



Why is psychiatric nursing not the preferred option for nursing students: A cross-sectional study examining pre-nursing and nursing school factors



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ABSTRACT

Background: There is a shortage of nurses working in the mental health field globally. The aim of the present study was to examine Singapore nursing students' attitudes towards specializing in psychiatric nursing by examining the pre-nursing and nursing school factors as well as attitudes towards psychiatry and personality traits.

Methods: A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with 500 nursing students from four nursing institutions in Singapore. Students' attitudes towards psychiatry (ATP-18), perception of psychiatric nursing career aspects relative to other fields, and personality traits (mini-IPIP) were assessed. The main outcome measure was likelihood of specializing in psychiatric nursing. Logistic regression was used to examine the combined effect of factors upon the outcome.

Results: Twenty-six students (5.2%) rated "definitely decided to do" psychiatric nursing. Pre-nursing school factors associated with choosing psychiatry included ethnicity, current education, parents' wishes, having personal/family experience of mental illness, prior work experience, interest in psychiatric nursing and psychology module taken prior to current school admission. Nursing school factors such as teaching methods and clinical exposure were not associated with choosing psychiatric nursing. Positive attitudes towards psychiatry, perception of better career aspects in psychiatric nursing relative to other fields, and the personality traits of extraversion and intellect/imagination were associated with likelihood of choosing psychiatric nursing. Logistic regression revealed Malay (OR: 1.90, 1.14–3.16, $p = 0.013$) and Indian ethnicity (OR: 2.56, 1.32–4.96, $p = 0.005$), interest in psychiatry (OR: 22.56, 8.22–61.92, $p < 0.001$), psychology module prior to current school admission (OR: 2.31, 1.28–4.17, $p = 0.005$), better perceived job prospects in psychiatric nursing than other fields (OR: 1.91, 1.21–3.04, $p = 0.006$), extraversion (OR: 1.09, 1.02–1.17, $p = 0.012$) and positive attitude towards psychiatry (OR: 2.72, 1.75–4.23, $p < 0.001$) as factors associated with students choosing psychiatric nursing.

Conclusions: The selection of psychiatry as a specialty by nursing students was affected by pre-nursing school factors. Taking these factors into consideration may improve recruitment and alleviate the shortages in the psychiatric nursing field.

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1. Introduction

Psychiatric or mental health nursing is concerned with the prevention, treatment and nursing care of people of all ages who are suffering from mental illness and its effects. Over the years, there has been a shortage of nurses choosing to specialize or work in mental health settings (Browne et al., 2013; De Kock and Pillay, 2016; Olfson, 2016). Moreover, past studies have examined attitudes of nursing students

towards psychiatric nursing and found that the majority of nursing students were not interested to specialize or work in mental health settings (Muldoon and Reilly, 2003; Surgenor et al., 2005). In a recent systematic review conducted by Happell and Gaskin (2013), mental health was rated as one of the least preferred areas of nursing for a potential career. Other studies also showed that psychiatric nursing had been ranked by students as one of the least preferred career options (DeKeyser Ganz and Kahana, 2006; Stevens et al., 2013). Various reasons such as negative attitudes towards people with mental illness (Happell, 1999), negative experiences specific to the course or the type of work (Stevens and Dulhunty, 1997), and lack of exposure to someone with mental health disorder (Surgenor et al., 2005) were associated with negative attitudes

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or lack of interest in pursuing psychiatric nursing as a career or specialty.

A number of studies have examined the different factors associated with nursing students' choice of selecting psychiatric nursing as a specialty (Happell, 2008b; Hunter et al., 2015; Thongpriwan et al., 2015). In a recent study conducted by Thongpriwan et al. (2015) among junior and senior nursing students, students with no experience in theoretical or clinical setting held greater negative stereotypes of persons with mental illness and expressed more anxiety about mental illness. Interestingly in the same study, students with prior mental health experience were more interested in a future career in mental health nursing than those who did not. More favourable attitudes towards psychiatric nursing were found when undergraduate nursing students received more hours of theoretical preparation and undertook longer clinical placement (Happell, 2008b). Increasing amount of time in clinical setting, adding psychology-specific content particularly the importance of psychiatric mental health nursing and effects of stigma to the curriculum were associated with recruiting and retaining psychiatric mental health nurses (Hunter et al., 2015).

