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Abstract

Background: The growing shortage of nurses is a global issue, with nursing recruitment and retention recognized as priorities worldwide. Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arabs share residency and citizenship. However, language, religion, values, customs, symbols and lifestyle differ between the groups. This research covers only Arabs citizens of Israel and not Palestinians in the occupied territories, the West Bank and Gaza. The future of the profession lies in the ability to recruit and retain the next generation of nurses.

Objective: To examine career choice and professional adaptation among Israeli Jewish and Arab nursing students by addressing motivation, materialistic factors and professional adaptation.

Participants & Settings: 395 students, which comprised the total number of students in the first five years of the nursing program's existence, in the nursing faculty at an academic college in Israel.

Method: A questionnaire was created and administered to the students in the first week of their first year in the nursing program.

Results: Altruistic motivation, such as the opportunity to help others, was the primary factor that influenced students to choose nursing as a profession followed by professional interest. Materialistic factors, such as social status and good salary, had less influence. A significant positive correlation was found between professional adaptation and all three dimensions of role perception - teamwork, professional knowledge, and treatment skills. The female students perceived those components as more important than the male students and the Jewish students perceived themselves as more suitable for nursing than the Arab students.

Conclusions: Career choice and professional adaptation are influenced by multiple factors. Future recruitment and retention strategies used to address the critical nursing shortage should consider these factors, as well as the role of mentors, peers, and role models in the formulation of career expectations and career choice decisions.

Keywords: career choice, professional adaptation, nursing

Title: Becoming a nurse: A study of career choice and professional adaptation among nursing students.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The growing shortage of nurses is a global issue, with nursing recruitment and retention recognized as priorities worldwide. An accurate and consistent account of the shortage is problematic, given the different systems used to quantify need ([Oulton, 2006](#)).

The International Council of Nurses (2003) has identified this shortage as a global crisis, recognizing that the number of nurses worldwide is insufficient. Many European countries and other developed nations, such as Israel and Australia, do not have enough nurses to serve the populations in need of care ([Oulton, 2006](#); Toren et al., 2010). According to Toren et al. (2010), the number of employed nurses in Israel (5.7 to 1000 population) is almost half their number in other OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries (8.4 to 1000 population). Contributing to this inequity is the migration of nurses from places where the needs are dire to countries where their skills are better compensated and respected ([Chaguturu & Vallabhaneni, 2005](#); [Oulton, 2006](#)). In developing countries, such as those in Africa, the shortage is drastic (Nigeria 0.28 per 1000 population; Zimbabwe 0.72 1000 population).

Effects of the nursing shortage are being experienced by all, and individuals who are vulnerable and fragile are at increased risk for negative health outcomes. Today's health care environments are increasingly complex and require a high level of technological skill. Shortened hospital stays have decreased the time allocated to provide comprehensive care ([Goodin, 2003](#)). Greater incidences of adverse outcomes for patients have been correlated to fewer qualified RNs caring for them (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2007; Aiken, Clarke, Cheung, Sloane, & Silber, 2003; [Needleman, Buerhaus, Mattke, Stewart, & Zelevinsky, 2002](#)).

Education is a recognized strategy through which the professional status of nursing can be enhanced at both the micro and macro levels ([Wynd, 2003](#)). Baccalaureate education in particular is a critical factor in cementing this status ([Clark, 2004](#); [Wolf & Hoerst, 2007](#)). However, enrollment statistics indicate that fewer persons in their twenties are entering nursing schools. The percentage of the nursing workforce under 30 years of age has dropped in every survey since 1980, with only an estimated 8% under 30 in the US in 2004 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Yet, there has been a significant increase in nursing students in their thirties ([Buerhaus, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2003](#)). College students enrolled in nursing programs now tend to be older, culturally diverse, and more likely to change their career major several times during the course of their education.

Methods to identify and guide appropriate students toward nursing are generally lacking (Roberts, Cristine, & Ward-Smith, 2010). Career choice and professional adaptation are influenced by multiple factors, which can be extrinsic, intrinsic, or a combination of both. For example, many people are heavily influenced by the professions that their parents favor, whereas others follow the career paths that their educational choices have opened up for them. Some choose to follow their passion, regardless of how much or how little money it will make them, while others pursue the career that will pay them the highest salary ([Myburgh, 2005](#)).

