

Nursing Students' Experiences of Professional Perceptions in A Multicultural Context: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Nursing's professional perception refers to beliefs about nurses and the nursing profession, encompassing traditional, societal, and professional impressions. **Objective:** This study was designed to determine nursing students' experiences about transcultural nursing and professional perceptions in a multicultural context. **Methods:** The "Phenomenological (qualitative)" design grounded in Husserl's philosophy, as operationalized through Giorgi's analytical method was used in the study. This study is a qualitative study and data were collected from two state universities in different countries. **Results:** Sixteen nursing intern students participated in the study. When the research data were analyzed, six main themes were identified: desire to help, satisfaction and motivation, difficulties in cultural care, economic and social problems, communication factors and career. **Conclusion:** Nursing students stated that they chose their profession with the desire to help people, but emphasized that professional satisfaction and motivation were important, while economic and social problems were important sources of concern. Especially in a country, it has been determined that the increasing migration in recent years has increased cultural differences therefore communication difficulties have been experienced. Students' participation in international exchange programs during their education will increase their knowledge and self-confidence.

Key words: Nursing student, Professional Perceptions, Culture, Qualitative Study.

Introduction

Nurses' role in a multicultural society extends beyond disease prevention and treatment to understanding and embracing cultural diversity [1,2]. In nursing education and practice, professional perception and intercultural sensitivity are as important as scientific knowledge [3]. Perception by itself is merely defined as an idea, belief, or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something [4]. Professional perception is shaped by both societal attitudes and individual feelings toward the profession [3]. The perception of nursing may vary depending on age, educational level, and social and professional experience [4]. Positive perceptions among nursing students enhance self-confidence, professional identity, and clinical performance [3]. Research highlights that factors influencing perceptions of nursing and career choice [5–7]. Students who enter nursing without adequate understanding of the profession may experience reduced motivation and appreciation for their role [2]. Motivation is a complex construct with multiple components. It is the result of a set of processes of activation and orientation of behaviour and action. Attitudes and motivations are shown to directly affect patient care quality and the efficiency of healthcare delivery [1,8–12]. Recent findings suggest that economic and social factors, along with a growing interest in international career opportunities, significantly influence students' aspirations [13]. Motivations for working abroad include achieving higher social status, international experience, and improved living standards [14]. Consequently, the willingness of nurses to seek opportunities abroad may enhance their capacity to address global health issues [15].

In contemporary healthcare, nurses operate within increasingly multicultural environments that require not only clinical competence but also intercultural awareness and sensitivity [16–18]. Culture shapes individuals from birth and influences their beliefs, traditions, lifestyles, and health-related needs throughout life. In today's globalized and migratory context, nurses increasingly encounter patients from diverse cultural backgrounds [17,19]. Beyond treating illness, nurses play an essential role in bridging cultural differences to deliver equitable and person-centered care [18,20,21]. Therefore, cultural awareness and sensitivity are critical components in providing high-quality, equitable nursing care. For nursing students, developing multicultural competencies during their education is essential, as it equips them with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to deliver culturally congruent care in real-world clinical settings [16,19]. Leininger describes transcultural nursing as a branch of nursing grounded in the comparative study and analysis of different cultures, aiming to provide cultural universality and specificity in nursing care [22]. To enhance the quality of cultural care, nurses consider various factors such as beliefs, gender, religion, language, and other cultural and socioeconomic elements in their practices [19,23,24]. Language barriers, often a major challenge in intercultural healthcare, can be mitigated through nurses' communication competencies, which are vital for accurate information exchange and patient

