



# Predicting factors of positive orientation and attitudes towards nursing: A quantitative cross-sectional study



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Previous studies have identified various reasons for students to choose a career in nursing. Students at the start of their programme hold a great variety of images and perceptions of nursing which can affect their orientation and attitudes towards their future profession.

**Objectives:** This paper aims to examine nursing students' orientation and attitudes towards nursing at the beginning of their educational programme, and to explore predictors of positive orientation and attitudes.

**Design:** The study used a quantitative cross-sectional design.

**Settings:** A survey was conducted among first-year nursing students at four nursing universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands.

**Participants:** Questionnaires were administered to all students enrolled in a bachelor of nursing programme (n = 1414) at these universities.

**Methods:** Respondents completed a survey consisting of: 1) Nursing Orientation Tool, 2) Nursing Attitude Questionnaire, and 3) demographic data such as gender, living status, nursing experience, preliminary training, first-choice programme, and career choice. Kruskal Wallis tests, with post hoc Mann Whitney U tests, were used to compare group scores. Multiple regression was performed to investigate predictors of positive orientation and attitudes towards nursing.

**Results:** Students in this study sample (n = 1244) strongly agreed with statements related to caring, nursing expertise, professional nursing knowledge and the application of this knowledge. Predictors of positive orientation and attitudes towards nursing include having nursing/caring experience, indicating nursing as the first choice for study, preliminary vocational training, and a desire to make a career in nursing.

**Conclusions:** Data from this survey suggest a link between personal and environmental characteristics and motivations to select nursing as a career. Understanding which factors predict positive orientation and attitudes towards nursing could offer educators a tool in the recruitment and selection assessment of new students.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Perceptions of Nursing and Career Choice

There are several reasons why students choose nursing as a career, such as a desire to care for and work with sick people (Cook et al., 2003; Jirwe and Rudman, 2012), past healthcare work experience (Beck, 2000; Larsen et al., 2003), the expected career opportunities and the wide variety of available work the profession has to offer (Mooney et al., 2008; Vanhanen et al., 1999). The literature shows

that the desire to care for others is one of the main motives for students to choose nursing as a career (Mooney et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2015). Nursing is regarded as a profession in which the values of caring and helping others are central and the focus of all nursing activities (Day et al., 2005; O'Brien et al., 2008). Students choose nursing because they value a career involving altruism, intellectual challenges, goal attainment, and job security (Miers et al., 2007; Rhodes et al., 2011; Sand-Jecklin and Schaffer, 2006). The study by Phillips et al. (2015) revealed that student nurses at the beginning of their training are enthusiastic about the caring aspect of the profession and that they really aim to make a difference to people's lives.

Personal and environmental characteristics are closely linked to motivations of students to choose nursing and to complete their programme. It seems that nursing students begin their training with a fairly well-formed sense of their future profession, but past research

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also shows that there is a noticeable gap between expectations and the reality of the clinical learning environment (Magnussen and Amundson, 2003; Papathanasiou et al., 2014). Unrealistic expectations of nursing programmes can lead to dissatisfaction and voluntary withdrawal (Brodie et al., 2004; O'Donnell, 2011). As dropout rates of nursing students is a worldwide problem, it is of main importance to further investigate their orientation and attitudes and potential predictors of a positive outcome.

### 1.2. Factors Influencing Students' Orientation and Attitudes Towards Nursing

Despite the fact that the image of nursing is undergoing change, many stereotypes still remain which are influenced by a number of factors including society and the media (Bolan and Grainger, 2009; Mooney et al., 2008). Nursing is regarded as a profession undervalued by society, and which lacks academic training and intellectual depth (Brodie et al., 2004; O'Brien et al., 2008). It is not inconceivable that these images mark student perceptions of the nursing profession. Previous studies show that nursing students begin their programme with preconceived ideas and misconceptions about nursing and nurses (Brodie et al., 2004; Day et al., 2005; Happell, 1999). These perceptions can differ by gender, preliminary training and healthcare work experience. The studies of Cowin and Johnson (2011) and Miers et al. (2007), for example, showed significant differences in perceptions according to mode of entry and healthcare experience. Students with healthcare work experience were notably less focused on nurses being compassionate and more on aspects of the professional role of nurses. Other characteristics can also influence students' perceptions of nursing (Bolan and Grainger, 2009; Safadi et al., 2011; Vanhanen-Nuutinen et al., 2012). The study by Safadi et al. (2011) showed that students who said that nursing was their first choice demonstrated more positive perceptions of nursing.