Professional development through education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to include the adoption of professional values ([Weis & Schank, 2002](#)). The quest of the nursing profession to secure recognition and value as a discipline has been a tortuous one. Whether or not nursing can claim status as a profession continues to generate debate among scholars and practitioners in all areas and at all levels of practice ([Wynd, 2003](#)). Characteristics such as critical thinking, communication skills, ethical standards, and clinical competency (Iwasiw, Andrusyszyn, & Goldenberg, 2007) are hallmarks of professionalism in any field. As both individual nurses and the profession at large embrace these characteristics as requisite elements of nursing practice, the status of nursing as a profession has been increasingly elevated.

Israel is a country of eight million citizens. Roughly eighty percent are Jewish while the remaining twenty percent consists of Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel after 1948 and their descendents and are also referred to as Israeli Arabs (Muslim, 17%; Christian, 2%) and Druze (1.5%). The minorities, though formally citizens of equal standing, have been subjected to various sorts of formal and informal discrimination and restrictions. The employment patterns of Israeli Arabs are characterized – some would say dominated – by two features: near-exclusion from the technological domain and relative inclusion in the fields of education and healthcare. This relative openness is particularly evident in the north of the country, which houses the majority of this population sector (Smoocha, 2010). Israel is and remains a deeply divided society of Jewish and Arab citizens. This division is reflected in institutions, culture, national identity, socioeconomic status, and stances on fundamental issues. Mutual rapprochement suggests that Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arabs are in the process of adjusting to one other and both are committed to coexistence and democracy. A better balance, compatible with the visions of both sides, could be struck between the Jewish and democratic character of the state by policies of nondiscrimination, inclusion, and integration of the Arab minority (Smoocha, 2010).

Political events might have underpinned the growing interest of Israeli Arabs in academic nursing, as a vehicle for greater public involvement and civil participation (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2007). In the college where this study was carried out, approximately 55 percent of the students are Jewish and 45 percent are Arab.

This research explores of the factors of career choice and professional adaptation experienced by baccalaureate Jewish and Arab nursing students in a college in northern Israel. Specific aims were: to identify the underlying factors of the nursing students' career choice, using the constructs of interest and professional adaptation; to evaluate the students' early professional perceptions according to their definition of professional nursing roles and functions, as well as their body of professional knowledge; and to determine the factors accounting for the variability of these data.

METHOD

Procedure

In this retrospective quantitative research a questionnaire was created and distributed to 395 students, which comprised the total number of students in the first five years of the nursing program's existence. The questionnaire was administered to the students in the first week of their first year in the nursing program.

Instrument

The questionnaire that was administered to the students included four parts:

1) Demographic details of the students included gender, age, origin, family status, number of children, religion, and religious level.

2) Professional adaptation: This part was developed by the researchers and consisted of 13 statements referring to nursing profession characteristics and their compatibility with the student. For example: "I think I could use my personal qualifications in this profession". Respondents were asked to rate the degree of their agreement with each statement on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree. High scores on the scale indicated a high level of compatibility. To validate the questionnaire two expert judges were asked to establish compatibility of each of the items. Considering the judges' comments, two items were removed from the questionnaire. The final version consisted of 11 statements. For purposes of data processing, one average score was calculated for the professional adaptation index for each subject. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.75.

3) Factors of career choice: This part consisted one question. The students were displayed with 10 factors of career choice: professional interest, convenient working hours, good salary, satisfying physical work conditions, high social status, opportunity to help others, economic security, possibility to influence, professional variety and promotion possibilities. The student was asked to choose the factor that influenced him the most in his career choice.