satisfaction [13,15,18,24]. Research indicates that cultural sensitivity among nurses reduces misunderstandings related to language, religion, and gender [15,25,26]. Furthermore, nursing students with exposure to different cultures or foreign language skills demonstrate higher levels of intercultural sensitivity that is accepting the existence of cultural differences and similarities between individuals without attributing a value to them. In multicultural settings, the ability to provide culturally congruent care requires students to reflect on their own values and assumptions while developing openness toward diverse patient perspectives. These experiences directly shape how nursing students perceive their professional responsibilities and self-concept as future nurses [27–29]. Also, cultural competence that is developing an awareness of one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, and environment without letting it have an undue influence on those from other backgrounds; demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the client's culture; accepting and respecting cultural differences, and adapting care to be congruent with the client's culture is an essential component of nursing care [21,30,31]. Nursing education must cultivate both professional perception that the way individuals understand, value, and internalize their professional roles and transcultural competence, which enables effective practice across cultural boundaries. There remains a need to enhance cultural competence and sensitivity among both nurses and students, highlighting the importance of integrating cultural education into nursing curricula prior to graduation [16,20,22,27–29].

Although the literature has examined professional identity and cultural competence separately, there remains a lack of integrative qualitative research exploring how professional perception is formed and transformed through transcultural experiences. Most existing studies focus narrowly on competence training rather than on students' lived experiences and how these influence career intentions [1,7,10,12,16,17,31,32]. This study addresses that gap by adopting a phenomenological lens to explore nursing students' lived experiences in multicultural contexts, drawing on data from Turkey and Portugal. The aim of this qualitative study is to explore how nursing students construct and interpret their professional perceptions within multicultural clinical and educational environments.

Research Questions:

1. How do nursing students perceive and make sense of their professional roles within multicultural settings?
2. What meanings do they assign to their transcultural nursing experiences, and how do these shape their professional perception?

Methods

Research Design

The "Phenomenological (qualitative)" design grounded in Husserl's philosophy, as operationalized through Giorgi's analytical method was used in the study [33]. According to the phenomenological approach, understanding individuals' unique perceptions and experiences is essential for analysing their behaviours. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence and meaning of lived experiences as described by individuals themselves. According to Husserlian phenomenology, the aim of research is to describe the essence of lived experiences as they appear to consciousness. Giorgi's method emphasizes the systematic description of participants' experiences rather than their interpretation, enabling the researcher to reveal the invariant structure of a phenomenon as lived by individuals. The phenomenon investigated was defined as the formation of professional perception within multicultural contexts. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because it allows for a deep exploration of how students experience and give meaning to their professional roles and transcultural interactions in real-life settings [33,34].

Population and Sample of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted between December 2022 and July 2023 with nursing intern students from two public universities in Turkey and in Portugal from Europe. The sampling group for the research was determined based on criterion sampling of purposive sampling techniques. Inclusion criteria of sampling were being final-year nursing students, aged 18 years or older, enrolled at one of the two participating public universities (one in Turkey and one in Portugal from Europe), speaking English well, willing to participate, provide informed consent and who declined interpreter support were not included. Twenty students initially consented; four withdrew prior to interviewing due to anticipated language-related communication difficulties. The final sample therefore included 16 participants—10 from Turkey and 6 from Europe. The number of participants increased until the data saturation defined as the point where no new codes emerged. In qualitative research, the number of individuals to be interviewed regarding the phenomenon under investigation varies; it is difficult

to include a large number of participants in the research because the data obtained must be detailed and in-depth. According to the literature, the sample size is determined based on the research question and objective. It is observed that studies are conducted with a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 20 participants, and interviews are terminated when the data begins to repeat itself [34]. Participants were informed about the use of voice recording, confidentiality of their identities, and their right to withdraw at any point, with informed consent obtained accordingly.

Data Collection Tools and Processes

Data for the study were collected using a Sociodemographic Characteristics Questionnaire and a Semi-Structured Interview Form were developed by the researchers based on the literature [3,10,12,16,22,30,35–38].

Sociodemographic Characteristics Questionnaire: This form includes five questions about the students' age, gender, place of residence, and prior experience abroad, among other demographic details.