According to the Singapore Nursing Board Annual Report 2015, there were a total of 639 nurses who were registered as Registered Nurses – Psychiatric (RNP). A total of 20 RNPs were registered as RNPs only with the remaining 619 RNPs concurrently registered on at least one other register. Of the 639 nurses, 573 were currently working (553 full-time, 20 part-time) and 495 were in the public sector. In Singapore, there were a total of 21 formal nursing programmes accredited in 2015 and as of December 2015, 59 clinical facilities which include public and private hospitals and long-term care nursing homes etc. were accredited for clinical nursing education (Singapore Nursing Board, 2015).

There is limited literature reporting on the attitudes of nursing students towards psychiatry and their reasons for choosing psychiatric nursing as a career in Asian countries especially in Singapore. As efforts are being made by the policy makers to attract students and nurses to work in the mental health field, it is important to examine the attitudes and factors that are associated with students' choice of selecting psychiatric nursing as a future career choice. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the pre-nursing and nursing school factors as well as attitudes towards psychiatry, perception of psychiatric nursing career aspects relative to other fields, and personality traits that are associated with the likelihood of choosing psychiatric nursing as a specialty choice.

2. Methods

2.1. Design and Sample

This cross-sectional study used an online web survey to collect data on Singapore nursing students' likelihood of choosing psychiatric nursing as a specialty and examined their attitudes towards persons with mental illness. The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee (National Healthcare Group's Domain Specific Review Board, Singapore). The target population included all nursing students who were enrolled in public nursing educational programmes in Singapore at the time of the study. Students who were Singapore residents (Singapore Citizens or Permanent Residents) were eligible to participate in the study. Approval was sought from every institution. A representative from each institution sent an email broadcast to invite its students to participate in the study. Participants were required to go through an online informed consent before they could proceed to complete the survey.

2.2. Instruments

All instruments were administered in English language only. The instruments used in the present study comprised a self-report online

questionnaire which included questions on socio-demographic information.

2.3. Pre-nursing School Factors

To measure pre-nursing school factors, questions enquired about the sources of information which helped the students in the process of choosing their specialty preference (e.g. parents' wishes, portrayal of doctor/nurses in books, television and the media, prior work experience etc.), pre-nursing school qualifications (e.g. General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary (O)/Normal Academic (NA) or Normal Technical (NT)/Advanced levels (A) etc.), prior modules of study (e.g. Economics, Psychology, and Sociology, etc.), and their interest in psychiatric nursing prior to current school admission (refer to Appendix A for the full list of modules studied in previous school).

2.4. Nursing School Factors

Students were asked to answer “Yes” or “No” for teaching methods and enrichment activities such as whether they had attended any type of psychiatry or mental health related activities. These include curriculum-based modules, psychiatry electives, optional courses/modules/electives, e-learning modules, etc. (refer to Appendix B for the full list of teaching and enrichment activities).

Subjects studied at current nursing school were queried and students were given the option of the following subjects: Behavioural Sciences, Philosophy, Psychology, Ethics, Communication skills, Sociology, Neuroscience, and other psychiatry and mental health related subjects. Other nursing school influences and clinical exposure factors included sources of information from school advisors or tutors and academics or lectures and self-reported highest level of responsibility for patient care during nursing school placement.

2.5. Other Factors

2.5.1. Attitudes Towards Psychiatry (ATP-18)

The scale consists of 18-items which were derived from verbatim comments by students in a pilot study conducted by Wilkinson et al. (1983) and is rated on a five-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Questions on attitudes towards psychiatry included e.g. “Psychiatrists are often merely failed physicians” and “Within medicine, psychiatry is one of the least important specialties” etc. Nine of the 18 items (2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17) which expressed positive views were reverse scored items (Wilkinson et al., 1983). The original ATP-30 had good internal consistency in other studies ranging from 0.77 to 0.87 (Parikh et al., 2014; Reddy et al., 2005) however, no Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for ATP-18 (Wilkinson et al., 1983). ATP-18 had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.57 in the present study.

2.5.2. Perception of Psychiatric Nursing Career Aspects Relative to Other Fields

Perception of psychiatric nursing career aspects relative to other fields was measured using 12 individual factors namely academic opportunities, research opportunities, work-life balance, perception of competency, job satisfaction etc. Participants were asked to rate each criteria based on whether they considered psychiatric nursing to be “better”, “worse”, or “similar/unsure” relative to other fields.

2.5.3. Personality Traits

Personality traits were measured using the Mini-International Personality Item Pool (mini-IPIP), a five-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate) (Donnellan et al., 2006). This model includes the following 5 traits i.e. Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Intellect/Imagination. This model consists of 20 items which is the short version of the

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