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## Original Article

# Measurement of professional identity in Chinese nursing students

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Chinese nurses continue to display low professional identity. It is becoming an emergent issue in China how to help nurse students develop their positive professional identity. This paper is to develop the Professional Identity Scale for Nursing Students (PISNS).

**Methods:** Literature review, and interviews with students and experts were adopted to develop initial item. Reliability and validity of the scale were respectively examined by computing internal consistency coefficient alpha and split-half Spearman Brown for equal length, and Exploratory Principle Component Factor Analysis.

**Results:** Five factors with 17-item were obtained explaining 58.9% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha, and split-half reliability was 0.83 and 0.84 respectively.

**Conclusions:** Given its high reliability and validity, PISNS could be used as a measurement tool for educators to evaluate the developing level of professional identity in nursing students and assess the effectiveness of corresponding interventions and strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Professional identity is the professional self or self-concept of nursing that represents how nurses or nurse students

perceive the nursing profession [1–3] or the values and beliefs that guide how nurses or nurse students think, act and interact with patients [1]. It is the most important process of professional socialization, which as a significant topic of personal development, is the process of the internalization of

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professional values, norms and ethical requirements into the students behavior and self-concept [4].

Nursing professional identity in China has different meaning and emphasis due to history of nursing higher education, the influence of cultural and economic condition. The first baccalaureate nursing program in China was developed at Peking Union Medical College in 1920 [5]. The higher nursing education program was closed in 1951, keeping only the secondary training program. Nursing education was totally stopped during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1975) [5]. Higher nursing education was reestablished in 1984 [5]. At present, there are secondary diploma, associate degrees, baccalaureate and master's degree, and doctoral programs in Chinese nursing educational system. There are two types of baccalaureate nursing program, 4-year and 5-year curriculum. There were 2.18 million registered nurses by May 2010 [6,7], who were supposed to have secondary diploma or above and to have gotten RN license after they had passed the qualification test for RN. The scale of nursing education expanded fast, the total recruitment was 391,000 in 2007. Among them, 6.68% was for baccalaureate programs, whose number is increasing significantly [8]. By 2010, enrollment of nursing students will increase at the level of baccalaureate degree or above by 20% [9]. It was showed in phenomena observation and literature that Chinese nursing students was confronting crisis of professional identity [10–13], becoming the most significant reason of their future turnover [9–11,13]. It was counted that 1/3 of nurses with baccalaureate degree leave their posts or immigration to developed countries for seeking adequate pay and good working condition in recent 10 years [14], due to their low social and economic status, poor self-achievement in China [9,14], Which was a big loss for Chinese government and strengthen nurse shortage of China [9]. It was showed that early conceptualization of professional identity may contribute to student's future success and the future quality of nursing [13,15]. Therefore, studying professional identity was becoming a significant and emergent issue for nursing educators in China.

Literature review showed that most of articles focused on the analysis of the concept and dimensions of professional identity [1,2,4,16–18]. Some articles emphasized on exploration of its development process [17,19,20]. Self-developed instrument was used to identify the difference in the process of establishing the professional identity between nursing students and nurses [20]. Some studies focused on measurement of related concept such as professional self-concept, professional attitude and professional values [21–23]. Only two studies addressed the measurement of professional identity. One was doctorate dissertation focusing on the professional stage in English database [24], another focused on the state of the professional identity of nurse in Chinese database [25]. No mature instrument was designed for measuring the professional identity of nurse students. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to develop the Professional Identity Scale for Nursing Students (PISNS) based on the Chinese nursing condition to provide a tool for evaluating the development level of professional socialization in nursing students, which will benefit the educators to help them immediately and efficiently.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. The dimensions formation of PISNS

The dimensions formation of PISNS was based on literature review and interview with students, combining the history and current condition of Chinese nursing education and cultural factors. Three themes were formed in accordance to the view of Ohlen. Ohlen theoretically analyzed the concept and frameworks of professional identity following a modification of the hybrid model for concept development combined with empirical data gathered from semi-structured interviews [2]. Three dimensions were found including personal, interpersonal and socio-historical dimension, which were supported by literature and empirical data [2].

#### 2.1.1. Dimension one: professional self-image as the core of professional identity (personal dimension)

How nurses or nurse students perceive nursing profession was regards as a significant source of problems relating to professional identity [1–3]. Self-confidence nurses can clearly evaluate the benefit of professional retention and the risk of turnover, and believe in themselves and their career, which was presumed to develop further personal and professional empowerment [26]. Nurse interview also showed that self-knowledge; trust in one's capacity and feeling were the personal attributes of a nurse with well-developed professional identity [2]. A positive self-image is a reflection of the professional identity, and is regards as a prerequisite for nurse to achieve in work field [2]. Therefore, positive professional self-image is a key of for nurse students to develop their professional identity.

Studies showed that Chinese nurses still suffered from low professional identity, low self-esteem and poor self-image, predominately due to lack of public respect [10,11,27–29] and opportunity of professional development [10,28,29]. Interview with students also showed the same results. Many students hope to continue her education of master degree aiming to quickly move into management or education position instead of clinical work because of above reasons [9,15].

#### 2.1.2. Dimension two: the autonomy of career choice and career persistence (social and historical aspect)

There are some social-historical factors influencing the autonomy of career choice and persistence of nursing students.

The content of autonomy of career choice is different in college students between western and eastern cultural background. Western education pays more attention to foster the ability of autonomy and independence [30]. Students contact society early, think of career planning early and incline to make choice by their own will. But eastern education attaches importance to obedience and modesty. Students have less opportunity to experience in real society due to the over-protection from parents. The decisions to choose nursing as a major are usually made by their parents [30], or influenced by other people [15]. Some students even study nursing as a major due to being transferred from other majors [15]. This situation leaves hints for the future professional persistence

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