Semi-Structured Interview Form: This form was developed by researchers to investigate the professional perceptions and intercultural sensitivities of nursing intern students from diverse backgrounds. The semi-structured information form had ten (Could you explain the reasons why you chose the nursing profession and about describing profession's characteristics, job satisfaction and motivation, the societal status, challenges, career planning. Intercultural nursing meaning, feelings and thoughts about providing care to people, experiencing while communicating with people and providing care from different cultures, effects of cultural differences of caregiving experiences) questions and probe questions. Opinions of two academicians who were experienced in qualitative research were gained to ensure the content validity of this form and the necessary corrections were made to the form. Additionally, a pilot study was done. Any changes were not made in the data collection tools. (Appendix I).

All the participants were informed about the research, and their consents were received. A face-to-face in-depth interview was conducted with each participant and the interviews were recorded. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher. The researchers are experts in their field who have received training in qualitative research. Additional notes were taken during the interviews. Questions like 'Do you mean this?' and 'Should I understand this from your words?' were asked to deepen the interviews in order to increase the research validity. Expert review and a pilot interview confirmed content validity. Interviews were conducted in English by the same researcher, each lasting 10–30 minutes (average: 12 min). Probing questions and field notes enhanced depth and contextual richness. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interview started with a "warm-up" question which asked participants to explain the reasons why they chose the nursing profession. Participants were given sufficient time to express their thoughts. Although questions were pre-designed, the format allowed for flexible, open-ended responses. During the interviews, data collection was concluded when the data reached saturation by repeating and no new codes emerged.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Giorgi's phenomenological analysis approach and content analysis were used as the method for analyzing the data. Giorgi's method is based on descriptive phenomenology and aims to reveal the essence of individuals' experiences [33]. Content analysis is a research tool used to analyze words or word clusters that place in texts [34]. The interviews were listened repeatedly to determine any nuances in intonation and the transcripts were read several times. The back-translation and cross-checking were conducted to ensure linguistic accuracy. Transcripts were reviewed by bilingual experts fluent in English, discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved. Significant words were highlighted and examined for patterns of themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotations for each theme. Data coding and analysis were performed independently by two researchers and agreed the emerging themes. Sharing the findings obtained in qualitative research with experts in the field and obtaining feedback from them is one of the strategies used to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. Another method is to provide a detailed description [34]. In our study, the quotes obtained from the participants are presented in the report in a complete manner that reflects the answers given. The data, which was converted into written documentation, was coded and classified according to themes. The peer debriefing, expert validation, thick description, and inter-coder consistency was calculated for reliability and determined to be 0.77. Interviews were notified by assigned numbers and participant names were not used.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval was granted by the Clinical Research Ethics Committee of Pamukkale University (E-60116787-020-295971). The study adhered to the general principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study.

Results

The ages of the students participating in the study ranged from 18 to 36, with an average age of 22. Fourteen of the participants were female, and two were male. It was observed that all students from the European university had been abroad for educational or travel purposes, whereas none of the students studying in Turkey had been abroad. The data obtained from the study revealed six main themes: the desire to help, satisfaction and motivation, economic and social issues, career, challenges in cultural care and communication factors.

Theme 1: Desire to Help

Nursing intern students expressed that a like for the profession, and a desire to help patients, the older people, and those in need were the primary reasons for choosing the nursing profession.

"I am a person who loves helping others and spending time with people" (3rd. SSUT)

"Whenever I saw people struggling to do things they couldn't do on their own, I wanted to take care of them" (1st SSUT)

"I have always had a deep love and kindness for patients, the older people." (6th SSUE)

"Helping people, caring for them" (2nd SSUE)

"I've always wanted people to live their lives without interruptions due to health issues, whether during their youth, childhood, or old age" (7th SSUT)

Theme 2: Satisfaction and Motivation

Nursing intern students shared that their sources of satisfaction and motivation were seeing patients complete their recovery process, receiving positive feedback from patients and their families, and working with supportive colleagues. They noted that these factors positively affected their work performance.

