

Nursing Students' Perception of the Profession and Professional Commitment During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 Pandemi Sürecinin Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Mesleki Algılayış ve Mesleğe Bağlılıklarına Etkisi

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Healthcare professionals and students were affected most by COVID-19 pandemic process. This study aims to determine the perception of the profession and professional commitment of nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: This is a descriptive study. Four hundred nursing students agreed to participate in the study. An online questionnaire form, the Perception of Nursing Profession Scale and the Nurses' Professional Commitment Scale were used to collect data.

Results: The mean total score of the student nurses was 94.27 ± 8.21 on the Perception of Nursing Profession Scale and 80.89 ± 12.86 the Nurses' Professional Commitment Scale. It was determined that the majority of the nursing students were worried about the development of professional qualifications. Although most students expressed that the conditions of the nursing profession were difficult, they still wanted to continue their careers.

Conclusion: Nursing students' professional commitment and professional values are high in line with the scores they get from the PNSP and NPCS.

Keywords: COVID-19, Nursing Students, Pandemic, Perception of the Profession, Professional Commitment.

INTRODUCTION

The SARS-COV-2 virus first appeared in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization

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ÖZ

Amaç: COVID-19 pandemi sürecinden en çok etkilenenler sağlık çalışanları ve öğrenimini sürdürmek zorunda olan öğrencilerdir. Bu çalışmanın amacı COVID-19 pandemi sürecinde hemşirelik öğrencilerinin meslek algısı ve mesleki bağlılıklarını belirlemektir.

Yöntem: Bu çalışma tanımlayıcı tipte bir araştırmadır. Araştırmanın örneklemini 400 hemşirelik öğrencisinden oluşmaktadır. Verilerin toplanmasında çevrimiçi anket formu, Hemşirelik Mesleğini Algılama Ölçeği ve Hemşirelikte Mesleğe Bağlılık Ölçeği kullanılmıştır.

Bulgular: Öğrenci hemşirelerin Hemşirelik Mesleği Algısı Ölçeği toplam puan ortalamaları 94.27 ± 8.21 ve Hemşirelikte Mesleğe Bağlılık Ölçeği 80.89 ± 12.86 'dır. Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin çoğunluğunun mesleki yeterliliklerinin gelişmesi konusunda endişeli oldukları belirlenmiştir. Öğrencilerin çoğu hemşirelik mesleğinin koşullarının zor olduğunu ifade etmesine rağmen yine de kariyerlerine devam etmek istediklerini belirtmiştir.

Sonuç: Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin PNSP ve NPCS'den aldıkları puanlar doğrultusunda mesleki bağlılıkları ve mesleki değerlerinin yüksek olduğu belirlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: COVID-19, Hemşirelik Öğrencileri, Pandemi, Meslek Algısı, Mesleğe Bağlılık.

(WHO) on March 11, 2020 (1). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has posed difficulties of health, education, economy, politics, and psychology to both countries and individuals, it has affected people's lives in every aspect (2, 3). Significantly, healthcare professionals and students are affected most by this process. Nurses, who take the most responsibility in the field, make up the occupational group in close contact with patients with COVID-19 most and at the highest risk for getting infected. In this process, nurses have also experienced other problems, such as lack of protective equipment, long and intense working hours, and lack of social interaction with their families (4). In addition, some of the nurses have experienced stigma and had to cope with social problems (5).

Countries have taken measures, such as quarantine, isolation, and sanitation, to control the spread of the virus and protect public health (6). Within the scope of these measures, as in many countries, face-to-face education was suspended at universities as of March 2020 in Turkey (7). Nursing students were directly affected by the pandemic due to changes in health and education systems (8). The interruption of education of nursing students created concerns about the development of clinical skills in students (9). In addition, during the pandemic period, students were afraid of getting infected and worried about the health of their families (10, 11). Experiences can also affect students' perception of the profession and their commitment to the profession during the pandemic (12). Therefore, this study aims to determine the perception of the profession and professional commitment of nursing students who have experienced the pandemic process and are future nurses.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Design

The study used a descriptive design.

