



## Student nurses' motivation to choose gerontological nursing as a career in China: A survey study



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### SUMMARY

*Background:* The world's population is aging, and the need for nurses is increasing. Working with older adults, however, has always been an unpopular career choice among student nurses. It is important to understand student nurses' motivation for choosing gerontological nursing as a career.

*Objectives:* The purpose of this study was to examine the motivation for choosing gerontological nursing as a career and to identify the associated factors among student nurses.

*Design:* Cross-sectional survey.

*Settings and Participants:* Participants were last-semester student nurses from 7 universities offering nursing undergraduate programs in Shandong, China. Of the 1290 student nurses, 916 completed the survey (a response rate of 71.0%).

*Methods:* The outcome variable was the motivation to choose gerontological nursing as a career. This was measured using a motivation questionnaire that included expectancy and value subscales. Other instruments included the Chinese version of the Facts on Aging Quiz I, the Geriatrics Attitudes Scale, the Anxiety about Aging Scale, a clinical practice environment questionnaire and a self-administered general information questionnaire.

*Results:* Student nurses' expectancy and value aspects of motivation for choosing gerontological nursing as a career were both at a moderate level; the highest value they held was of personal interest. Clinical practice environment, anxiety about aging and the attitudes about geriatrics were the main factors influencing student nurses' motivation to choose gerontological nursing as a career in China.

*Conclusions:* It is imperative for nurse educators to improve the gerontological nursing clinical practice environment for student nurses. Moreover, cultivating student nurses' positive attitudes about geriatrics and relieving anxiety about aging could be beneficial.

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### Introduction

Concerns over an aging population are becoming more and more serious globally, especially in China. The population of those aged 65 or over has increased from 4.7% in 1980 to 8.2% in 2010 and is predicted to reach 23.3% by 2050 in China, mainly due to the one-child policy and the marked improvement in life expectancy (Desa, 2009). Caring for older adults has for a long time been regarded as the responsibility of family members in China based on the respect of children for their parents (Li and Buechel, 2007). With the emergence of an increasing number of nuclear families, family supported elder care is becoming a

heavier burden. Meanwhile, the utilization of nursing home care has gained acceptance in the community as more and more older adults recognize its advantages (Wu et al., 2012). However, gerontological nursing, as provided by communities and nursing homes, is underdeveloped in China (Hao et al., 2012; Wan et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2009). Despite the increasing demand for a large number of competent nurses for gerontological nursing, most of the student nurses express a dislike of gerontological nursing (Henderson et al., 2008; McCann et al., 2010). Work motivation is commonly understood as the reason why workers behave as they do in terms of achieving personal and organizational goals. Motivation is not directly observable but has been identified as a critical factor in the retention and performance of health workers (Kivimaki et al., 1995; Mbindyo et al., 2009; Tzeng, 2002). Because student nurses are the main source of future gerontological nursing providers, understanding their career motivations is vital. There is, however, a lack of studies on student nurses' motivations for choosing gerontological nursing as a career (hereafter abbreviated 'MGNC').

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## Literature

Substantial evidence has shown that gerontological nursing is described as boring, undemanding and depressing and thus is not a popular career option among student nurses (Happell, 1999; Henderson et al., 2008; Kloster et al., 2007; McCann et al., 2010; Stevens, 2011). Work motivation can affect one's future professional development and job satisfaction. Student nurses' prosocial motivation has been shown to be related to their commitment to their career (Li et al., 2014; Nesje, 2015). We speculate that the higher MGNC student nurses hold, the more likely they will engage in gerontological nursing. Previous studies found that extrinsic rewards, such as job security, good income, government employment and personal development, as well as intrinsic factors, such as a desire to help others, caring and altruism, are the motives for choosing nursing as a career (French et al., 1994; Halperin and Mashiach-Eizenberg, 2014; Hollup, 2012; Kloster et al., 2007). However, to our knowledge, there are few studies on MGNC and its associated factors.

Expectancy-value theory indicates one's motivation to complete various tasks depends on his hope for success and the value of the task. Expectancy is represented by the self-concept of ability and self-efficacy (Eccles and Wigfield, 1995). Value subsumes interest, utility, attainment value and cost. Numerous studies have shown that altruism, one of the values related to nursing, is one of the most important reasons that student nurses choose to become a nurse and is the foundation of nurses' willingness to choose nursing as a career (Haigh, 2010; Halperin and Mashiach-Eizenberg, 2014; Miers et al., 2007; Sellman, 2011). The MGNC questionnaire used in the current study was based on expectancy-value theory.

The more positive students' attitudes toward older adults were, the more interested they were in providing services for older adults (Kaempfer et al., 2002). Negative attitudes toward older adults negatively affect the quality of service (Hanson, 2014). Student nurses' attitudes toward older adults may also affect their view of gerontological nursing and their career goals. Ageist attitudes and prejudices against older adults were identified as barriers preventing students from choosing gerontological nursing (Shen and Xiao, 2012; Xiao et al., 2013).