With regard to education, the Netherlands underwent a radical change in healthcare education when the curriculum was reformed at the national level. Until 1971 the system of professional training of nurses had been based on the apprenticeship model; since then, nursing programmes have been linked to higher education institutions. In 2002 the Bologna agreement was concluded and the Bachelor's–Master's structure in higher education, including higher vocational education, was introduced. Professional values, nursing roles, nursing practice and clinical decision-making are some of the competence categories which comply with the Bologna agreement (Salminen et al., 2010). It is imperative therefore, that the perceptions of Dutch nursing students towards these concepts are verified.

## 2. Objectives

The aim of this study was twofold:

- 1) to examine what nursing students' orientation and attitudes towards nursing are at the beginning of their education
- 2) to explore which characteristics are the strongest predictors of positive orientation and attitudes towards nursing

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Study Design and Sample

A cross-sectional survey design was used. Questionnaires were administered to all first-year students enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing programme at four nursing universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands ( $n = 1414$ ).

### 3.2. Instruments

The Nursing Orientation Tool (Vanhanen et al., 1999) and the Nursing Attitude Questionnaire (Toth et al., 1998) were used. A forwards–backwards translation process was performed for both instruments to ensure content and semantic equivalence and applicability to the Dutch cultural context. The translator for the blind reverse translation was not involved in the project.

### 3.3. The Nursing Orientation Tool (NOT)

The Nursing Orientation Tool (Vanhanen et al., 1999) is a widely-used self-report instrument and consists of seventeen items using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument measures students' orientation to nursing using three subscales: caring, nursing expertise and life orientation. The caring orientation is based on 'students' meaningful caring and nursing experiences either in their families or in working life. The nursing expertise orientation is based on 'professional nursing experience'. The life orientation is based on 'the need to keep a balance between family life and studies' (Vanhanen and Janhonen, 2000b, p. 655). The validity and reliability of the tool were tested in previous studies (Janhonen et al., 2000; Vanhanen and Janhonen, 2000a).

### 3.4. The Nursing Attitude Questionnaire (NAQ)

This instrument was developed by Toth et al. (1998) and is one of the earliest tools measuring attitudes towards nursing. Attitude towards nursing was defined theoretically 'as the view that persons hold regarding the roles, values, and professional activities of nurses, and the responsibilities nurses have towards society' (Toth et al., 1998). The NAQ consists of a thirty-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the NAQ was tested in previous studies (Bolan and Grainger, 2009; Grainger and Bolan, 2006; Toth et al., 1998). However, these studies used the scores across the entire NAQ to compare demographics or interventions, not content areas. No factor analysis was performed to test its construct validity. It is not clear which items contribute to which factor or dimension of the 'attitude towards nursing' concept. To reduce the NAQ items to a smaller number of coherent subscales, we submitted the questionnaire to closer inspection.

### 3.5. Item Reduction and Factorial Testing of the NAQ

A team of four researchers reviewed the NAQ items to verify that their wording reflected the concept measured: attitude towards nursing. The specific meaning of each item was examined to establish face validity. Twelve items were removed based on open discussions of the intended meaning and group consensus, resulting in eighteen items for inclusion for further analysis. Two core concepts were clearly differentiated: Nursing Agency and Advocacy & Empathy. Nursing Agency can be regarded as the link between nursing science and nursing practice (Orem, 2001). Orem made the point that 'nurses must not only master such knowledge, that is, make the knowing their own, but also master its application in practice situation' (Orem, 2001, p. 16). Advocacy & Empathy refers to the extent that nurses speak out and speak for patients, and act on the unmet needs of patients (Hanks, 2008; O'Connor and Kelly, 2005).

To test the factorial structure of the reduced NAQ, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed first. The results of the EFA revealed two measurable factors in the reduced NAQ. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then conducted. The goodness-of-fit of the two factor solution was evaluated in the CFA using multiple criteria: chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), chi-square/degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df$ ) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The following goodness-of-fit indices were obtained for the two-factor model (with criteria for good fit in brackets):  $\chi^2/df = 3.69$  (2.0–5.0), CFI = 0.90 (>0.90), RMSEA =

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