Participants

The study population consisted of 983 students of a public university nursing department in Turkey in the 2020-2021 academic year. The sample size was calculated using the sampling known universe formula ($n = Nt^2pq/d^2(N-1)+t^2pq$) (13). Accordingly, the minimum sample size was found to be 277 students with a 95% confidence interval. Eventually, 400 volunteering students were included in the study, considering possible data losses.

Procedure

The questionnaire form used in the study was created via Google Forms®. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to the nursing department students via WhatsApp groups to invite them to participate in the study. The students were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that their decision whether to participate or not would not affect their academic grades. The students who accepted

to participate in the study filled out the online questionnaire. The study data were collected between November 2020 and January 2021. More than one submission of the questionnaire by the same user was prevented by using the "allow only one response per user" option of the Google Forms® setting. In addition, possible data loss in questionnaires was prevented thanks to the option in Google Forms® that prevents submitting incomplete questionnaires.

Data Collection Tools

An online questionnaire was created by the researchers following a literature review to collect data. This online questionnaire included "Personal Information Form," "Perception of Nursing Profession Scale (PNPS)", and "Nurses' Professional Commitment Scale (NPCS)."

The personal information form

The personal information form consists of 38 questions about the students' sociodemographic characteristics (age, education level) and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their perception of the profession and professional commitment.

The perception of nursing profession scale (PNPS)

This scale was developed by Eser et al. in 2004. It is a 5-point Likert-type scale and consists of 22 items. It has two sub-dimensions: professional qualifications (17 items) and professional status (5 items). The items on the scale are scored using options ranging from "1 - strongly disagree" to "5 - strongly agree". The total score that can be obtained from the scale varies between 22 and 110. Increased total scores obtained from the scale indicate a positive perception of the profession. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.83 for the total scale, 0.85 for the "professional qualities" sub-dimension, and 0.79 for the "professional status" sub-dimension (14). Cronbach's alpha value of the scale in our study was found as 0.78.

The nurses' professional commitment scale (NPCS)

This scale was developed by Lu et al. in 2000 to determine nurses' professional commitment levels (15). The original form of the scale has 26 items

and three sub-dimensions (willingness to make an effort, items 1-13; maintaining professional membership, items 14-21; belief in goals and values, items 22-26). Nine items on the four-point Likert-type scale contain reverse expressions (items 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 25). In the original study, the internal consistency of the scale was 0.94. The Turkish validity and reliability of the scale were established by Cetinkaya et al., and Cronbach's alpha internal consistency value was calculated as 0.90. The lowest and highest scores range between 26 and 104. The lowest and highest scores that can be obtained from the sub-dimensions are as follows: 13-52 from the "willingness to make an effort" sub-dimension; 8-32 from the "maintaining professional membership" sub-dimension; and 5-20 from the "belief in goals and values" sub-dimension. Increased scores from the total scale and its sub-dimensions indicate high levels of professional commitment (16). Cronbach's alpha value of the scale in our study was found to be 0.92.

Data Storage and Analysis

The data obtained from the participants were stored in one of the researcher's (SOS) email account. The stored data were transferred to the SPSS 23.0 software package for analysis. In the data analysis, descriptive statistics, such as frequency (n) and percentage distributions (%), independent groups t-test, variance analysis, Post-hoc analysis, and Pearson's correlation analysis, were used.

Ethical Consideration

Ethics committee approval was received from the Gazi University Ethics Committee (Date: 21.10.2020 issue: 91610558-604.01.02-09) and institutional permission was obtained for the study. The written consent of the students was obtained via the informed consent form at the beginning of the online questionnaire. In addition, the article carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

Table 1. The socio-demographic characteristics of the student nurses (n = 400) (Ankara, 2020)

Socio-demographic characteristics		
	Mean ± SD	Min-Max
Age	20.56 ± 1.69	18 - 33
Time spent at university	2.59 ± 1.08	1 - 6
	n	%
Gender		
Female	344	86.0
Male	56	14.0
Marital status		
Single	397	99.3
Married	3	0.7
The most extended place of residence during the pandemic		
Metropolitan city	125	31.3
Province	94	23.5
County	111	27.7
Town/village	70	17.5
School year		
First-year	91	22.8
Second-year	103	25.7
Third-year	118	29.5
Fourth-year	88	22.0
Economic status		
Income < expenses	73	18.3
Income = expenses	280	70.0
Income > expenses	47	11.7
Family type		
Nuclear family	322	80.5
Extended family	63	15.8
Broken family	15	3.7