"Just a thank you from people or seeing them smile, hearing them say they feel better makes me so happy" (2nd SSUT)

"The gratitude I see in people's faces after helping them is my biggest source of motivation" (1st SSUT)

"I feel fulfilled when I see that patients are happy and healthy as a result of the care and treatments we provide..... this is my greatest source of motivation." (6th SSUE)

Theme 3: Economic and Social Issues

Nursing intern students explained that economic issues stemmed from unclear role definitions within the hospital, a heavy workload, and insufficient salaries as a result.

"The workload is way too much. Sometimes I feel like they view us as robots" (2nd SSUE)

"...the heavy workload leads nurses to handle numerous tasks simultaneously. The limited scope of their responsibilities and authorities on paper actually shows only a small portion of what they do." (4th SSUT)

"I believe the fundamental issue in nursing is the salary amount. We live with ridiculous salary inconsistencies that create a hierarchical atmosphere among healthcare workers." (1st SSUE)

"I think we are like 'joker' staff in hospitals because even for the smallest issues, they call the nurse" (5th SSUT)

Nursing intern students indicated that unfavorable working conditions, workplace mobbing, and authoritarian attitudes contributed to social difficulties in clinical settings, potentially leading to emotional disengagement and diminished professional commitment.

"The work environment is very challenging; it requires a good team.....we work hard and get tired" (5th SSUT)

"I think all nurses should work in peaceful and comfortable environments free from mobbing." (6th SSUE)

"If someone experiences mobbing or has difficulty establishing effective communication with colleagues, superiors, or staff, this can create a concentration problem." (7th SSUT)

Theme 4: Career

Nursing intern students expressed a positive view of working abroad due to higher salaries, better nursing rights, and the status of the profession in society. The majority of them expressed a desire to pursue postgraduate education abroad, although some students from Turkey mentioned economic concerns about this.

"Working abroad is much more appealing for a nurse due to higher salaries" (4th SSUE)

"Working in the profession abroad varies from person to person, but the economic benefits, different workload, advanced processes, and higher salaries abroad make it more attractive." (4th SSUT)

"Regarding international education, I believe it's essential to get to know a new culture and its healthcare perspectives." (1st SSUE)

Nursing intern students noted that the nursing profession is not sufficiently valued in society and is needed greater social awareness.

"When engineers build a machine, everyone respects them, but when we save a life...we're undervalued." (7th SSUT)

"During the pandemic, we saw the nursing profession gain a heroic status, but shortly after, this title faded" (1st SSUE)

"I think we are still poorly recognized; the public still sees us as women who clean up after patients, and it's really disturbing." (6th SSUE)

Theme 5: Challenges in Cultural Care

Nursing intern students mentioned experiencing challenges when providing care to patients from different cultures including issues related to gender, religious beliefs, and personal characteristics. Some students from Turkey have mentioned that, due to their sense of privacy, patients do not want to be cared for by a nurse of the opposite gender.

"The most notable cultural difference affecting the care experience involved a patient who deliberately withheld defecation because he didn't want a female nurse to care for him." (7th SSUT)

"Unwilling or tense patients make providing care more challenging." (1st SSUE)

"People who are shy or reluctant can make care difficult, as well as those who make no effort to communicate." (2nd SSUE)

"the patient was very tense and kept trying to cover up we realized the patient was uncomfortable, so we were careful to keep them covered and keep the perineal area concealed during care" (6th SSUT)

Theme 6: Communication Factors

Nursing intern students identified language and cultural differences as the main barriers to communication. They emphasized that nonverbal strategies—such as body language, gestures, and facial expressions—were essential in overcoming these obstacles and facilitating effective patient interaction.

