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Factors influencing nursing students' decisions to specialize in mental health: The role of educational, professional, and personal experiences

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Abstract

Background: A significant global shortage of mental health nurses exists. Additionally, compared to other nursing specialties, mental health nursing has been determined to be less popular at University Medical Center Utrecht of Applied Sciences.

Purpose: a better understanding of what influences second-year nursing students' choice to minor in mental health.

Method: Survey-based quantitative methodology was used. The sample consisted of 177 second-year nursing students pursuing bachelor's degrees.

Results: Multiple linear regression revealed that four factors—students' interest in mental health care, teachers' knowledge of the topic, previous internships in mental health care, and the experience of a close relative with mental health concerns—were significantly connected with the decision to minor in mental health.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that choosing a child or adolescent with mental health issues as a focus of care is relatively uncommon. Moreover, the decision to work with this population was not associated with all themes identified in previous qualitative studies. Several variables were excluded from the analysis due to limited conceptual clarity or insufficient understanding. Overall, the observed effect sizes were modest.

Keywords: Educational; Mental Health Care; Nursing Students; Personal Experiences; Professional.

INTRODUCTION

There is clearly a shortage of mental health nurses in the world (Ong, Seow, Chua, Xie, Wang, Lau, & Subramaniam, 2017). A halt to admissions and/or the (temporary) closure of inpatient institutions in the Netherlands could result from this gap (Happell & Gaskin, 2013). Furthermore, it appears that the nursing profession's least chosen sector is mental health care (Duman, Güneşen, İnan, Ince, & Sari, 2017). Given the prevalence of mental health issues, contemporary nursing students need to be prepared to meet the needs of Australians in terms of mental health care. This study examined the effects of a Bachelor of Nursing course's mental health component on second-year undergraduate nursing students' self-reported knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward mental health nursing (Henderson, Happell, & Martin, 2007).

Stigma remains the largest barrier to receiving high-quality mental health care, despite improvements in the mental health literacy of the Australian public over the previous 10 years. In Australia, mental illness is the primary source of the burden of non-fatal diseases. Medical professionals, including chemists, may also be impacted by the stigma surrounding mental health. Pharmacists are frequently consulted for advice on psychotropic drugs, which are used to treat the majority of mental illnesses (O'Reilly, Bell, Kelly, & Chen, 2011).

According to Corrigan et al. (2014), a significant number of individuals with severe mental illnesses do not actively participate in treatments once they have begun or seek treatment when appropriate, which can lead to significant discomfort and disability that impairs quality of life. The mental health workforce covered in

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this study is composed of three types of individuals. The first group consists of specialists such as occupational therapists, psychologists, mental health social workers, neurologists, psychiatric nurses, and psychiatrists. Affected individuals, carers, and non-specialist medical professionals such as doctors, nurses, and lay health workers make up the second group. Other professions in the third group include teachers and community-level workers (Kakuma, Minas, Van Ginneken, Dal Poz, Desiraju, Morris, & Scheffler, 2011).

To determine the rationale behind the scarcity of mental health professionals and why it is the least popular nursing specialisation, qualitative research has been carried out in recent years (Auerbach, Mortier, Bruffaerts, Alonso, Benjet, Cuijpers, & Kessler, 2018). The reasons behind their choice to pursue mental healthcare were asked of nursing students across a range of nations. The findings of these research revealed a number of factors impacting the choice of mental health nursing, including personal experiences as a mental healthcare beneficiary and the taboo and stigma surrounding mental health (Wathelet, Duhem, Vaiva, Baubet, Habran, Veerapa, & D'Hondt, 2020; Hamaideh, 2017).

The most often cited characteristics in the research that influenced students' decisions were internship experience and instructional strategies (Günüşen, Duman, İnan, İnce, Sari, & Aksoy, 2017; McConlogue, 2014; Ong et al., 2017). They discovered that instructional strategies play a significant role and that internship experience affects students' decisions. Students are more inclined to study mental healthcare as their knowledge of the topic grows (McConlogue, 2014; Edward, Warelow, Hemingway, Hercelinskyj, Welch, McAndrew, & Stephenson, 2015; Happell & Gaskin, 2013; Thongpriwan, 2015).