4) Role perception: The questionnaire is based on the nurse role questionnaire (Shachar, 1998). The original questionnaire consists thirty nine items that describe behaviors and

perceptions regarding the nurses' role. In Shachar's research high internal consistency reliability for the total scale was observed ($\alpha=.91$). To validate the questionnaire two expert judges were asked to establish compatibility of each of the items. Considering the judges' comments, four items were removed from the original questionnaire and three others were added. The final version consisted of 38 statements divided into three dimensions. Respondents were requested to rate the degree of their agreement with each statement on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important. The three dimensions of role perception were:

A. Teamwork – Nine statements referred to the components of working in a team. For example: “To what extent is it important for a nurse to create good communication between different staff members?” Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.72.

B. Professional knowledge – Ten statements referred to the components of professional knowledge. For example: “To what extent is it important for a nurse to have comprehensive medical knowledge?” Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.66.

C. Treatment skills – Nineteen statements referred to the components of treatment skills and the caring nature of the nursing role. For example: “To what extent is it important for a nurse to listen to the patient?” Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.84.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the Predictive Analytics Software (PASW, Version 18.0). After exclusion of the respondents who supplied incomplete data, the analysis was calculated on 391 responses. Missing values were 1% and were not replaced. In order to explore the relationships between professional adaptation and role perception, we performed Pearson correlations. Group comparisons were performed using 2×2 ANOVA's. Significance was set at the .05 level, and all tests of significance were two-tailed.

Ethics

Approval for the research was obtained from the College Ethics Committee prior to the study. The data were anonymized and no personal identification was used in the questionnaires.

RESULTS

The demographic characteristics of the students are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the majority of the students were female (76%), single (83%), and childless (88%). Regarding religion, 53% of the students were Jewish and 47% were Arabs (38% Moslem, 8.5% Christian, and 0.5% Druze). The mean age of the overall sample was 23.5 (SD=5.4), with 25.5 for the Jewish students and 21.5 for the Arab students. Most of the students (90%) began their studies under the age of 30.

Table 2 presents the career choice factors among the nursing students, based on the responses of the fifth class alone. Considering the initial findings from the first four classes, we decided to add an additional research question. The results show that the opportunity to help others was the primary factor influencing the students, both Jewish and Arabs, to choose nursing as a profession (46.0% and 34.2%, respectively). The next most influential factor was professional interest (31.7% and 15.8%, respectively). The third factor was promotion possibilities, it was chosen by few though all of them Arabs (N=7, 18.4%). All of the other factors were chosen by less than 7% from the total sample and there for less influential.

Table 3 presents the correlations between professional adaptation and role perception. As can be seen, a significant positive correlation was found between professional adaptation and all three dimensions of role perception (teamwork, professional knowledge, and treatment skills). No significant differences were found in the correlations between the male and female students and between Jewish and Arab students. However, the correlation between teamwork and professional adaptation was found stronger among Jewish women($r=.46$) then among Arab women($r=.30$). In Fisher Z test no significant difference was found between those

correlations ($z=1.30, p>.05$). In addition, the correlation between knowledge and professional adaptation was found stronger among Jewish men ($r=.50$) than among Arab men ($r=.24$). In Fisher Z test no significant difference was found between those correlations ($z=1.54, p>.05$). A 2×2 ANOVA's were performed in order to compare the means between the Jewish and Arab sectors and between the male and female. Table 4 depicts the means scores for the professional adaptation and dimensions of role perception. Significant main effect of gender was found for professional adaptation $F(1,368) = 4.53, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .012$, and for two of the three dimensions of role perception: professional knowledge $F(1,369) = 7.36, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$ and treatment skills $F(1,369) = 8.62, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .023$. On average, the female students perceived those components as more important than the male students (weak effect). There was no significant difference between the male and female students in their perceptions of the importance of teamwork as an essential part of the nursing profession.

Significant main effect of religion was found just for professional adaptation $F(1,368) = 4.53, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .012$. The Jewish students perceiving themselves as more suitable for nursing than the Arab students (weak effect). There was no significant difference between the Jewish and Arab students in their perceptions of the role.