"When communication became more complex, I used drawings and visuals. I used similar words, body language, and demonstrated with my hands to convey my message" (1st SSUE)

"I feared not understanding patients well enough or not explaining myself well due to not fully grasping the language." (2nd SSUE)

"The translation apps and body language we used helped ease communication." (3rd SSUE)

"I couldn't fully understand why a patient came to the hospital because of the language barrier, which negatively affected our interaction." (1st SSUT)

"There may be differences in belief or culture..... I also needed to respect them, as dietary preferences or religious dietary restrictions can be essential to some patients" (7th SSUT)

Discussion

This study explored how nursing students from Turkey and Portugal construct and interpret their professional perceptions within multicultural contexts. In our qualitative study, the six main themes: the desire to help, satisfaction and motivation, economic and social issues, career aspirations, challenges in cultural care, and communication factors were identified. These represent an interconnected structure describing the essence of developing professional perception through transcultural experiences. Findings show that transcultural encounters act as catalysts for shaping professional self-understanding. Exposure to culturally diverse patients encouraged reflection on empathy, ethics, and adaptability, highlighting that nursing professionalism encompasses cultural humility and relational sensitivity [16,22].

In our study, nursing intern students overwhelmingly cite altruistic and professional motivations for entering the field chiefly a desire to help patients (including the older people and other vulnerable groups), a genuine passion for nursing, and viewing it as an appealing career alternative. Although few studies single out geriatric care as a primary motivator, Mewshaw et al. (2017) report that students generally hold positive attitudes toward older people patients [5]. More broadly, the literature emphasizes helping others and personal preference as central drivers as well as social and community-oriented factors—such as direct patient communication and contributing to public health [7,10].

Nursing intern students reported that positive feedback from patients and their families, supportive co-workers, and a sense of accomplishment increased their professional satisfaction and motivation. While these findings are

broadly consistent with Messineo et al. (2019), who emphasized the role of personal achievement and social support in sustaining motivation among nursing students [12], our results contribute additional insights by highlighting contextual differences. Both groups linked job satisfaction to social support, fair compensation, and workplace respect, consistent with Savitsky et al. (2023) and Shin et al. (2023) [10,11]. Structural barriers and insufficient recognition diminished motivation, suggesting that professional perception is co-constructed between individual values and systemic conditions. In particular, participants in our study frequently linked their satisfaction and motivation not only to interpersonal support and patient outcomes but also to structural factors, such as institutional recognition and workplace hierarchy, which have received less attention in previous research. Studies have shown that professional satisfaction is influenced by elements such as personal achievement, personal growth, and contributions to patient care [1,9,10]. A majority of participants in our study stated that lack of motivation and satisfaction reduced their performance in hospitals. One of the most important elements of professional satisfaction is the social support and collaboration among healthcare professionals in the workplace [10]. Consistent with findings in other studies, nurses who receive social support from colleagues demonstrate higher job satisfaction and professional competence compared to those who do not [8].

Nursing intern students reported facing both economic and social challenges in the clinical environment. Economic difficulties were attributed to factors such as role conflict, ambiguity, excessive workloads, and insufficient salaries. The literature indicates that low compensation and increasing workload contribute to reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and professional disengagement [10,13,39]. Additionally, students from both universities highlighted that negative workplace dynamics—including mobbing, oppressive behaviors, and poor working conditions—adversely affect their motivation and the quality of care provided, potentially prompting withdrawal from the profession. While similarities were found across both groups, cultural contrasts were evident. Turkish students frequently cited hierarchical clinical structures, limited autonomy, and economic constraints, whereas European students emphasized self-direction and institutional support [6,13]. Research supports that role ambiguity impairs nurses' ability to perform clinical duties effectively, heightens stress, and undermines both professional satisfaction and success [40]. When coupled with burnout and trauma from workplace mistreatment, these factors threaten nurses' well-being and compromise patient safety and care quality [41,42]. Ultimately, economic insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and the devaluation of professional roles contribute to elevated nurse turnover rates [11,38,43].