The impact of two distinct teaching strategies was examined in the study. The conventional approach and the problem-based teaching approach were contrasted. Students taking charge of their education is the foundation of the problem-based approach (Koops & Kuebel, 2021). Using real-world examples, 13-student groups practiced problem-solving techniques and assuming accountability. By giving lectures and getting students ready for practice, the teacher actively participate din the traditional teaching approach (Doherty & Kartalova-O'Doherty, 2010). According to the study (Duman et al., 2017), students who were taught using a problem-based education approach had a more favourable attitude toward mental healthcare.

Table 1. Factors Influencing Choosing Mental Health Nursing Education

Previous Studies	Education	Professional Experience	Taboo/Stigma	Personal Experience
Duman et al. (2017)	Psychiatric nursing courses			
Edward et al. (2015)		Professional experience		Personal experience
Günüşen et al. (2017)	Nursing courses	Professional experience Clinical exposure		Personal experience
Happell & Gaskin (2013)	Nursing education			
McConlogue (2014)	Psychiatry instructor teaching methods	Clinical exposure	Fear & Anxiety Unpredictability Fear from friends & family	
Ong et al. (2017)	Current education Teaching methods	Prior work interest	Parents' wishes Positive attitude towards psychiatry	Loved ones experience with mental illness Ethnicity Interest in Psychiatry
Thongpriwan et al. (2015)	Teaching methods			

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RESEARCH METHOD

This study, which sought to investigate the factors influencing nursing students' judgements regarding mental health services, used a quantitative research approach. All second-year nursing students at University Medical Center Utrecht of Applied Sciences were given a survey that was derived from earlier qualitative study that identified these criteria. During the 2017–2018 academic year, 313 full-time bachelor of nursing students made up the research population. Before selecting a specialty in their third year, these students had received basic training in a variety of nursing subspecialties, including mental health care.

The study utilized a digital survey via Google Forms, comprising various question types including multiple choice, dichotomous, open-ended, and Likert scale questions. The introduction clarified the study's purpose and participants' consent for data use. Respondents indicated whether mental health nursing was their first or second choice, leading to the identification of four primary subjects based on prior research: (1) education, (2) work experience,

(3) taboo/stigma, and (4) personal experience. Each subject was elaborated in statements rated on a 4-point or 5-point Likert scale when options like "not applicable" were included.

In a study assessing students' decisions regarding a minor in mental health, respondents were asked to evaluate the selection procedure and suggest additional relevant elements through open-ended questions. An email with a survey link was sent, and respondents were encouraged to participate, particularly the smaller group of 40 students who listed mental health as their second choice and 21 who chose it as their first. Data was analyzed using SPSS, which provided descriptive statistics for respondents' working and internship days. A backward multiple linear regression analysis was performed with an alpha of 0.05 to examine the dependent variable "minor choice," combining first and second choices for mental health against other possibilities, due to small sample sizes. The rationale for pooling the choices was based on similar outcomes in prior separate analyses.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 2. The Relationship Between Independent Variables and the Decision to Become a Mental Health Nurse

Variable	Standardized Beta	T	Significance
Model (R-squared = .242)			
<i>Interest in mental health care</i>	.378	5.547	.000
<i>Experience of loved ones as mental health care consumers</i>	.223	2.633	.009
<i>Internship in mental health care during training</i>	.184	2.590	.010
<i>Teacher who taught mental health care</i>	.154	2.252	.026
Non significant associations			
<i>Personal consumer experience</i>	-.147	-1.713	.089
<i>Opinions of family and friends</i>	-.046	-.651	.516
<i>Lessons in mental health care</i>	-.026	-.289	.773
<i>Opinions of classmates</i>	.002	.021	.983

Open-ended Question

Respondents have the opportunity to utilize an open-ended question in the last survey question to describe why they selected mental health nursing. There were three alternative answers: "everything is mentioned," "my preference was for a different minor," and "otherwise, namely..." The choices under 'else, particularly...' can be categorized into the four main topics of the questionnaire, even though respondents may have chosen 'everything is mentioned'. This implies that respondents prioritized certain features over others using this section.