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the student nurses. Of the students, 86% were female, 99.3% were single, and 29.5% were third-year students. The mean age of the student nurses was 20.56 ± 1.69 years, and the most extended place of residence of 31.3% during the pandemic was a metropolitan city. Also, 70% of the students had equal income and expenses, 80.5% had a nuclear family, and the average time they spent at the university was 2.59 ± 1.08 years (Table 1).

Table 2. Student nurses' feelings and thoughts on the perception of the profession, professional commitment, and the effects of the pandemic on the nursing profession during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ankara, 2020)

Statements	Agree		Disagree		Statistics	
	n	%	n	%	X²	p
Feelings and thoughts about the perception of the profession						
The pandemic has negatively affected my view of the profession.	88	22	209	52.3	123.45	.000
During the pandemic, I have seen nursing as a very dangerous profession.	193	48.3	118	29.5	156.05	.000
I think that my profession is perceived as a more respectable profession in society during the pandemic.	211	52.8	80	20	111.64	.000
I have been more proud of my profession during the pandemic.	356	89	9	2.3	74.49	.000
With the pandemic, I see nursing as a more difficult profession.	337	84.3	17	4.3	94.97	.000
I think the status of the nursing profession has increased in the pandemic.	212	53	67	16.8	90.75	.000
I think society has not given enough value to the nursing profession during the pandemic.	265	66.3	44	11	97.04	.000
The pandemic has made me realize that the nursing profession is not respected as much as it deserves.	290	72.5	32	8	91.70	.000
I think the public did not fully know the nursing profession before the pandemic.	311	77.9	32	8	122.95	.000
I think the pandemic has led to better recognition of the nursing profession.	265	66.3	34	8.5	72.94	.000
With the pandemic, I have realized that the nursing profession is an indispensable part of the health system.	373	93.3	7	1.8	98.42	.000
With the pandemic, I have seen how valuable nursing care is for human health.	371	92.8	9	2.3	117.78	.000
The pandemic has a significant impact on the development of the nursing profession.	266	66.5	31	7.8	66.70	.000
Feelings and thoughts about professional commitment						
I have thought about leaving school during the pandemic.	40	10	318	79.5	172.35	.000
In the pandemic, I have turned away from the nursing profession.	43	10.8	282	70.5	115.14	.000
I have felt stressed and anxious during the pandemic.	279	69.8	53	13.3	140.87	.000
The pandemic has been a major factor in my continuing the profession.	175	43.8	54	13.5	48.55	.000
With the pandemic, I have thought I am suitable for the nursing profession.	212	53	24	6	28.79	.000
With the pandemic, I decided not to work as a nurse after graduation.	35	8.8	271	67.8	80.57	.000
During the pandemic, I decided to pursue postgraduate education after graduation.	172	43	65	16.3	58.54	.000
During the pandemic, I decided that I would not be able to do the nursing profession.	27	6.8	294	73.5	80.30	.000
With the pandemic, I saw that I made the right decision when choosing the profession.	232	58.1	21	5.3	30.78	.000

During the pandemic, I have been worried that I will not be professionally qualified enough due to distance education.	282	70.5	44	11	118.14	.000
Feelings and thoughts about the impact of the pandemic on the nursing profession						
With the pandemic, I have thought the working conditions of the nursing profession are unacceptable.	164	41	78	19.5	67.33	.000
Nurses are at high risk for getting infected during the pandemic.	385	96.3	6	1.5	156.34	.000
I think the workload of nurses has increased in the pandemic.	381	95.3	7	1.8	142.86	.000

Table 3. The mean total scores of the student nurses from the PNPS and NPCS and the variables that affect them (Ankara, 2020)