Nursing intern students perceive working abroad positively, primarily due to better salaries, professional recognition, and improved nursing rights. Motivations also include pursuing postgraduate education and escaping local challenges such as gender discrimination and poor working conditions [13]. One of the study's notable findings is the difference in international experience between the two groups of students. While all students participating from the European university had previously been abroad for education or travel purposes, none of the students in Turkey had such experience. Students who had previously encountered different cultures demonstrated a higher level of cultural awareness and a desire to work abroad, while students without this experience reported concerns about language barriers and cultural differences. European students with prior international experience exhibited higher cultural confidence. Turkish students, meanwhile, associated professional perception with societal recognition and financial challenges, reflecting contextual influences on identity formation. Studying abroad provides nursing students with cultural competence while motivating them to explore international job opportunities [16]. However, studying abroad often involves high costs and challenges related to language proficiency [44]. Turkish students reported financial constraints as a major obstacle to studying abroad, often resulting in a more favorable view of domestic educational opportunities. Additionally, participants noted that the nursing profession lacks adequate social recognition, influencing their aspirations for international employment. Economic and social drivers—such as higher income, job security, and professional status—play a significant role in decisions to seek employment abroad [10,13]. Including international exchange opportunities or multicultural learning environments in nursing education programs is of great importance for students to develop their transcultural competence and gain a global perspective.

Nursing intern students reported difficulties in providing care to culturally diverse patients due to factors such as gender preferences, religious beliefs, and individual characteristics. Social and cultural norms regarding gender roles often led patients to reject care from nurses of the opposite gender or younger students [15,29]. Some patients, guided by religious beliefs, expressed a preference for same-gender caregivers [15]. Our participants noted that patients' personal characteristics, such as modesty and shyness, could create difficulties in the care process. Such barriers may lower the quality of care and negatively impact patient satisfaction [23]. Culture significantly shapes patients' perceptions of healthcare services [17], and increasing multiculturalism due to migration has introduced both challenges and opportunities in nursing care [21,45]. To address these issues,

enhancing nurses' cultural competence is essential for delivering effective, patient-centered care and improving overall patient satisfaction.

The study highlighted language and cultural differences as significant communication barriers for nursing intern students from both countries, particularly in understanding medical terminology and cultural norms. To overcome these challenges, students employed nonverbal communication strategies and sought assistance from translation tools, interpreters, and multilingual family members [22,46]. With growing migrant populations exacerbating communication difficulties in healthcare [19,27], the study underscores the importance of employing professional medical interpreters to enhance communication and ensure patient safety in multicultural clinical settings.

This phenomenological study revealed that professional perception evolves through transcultural experience, where cultural encounters stimulate reflection, empathy, and professional growth. Nursing students from Turkey and Portugal shared similar motivations but differed in autonomy, workplace structure, and exposure to international learning. Transcultural nursing thus represents not a separate competency but a transformative dimension of professional identity formation [16,22].

Conclusion

In conclusion, this phenomenological study provided important insights by examining nursing students' views regarding the nursing profession in a multicultural context in depth. It was observed that findings from participants studying at universities in Turkey and Europe were largely similar. In students' choice of profession, the desire to help patients, especially the older people, and the love for the profession are effective. Communication difficulties are more apparent due to cultural differences, highlighting the need to develop intercultural communication skills. Providing transcultural nursing is a complex and evolving phenomenon that requires cultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, effective communication, and continuous adaptation and motivation to meet the diverse needs of patients from different cultural backgrounds. In these days of globalization, it is important to establish a common professional perspective because of that most of the students are interested in studying and working abroad. Students' participation in international exchange programs during their education will increase their self-confidence. These findings serve as an important reference for decision-makers in education and health policy.

Declarations

Acknowledgment: The authors wish to thank all participants in this research.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest involved.

Funding: This study was supported by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK), Reference Number: 1919B012202696.

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