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Additionally, respondents were given the chance to provide recommendations on how to make the choice to seek mental health treatment more compelling. The assertion that those who have finished an internship in mental health are more likely to pursue a career in the field was the most frequently made. They also asked for more details about education and nurses' involvement in mental health care.

Respondents

The survey was filled out by 177 out of the 313 students, or 56.6% of the total population. Women made up the bulk of responders ($n = 168$, 95%), as is common in Dutch nursing schools. The majority of students have neither internships (66.6%) nor professional experience in mental health care (89.8%). Mental health nursing was chosen as the first option ($n = 20$) or second choice ($n = 26$) by 46 respondents, or 26% of the sample.

Regression Analysis

Personal interest in mental health care was found to have the strongest link with choosing mental health therapy ($\beta = .37$; $t = 5.54$; $p = .000$). Of the educational features, only teachers had a positive link with the decision to pursue mental health nursing ($\beta = .154$; $t = 2.252$; $p = .026$). Minor selection and mental health classes did not significantly correlate ($\beta = -.026$; $t = -.289$; $p = .773$). Having a mental health internship was positively correlated with selecting the mental healthcare minor ($\beta = .184$; $t = 2.590$; $p = .010$). Because so few students had previous work experience in the field of mental health nursing, this criterion was excluded from the study.

Students were questioned about whether they or any friends or family had ever used mental health services as consumers. Customer experience had no significant impact on selecting a minor in mental healthcare ($\beta = -.147$; $t = -1.713$; $p = .089$). Choosing a minor in mental health nursing is most likely to be negatively connected with customer experience, as far as a pattern can be seen. Having family members with mental health problems was positively connected with selecting a minor in mental health ($\beta = .223$; $t = 2.633$; $p = .009$). Other than firsthand

experiences with loved ones with mental health concerns, there was no apparent correlation between choosing mental health nursing and the opinions of classmates ($\beta = .002$; $t = .021$; $p = .983$) or family and friends ($\beta = -.046$; $t = -.651$; $p = .516$).

The influence of the students' cultural background was also investigated. According to 76% of those surveyed, this had no impact. It turns out, though, that a lot of students didn't understand the open-ended question regarding the cultural factors that had influenced their choice to pursue mental health nursing. For example, several respondents claimed to have no culture. Based on these open-ended questions, it was determined to exclude the study's questions regarding stigma and culture.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study are in line with earlier studies that demonstrate nursing students' distaste for mental health nursing. Numerous qualitative studies have pinpointed the elements that impact the choice to become a mental health nurse. The present study aimed to assess the association between the various factors found in previous qualitative studies and the choice to become a mental health nurse (McConlogue, 2014; Edward et al, 2015; Happell & Gaskin, 2013; Thongpriwan, 2015).

Personal interest in mental health, the experience of loved ones as consumers of mental health care, internship experience in mental health care, and teachers who taught mental health care were all found to have a significant positive correlation with selecting a minor in mental health care. Personal experience as a mental health care consumer, lessons learned about mental health care, and opinions of family, friends, and classmates regarding mental health nursing did not significantly affect the decision to choose a minor in mental health care. Insufficient students with work experience in mental health care were included in the sample to examine the connection with minor choice.

Many respondents were eliminated from the study because they were unable to accurately reply to the questions about stigma and cultural issues (Hogan, 2003). Findings from previous studies are in line with the positive association between internship

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experience and choosing mental health nursing. First, direct exposure lessens fear and stigma. Alipanopoulos et al. (2020) state that although many students are first apprehensive about mental health facilities, actual clinical contact helps them comprehend patients and experience recovery in action.