Finally, there was no significant gender by religion interaction effect in any of the measures.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with those of other studies regarding the factors that influence potential students to choose nursing as a career ([Beck, 2000](#); [Larsen et al., 2003](#); [Price, 2009](#)). Altruistic motivation, such as the opportunity to help others, was the primary factor that influenced students to choose nursing as a profession. The next most influential factor was professional interest. Materialistic factors, such as social status and good salary, had less influence. The decisions that we make are often a reflection of our values, interests, and skills. In order to make more informed decisions, it is important to be aware of them. The findings of this study suggest that nursing continues to be a career that attracts both younger

and older people. Most of the students were under 30 years old, which suggests that younger students may see nursing more as a professional career with improved opportunities for continuing their education and obtaining employment in positions that require a minimum of a bachelors degree.

The essence of nursing is knowledge and caring - the art and science of nursing. Knowledge represents the science of nursing, and caring represents the art of nursing. Knowledge and caring must both be present for the provision of quality nursing care. As a professional discipline, nursing has developed a body of knowledge with conceptual and theoretical models that guide nursing practice in the care of individuals or groups ([Barrett, 2002](#)). In our study the correlation between knowledge and professional adaptation was found stronger among Jewish men than among Arab men but not among women Jewish or Arab. Women tend to express lesser confidence in their science abilities, lower expectations for success in science courses, and lesser interest in science than do men; These gender differences persist throughout the college years and beyond ([Jacobs and Simpkins 2006](#); [VanLeuvan 2004](#)). In the general public, men demonstrate greater scientific knowledge and scientific literacy than do women ([McCright, 2010](#)).

The students in this study perceived teamwork, professional knowledge, and treatment skills as an integral part of the nursing job and as part of their professional adaptation. The correlation between teamwork and professional adaptation was found stronger among Jewish women than among Arab women. When nurses function as part of a unit or team, the job itself is easier and gets done more efficiently. Moreover, overall patient care is enhanced. When teamwork is emphasized and valued, every member works together to meet their patients' needs and improved patient outcomes become their common goal ([Ward, 2009](#)).

Of interest in this study was the comparison between the Jewish and Arab students. No significant difference was found between the two sectors in their perceptions of the importance of teamwork as an essential part of the nursing profession. However, significant differences between the sectors were found in the other two dimensions of role perception,

namely professional knowledge and treatment skills. On average, the Jewish students perceived those components as more important than the Arab students. Moreover, a significant distinction emerged between the two groups in the perceptions of their professional compatibility, with the Jewish students perceiving themselves as more suitable for nursing than the Arab students.

As previous studies show, nursing programs in Israel provide a major route for upward mobility for underprivileged groups (mainly Israeli-Arabs and Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union) ([Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2002, 2007](#); [Romem & Anson, 2005](#); [Arieli, 2007](#)). Considering that the overall situation of Israeli-Arabs is characterized by high unemployment, high rates of unskilled workers, and exclusion from other fields in the labor market, nursing is identified as a profession that can provide them with “secure, rewarding careers that might also exceed ethnic boundaries” ([Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2007](#), p. 124). Given the split between these two national groups in many spheres of life, including separate elementary and high school education systems, higher education institutions are almost the only venue in Israeli society in which Arabs and Jews can meet on an equal footing ([Ben-Ari & Gil, , 2004](#)). This encounter is an important factor in the consolidation of the Arab students’ civic identity and their relations with the Jewish majority.

It is important to note the limitations of this study. The students participating in this study did not comprise a representative sample, but rather a convenience sample. Thus, they cannot be taken as representative of the views of nursing students attending other higher education institutions. The question on the career choice factors will be investigated in the future due to the fact it was examined on one class alone. The next stage of this investigation will therefore be to conduct a larger scale study in which nursing students are randomly selected from different higher education institutions in order to assess the generalizability of these findings.

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore nursing as an intellectually challenging profession focused on saving lives and improving the health care of the public. At the same time, nursing studies afford an equal opportunity for students from all sectors of society to acquire a profession in which there is a severe shortage. It may be this mixture of intellectual challenge and altruism – the sense of serving the community and acting in the best interests of society – that contributes to their choice of nursing. In future recruitment and retention strategies used to address the critical nursing shortage, it is important to consider such factors in the formulation of career expectations and career choice decisions. These results could potentially be used to develop a strategy to influence students' career choice of the nursing profession in an effort to increase the number of nurses in Israel.

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