Work preferences were found to be strongly associated with student nurses' scores on knowledge about aging (Lee et al., 2006). The level of aging knowledge was a significant predictor of nurses' attitudes toward older adults. This finding is extremely important as it empirically validates the effect of knowledge exerts on nurses' attitudes (Topaz and Doron, 2013; Wallace et al., 2006). In addition, a positive attitude toward older adults correlated with a higher aging knowledge, indicating the importance of attitude in learning and knowledge (Mellor et al., 2007). Therefore, attitude and knowledge were influenced by each other. A lack of aging knowledge can lead to students' misunderstanding of older adults and negative emotions toward older adults and elderly care, thus affecting their desire to take care of older adults (Stahl and Metzger, 2013; Wang et al., 2010).

Anxiety about aging has been defined as the concern and anticipation of adverse physical, mental, and personal losses during the aging process (Lasher and Faulkender, 1993). A growing body of research has linked anxiety about aging with ageism (Allan and Johnson, 2008; Boswell, 2012; Harris and Dollinger, 2003). Nurses' adverse attitudes toward self-aging were significantly associated with misconceptions about aging and stereotyping of older adults (Getting et al., 2002). Less aging anxiety was correlated with a higher likelihood of working with older adults (Eshbaugh et al., 2010). According to the Knowledge-Attitude-Belief-Practice (KABP) model, we speculate that student nurses' aging anxiety may affect their MGNC through their attitudes toward older adults.

The clinical experiences of student nurses can shape their future attitudes and can potentially impact their future work decisions (Abbey et al., 2006; Henderson et al., 2008). If student nurses

experienced an 'enriched' practice environment, they are far more likely to develop a favorable view of gerontological nursing (Brown et al., 2008). Exposure to impoverished practice environments which were characterized by very poor standards of care for older people often made working with older adults an unattractive career option for students (Nolan et al., 2002). Nolan believed that a senses framework can be used to evaluate the gerontological nursing clinical practice environment based on six aspects: security, belonging, continuity, purpose, achievement and significance (Nolan et al., 2004). The gerontological nursing clinical practice environment questionnaire used in the current study was based on this framework.

Given the above evidence, we assume that student nurses' attitudes toward older adults and gerontological nursing, aging knowledge, anxiety about aging and the clinical practice environment may directly or indirectly affect their MGNC. An investigation of student nurses' MGNC and the associated factors may provide important information for nursing educators.

## Methods

### *Design, Sample and Setting*

The aim of this study was to examine student nurses' MGNC and the associated factors. A cross-sectional survey was utilized. A convenience sample of student nurses in the last semester of their studies at 7 universities in Shandong, China participated in this study. In China, almost all nurses graduated with an initial undergraduate degree or college degree. During the first three to four years of an undergraduate degree program, student nurses undertake a specific course on Gerontological Nursing. In their final year, they were required to practice 8 to 12 months in mainly hospital-based clinical settings, where they worked with older adults in geriatric units and other units. Student nurses were suitable for this study because they had all experienced almost one year of clinical practice and they were about to graduate and become registered nurses. The data were collected between June and July of 2013. The researchers distributed and collected the questionnaires in lecture theaters prior to the commencement of the graduating class meeting. Among 1290 students, 916 completed the survey, representing a response rate of 71.0%.

### *Measurement Instruments*

The motivation questionnaire based on the expectancy-value theory was used to measure student nurses' MGNC. The expectancy and value subscales contain 6 and 14 items, respectively. Each item is rated by student nurses on a scale of 1–5. Higher scores indicate student nurses possess higher expectancy and value in gerontological nursing (Cheng et al., 2014a).

The Chinese version of the Facts on Aging Quiz I (FAQI) was used to assess student nurses' knowledge about older adults. It is composed of 25 questions with possible answers of "true", "false" or "don't know". The assessment is scored as follows: starting with a score of 25, 0.5 is subtracted for each incorrect answer. "Don't know" responses are assigned zero points. The total score can range from 0 to 25, with higher scores reflecting greater knowledge about aging (Palmore, 1977; Wang et al., 2010).

The Chinese version of the Geriatrics Attitudes Scale (GAS) was used to assess student nurses' attitudes toward older adults and caring for older adults. Each item (14 items in total) of the GAS is rated by student nurses on a scale of 1–5. A higher average score indicates more positive attitudes toward older adults and gerontological nursing (Reuben et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2009b).

The gerontological nursing clinical practice environment questionnaire based on Nolan's senses framework was used to evaluate student nurses' gerontological nursing clinical practice environment. Each item (20 items in total) is rated by student nurses on a scale of 1–5. The

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