Second, internships increase competence and self-assurance. Students feel more prepared to work in this profession after gaining practical experience that enhances their therapeutic interaction, crisis management, and communication abilities (Avleeva et al., 2025).

Third, there should be positive role models. Students' job preferences can be influenced and inspired by supportive clinical teachers or nurses working in mental health settings (Wenzel et al., 2022). Fourth, internships foster the growth of empathy and interpersonal relationships among students. Engaging with patients frequently results in meaningful experiences that boost commitment and interest. (Kana et al., 2020). Lastly, internships help to match expectations with reality. After practical experience, things that initially seem daunting frequently become doable and even pleasant (Baird & Mollen, 2023).

After completing an internship at a mental health facility, students were more likely to select a minor in mental health care. This was also shown by studies. The lack of internships in mental health was also cited as a disincentive in the survey's open-ended questions (Günüşen et al, 2017; McConlogue, 2014; & Ong et al, 2017).

Another difficulty that arose in both this study and previous research was personal experience with mental health care (Ong et al, 2017). The current study suggests that there is a difference between personally experiencing mental health therapy and having a loved one who has. Having loved ones with mental health concerns is positively correlated with choosing mental health nursing, however there was no clear association for individual customer experience.

According to Ong et al. (2017), there appeared to be a negative correlation ($p = 0.089$) between the choice of mental health therapy and the trend for individualized customer experience. concluded that

students who have such personal experiences are more likely to select mental health after looking at these two components as one facet of personal experience. Because the survey was more anonymous, more students may have felt comfortable admitting that they had (had) mental health difficulties, which could account for the differences between the current study and that (Tery, 2020).

Students who are more likely to decline this during an interview may also be the ones who should not seek mental health care because of these issues. Additionally, because of the distribution's nature, more students are likely to have loved ones with mental health problems than to have mental health problems themselves, which could skew the results in favor of a favorable correlation (Ong et al., 2017). Even while lessons on mental health care by itself did not have a beneficial correlation with studying mental health nursing, respondents claimed that their teachers had influenced their choice in a good way. Despite not being known yet, it appears to be unrelated to the chosen teaching methods (Henderson et al., 2007). To put the results of the current study in perspective, the sum of all the components explains around 25% of the variance, and all significant correlations were small (based on standardized betas). Even though the variables were shown to have a significant correlation, it appears that only a tiny percentage of the variation in minor choice can be explained by the selected variables. This could be partially due to other factors that have not yet been found to influence the decision to pursue mental health nursing (Gary, 2005). This suggests that focusing more on why students specifically choose mental health over other possibilities or why those other options are preferred over mental health could be beneficial for the current field of study.

Additionally, even if it's likely that students aren't fully aware of these characteristics, the current study depends on students' self-reports of the factors that influenced their decision to pursue a profession in mental health nursing. A lengthier, more comprehensive study would be needed to account for the genuine impact of variables that can be impeded by a self-reported format, such as specific

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teacher qualities against the instructors' self-reported influence.

After reviewing the responses to the open-ended questions, the items pertaining to cultural influences are eliminated. Many respondents claimed to have no culture. This most likely reflects a lack of understanding of the cultural factors that make self-reported statistics unreliable. By posing more questions about specific aspects of culture that leave less opportunity for respondents' interpretation, future study could help to partially solve this. However, it could be difficult for students to comprehend cultural influences. All things considered, to thoroughly investigate the consequences of cultural variances, a comprehensive cross-cultural study would likely be necessary.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding its limitations, the study discovered that teachers with experience in mental health nursing, personal ties to mental health concerns, and past interest in mental health all have a beneficial impact on the decision to specialize in mental health nursing. Other previously recognized characteristics were either difficult to evaluate using self-reporting or were not significant. According to the findings, increasing the number of internships in mental health care at an early stage of nursing school may increase students' desire to specialize in this area.

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