which aimed to compare the self-concept of the first and fourth year students of School of Rehabilitation, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences in Iran. According to the study, the majority of the students was poor or had negative self-concept.

Edraki et al. (2011) also showed that senior nursing students were minimally satisfied with their education, resulting in the reduction of their professional self-concepts. Lower professional self-concept of the students in this study in comparison to students abroad may rise from the educational system which has not been able to play a key role in the development of the students' professional self-concept. In fact, it is the

nursing education that creates certain beliefs and attitudes towards oneself, co-workers, and other members of the healthcare team (AdibHajBagheri et al., 2006).

Since the results of Cowin and Hengstberger-Sims's (2006) study indicated that the professional self-concept of nursing students in the first six months after graduation and starting a job has a descending trend because of the reality shock, the low level of the nursing students' self-concept in this study needs more consideration because further reduction can have unfavorable consequences; they may either quit nursing or have improper performances.

In the present study, the minimum and maximum scores were related to self-esteem and communication aspects, respectively. However, in the studies by Hensel and Stoelting-Gettelfinger (2011) and Cowin and Hengstberger-Sims (2006), the highest scores were related to self-esteem. The results of this study showed that the students who were more interested in nursing had a better self-concept. In a study conducted by Salimi et al. (2005), a significant relationship was found between the clinical skills and interest in nursing. Beigmoradi and Nazere (2002) also showed a significant relationship between interest in one's major and achievement of the overall objectives of the training program. In the current study, a significant difference was observed between male and female students regarding their professional self-concept, with the female students having a better nursing self-concept. Such differences can stem from the fact that most nurses are female which made nursing a woman's profession; and female students to have a stronger self-concept. In a study by Nasiriani et al. (2006), female students also had better clinical skills. On the other hand, in a study by Björkström et al. (2008), the professional self-concept of male students was higher in some aspects, which was not reliable since according to the researchers, the number of male students was lower than females. In studies conducted by Dibaj Nia (2005) and Tamannaifar et al. (2010), no significant relationship was found between sex and self-concept which could be due to the difference between personal and professional self-concept.

The results of this study revealed no significant relationship between professional self-concept and age. Dibaj Nia (2005) also found similar results perhaps because of small age differences between the students. In a study by Arthur et al. (1998), older nurses had a better professional self-concept. Non-student clinical work background and average grades had no influence on the professional self-concept.

Considering the relationship between interest in nursing and professional self-concept, the students of

nursing should be selected with due caution. On the other hand, due to the lack of male nurses and lower professional self-concept in male students, some concessions should be offered to motivate them to enter this field. At the same time, the appropriate cultural and social context should be provided by instructors and educators at universities and through media in the society.

A limitation of this study is the fact that the sample size was small and it was not randomly selected. Despite the researchers' effort to attract more study samples, some students were reluctant to participate in the research which could possibly affect the results of the study. Thus, it is suggested that the students are informed about the importance of the research and encouraged to take part in the study.

The most important limitation of this research is that it studied only senior student nurses, so the results of this study can be generalized to senior students. Generalization to other students would need broader research involving other nursing student groups and different parts of the country. Also a large international comparative study using the NSCQ would be valuable.

Yet another limitation is the method of assessment of student's motivation to choose nursing career using a close question. Thus, it is recommended to evaluate students' interest with a specific questionnaire in future research.

This study has provided useful data for future research which could compare the results from the Iranian nursing student sample to other nursing groups. Ideally, future studies could add some qualitative data to compare contrast and enrich the findings. A future study could focus on those students who have left nursing, to examine their views of themselves and as professional would benefit from a method which included in depth interview.

Conclusion

Applying the results of this study elucidates the realities for the educational planners to take principal strategies for solving the students' educational problems and increasing their satisfaction. However, the nursing students' views of themselves as a nurse are greatly affected by the image the society has regarding nursing; therefore, they are worried about their images as a nurse. This makes them internalize their negative features and have a poor self-concept; nevertheless, consultation and occupational as well as social supports can pave the way.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

This research study was approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. Permission was received from the Dean of the Faculty where the research was conducted. Written information about the purpose and the nature of the study was given to the participants. The participants were informed that the information would be kept confidential and it would be used for scientific purposes only. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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