Variables	PNPS	Statistics	NPCS	Statistics
Gender				
Female (n = 344)	81.52 ± 12.84	t= -2.425 p=.016*	94.81 ± 7.59	t = -2.61 p = .011*
Male (n = 56)	77.05 ± 12.44		90.91 ± 10.75	
School year				
1 st -year (n = 91) ¹	81.37 ± 11.87	F = .273 p=.845	92.52 ± 7.53	F = 2.579 p = .053* 3 > 1**
2 nd -year (n = 103) ²	81.51 ± 14.30		94.97 ± 9.03	
3 rd -year (n = 118) ³	80.10 ± 12.62		95.43 ± 8.13	
4 th -year (n = 88) ⁴	80.75 ± 12.55		93.69 ± 7.74	
Mean total score	80.89 ± 12.86 (Min:30; Max: 102)		94.27 ± 8.21 (Min:70; Max: 110)	

Note: *p ≤ 0.05; ** One Way ANOVA -Tukey HSD

Table 2 presents student nurses' feelings and thoughts on the perception of the profession, professional commitment, and the effects of the pandemic on the nursing profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of students who agreed with the statement "I have felt stressed and anxious during the pandemic" was statistically significantly higher than students who disagreed with the statement ($X^2 = 140.87$; $p < .01$). In addition, the number of students who agreed with the statement "I think the workload of nurses has increased in the pandemic" and "Nurses are at high risk for getting infected in the pandemic" was statistically significantly higher than those who disagreed with the statements ($X^2 = 142.86$, $p < .01$; $X^2 = 156.34$, $p < .01$). In addition, the number of students who agreed with the statement "During the pandemic, I have been worried that I will not be professionally qualified enough due to distance education" was statistically significantly higher than those who did not ($X^2 = 118.14$, $p < .01$) (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the mean total scores of the student nurses from the PNPS and NPCS and the variables that affect them. The mean total score of the student nurses was 94.27 ± 8.21 from the PNPS and 80.89 ± 12.86 from the NPCS. It was determined that the mean total scores of the female students from the PNPS and NPCS were statistically significantly higher than 6 of males ($p \leq .05$). The mean total scores of the students from the NPCS did not differ statistically by school year ($p \geq .05$). It was determined that the mean total score of the third year nursing students from the PNPS was statistically significantly higher than those of the first-year students ($p \leq .05$).

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a different and challenging experience for both clinical nurses and nursing students due to health and education systems (17). Severe and more prolonged working conditions, the lack of protective equipment and personnel, and fear of infection/contamination have led to severe psychological and social effects on all health personnel, including nurses. Nursing

students were in a difficult situation like other students in the field of health due to the changes in both health and education systems during the pandemic process. The transition to the online education system has resulted in inadequate clinical practice, and therefore students were caught unprepared during the transition to professional life. As healthcare professionals, the fear of getting infected with the virus and spreading it to family/relatives has led to increased stress and anxiety levels in students during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the uncertainty of the pandemic reveals that everything should continue by adapting to changes and taking the necessary precautions (11, 18).

In our study, examining the students' feelings and thoughts about their professional commitment indicated that the number of students who agreed with the statement "I have felt stressed and anxious during the pandemic" was significantly higher than those who did not. In studies conducted with nursing students in the literature, it was determined that the COVID-19 pandemic increased students' anxiety and stress levels (8, 11, 19, 20). In these studies, students were worried because they did not feel ready to provide care due to the fear of getting infected, the fear of transmitting the infection to their family/relatives (17, 21), as well as the lack of clinical practice (11, 22, 23). Similarly, in our study, it was determined that the number of students who agreed with the statement "During the pandemic, I have been worried that I will not be professionally qualified enough due to distance education" was significantly higher than those who did not. In a study conducted by Zheng and Zu (24), which supports our study, 62.4% of nursing students stated that online teaching did not have enough effectiveness compared to face-to-face teaching (24). Despite many advantages offered by online learning today, it may be inadequate in nursing, where clinical practices are essential. This situation causes students to experience great dissatisfaction with online learning (25). However, only 10% of students in our study stated that they were considering dropping out of school during the pandemic. In addition, the number of students who disagreed

with the statement "I have turned away from the nursing profession during the pandemic" and "With the pandemic, I decided not to work as a nurse after graduating" was significantly higher than those who did not. In a study conducted with 150 senior nursing students in China, it was stated that 9.3% of the students had an intention to leave the nursing profession (26). In this context, our research result was similar to the literature, but it was important in terms of showing that the students' level of professional commitment was high, although they stated that they were worried about receiving enough education and gaining enough professional development during the pandemic process. In addition, the students' mean score from the NPCS was 80.89 ± 12.86 in our study, which supports the finding that their level of professional commitment was not low (Table 3).

In our study, according to the examination of the feelings and thoughts about the effects of the pandemic on the nursing profession, most students stated that the workload of nurses increased during this process and the risk of getting infected was high. In addition, nearly half of the students thought that nursing was a very dangerous and challenging profession during the pandemic period. However, when the students' feelings and thoughts about their perception of the profession were examined in our study, it was determined that most of the students were more proud of their profession during the pandemic. In addition, it was determined that the number of the students who agreed with the statement "With the pandemic, I have realized that the nursing profession is an indispensable part of the health system" and "With the pandemic, I have seen how valuable nursing care is for human health" was significantly more than those who did not. This situation was critical in showing that the students' perception of the profession was positive, although they thought that the conditions of the pandemic process made the nursing profession difficult. In addition, the mean score of the students on the Perception of Nursing Profession Scale was 94.27 ± 8.21 in our study, which supported the conclusion that students'

perception of the profession was positive (Table 3). Furthermore, in a qualitative study (n = 33) conducted with nursing students in the literature, most of the students stated that they were aware of the importance and risks of the nursing profession but that they had responsibilities towards society (27). In addition, studies in the literature determined that approximately three-quarters of the students were willing to provide care and help health services during the COVID-19 process (17, 22).

Perception of the profession and professional commitment develop over time. In the study, the evaluation of the students' perception of the profession according to school year indicated that the perception of the profession in the third-year nursing students was significantly more positive than that of the first-year students. In a study conducted with 662 nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey, it was determined that students between the ages of 18-20 perceived themselves as more stressed than those aged 21 and over (9). In a study conducted in India, first-year students' dissatisfaction with online learning was significantly lower than that of fourth-year students (25). These results may be because students who are new to nursing education are more likely to have less developed professional belonging and identity in lower classes. In addition, in our study, female students had more positive perceptions of their profession and higher levels of professional commitment than males. Studies in the literature also indicate that the gender factor is effective in the perception of the profession and professional commitment levels (28-31).

Limitations

Conducting our study with a large sample group that can reflect students' data from all classes of undergraduate education made up the strength of the study. However, it was conducted with only one university, which constituted the limitation of the study.

Implications for Practice

It is crucial to determine the effect of the

pandemic on the nursing students' perception of the profession and professional commitment since they will form the future nurse workforce. Therefore, in our study examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on nursing students' perception of the profession and their professional commitment, it was determined that the majority of the nursing students were worried about the development of professional qualifications due to distance education during the pandemic and that they felt stressed and anxious. In addition, although most students expressed that the conditions of the nursing profession were difficult during the pandemic, they still wanted to continue their careers. Moreover, most of the students thought that the nursing profession was important in human health and that it was an indispensable part of the health system during the pandemic. Also, students' professional commitment and professional values are high in line with the scores they get from the PNSP and NPCS. Therefore, we suggest that the pandemic process should be evaluated not only as a crisis period but also as a period of opportunity in developing high professional commitment and positive perception of the profession in student nurses who will become future nurse professionals.

Information

Research idea ŞYS, AŞE; data collection SÇÖ, SÖŞ, CUA; analysis SÇÖ; manuscript writing SÇÖ, SÖŞ, CUA; study design, manuscript control and editing SÇÖ, SÖŞ, CUA, ŞYS, AŞE. All authors approved the final version for submission. Ethics committee approval was received from the Gazi University Ethics Committee (Date: 21.10.2020 issue: 91610558-604.01.02-09) and institutional permission was obtained for the study. This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors. We thank all nursing student for their participation and support in the study.

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