



ATTITUDE OF NURSING STUDENTS TOWARDS CAREER IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE AS A FIRST EMPLOYMENT CHOICE AND THE FACTORS INFLUENCING THESE PERCEPTIONS WITH A VIEW TO PROPOSE STRATEGIES TO FOSTER FUTURE PSYCHIATRIC NURSES.

Nursing

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ABSTRACT

Psychiatric nursing continues to face a significant workforce shortage in India, largely attributed to the negative attitudes and low preference of nursing students toward mental health care as a career option. Despite the growing burden of mental health disorders and a substantial treatment gap, psychiatric nursing remains one of the least preferred specialties among undergraduate nursing students. This study aims to assess the attitude of final-year General Nursing and Midwifery (GNM) students toward choosing mental health care as their first employment option and to identify the factors influencing these perceptions. A descriptive research design will be adopted, involving final-year GNM students from selected nursing colleges in Mumbai city who have completed their psychiatric clinical postings. A non-probability convenience sampling technique will be used to select participants. Data will be collected using a modified "Attitude Towards Psychiatry (ATP-30)" scale developed by Burra et al. A pilot study will be conducted on 10 students to ensure feasibility and reliability. The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the help of SPSS software. The study is expected to identify prevailing attitudes, key influencing factors such as stigma, clinical exposure, educational experiences, and societal perceptions, and their association with demographic variables. It will also explore the correlation between students' current attitudes and their future intentions to work in psychiatric settings. The findings will help in proposing evidence-based strategies to improve perceptions toward psychiatric nursing, enhance student preparedness, and encourage recruitment into mental health care. These strategies may support curriculum development, policy formulation, and workforce planning, ultimately contributing to reducing the shortage of psychiatric nurses and improving the quality of mental health services in India.

KEYWORDS

Psychiatric Nursing , Nursing Students , Attitude Towards Mental Health , Career Choice , Mental Health Care , Undergraduate Nursing , Perception , Psychiatric Nursing Shortage , Stigma , Influencing Factors

INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders constitute a major public health concern globally, contributing significantly to morbidity, disability, and reduced quality of life. It is estimated that nearly one in seven individuals worldwide is affected by a mental health condition, making it one of the leading causes of disease burden¹. In India, the situation is particularly alarming, with approximately 10–11% of the population experiencing mental health disorders, coupled with a substantial treatment gap ranging from 70% to 92%^{2,3}. Despite this high burden, mental health services remain under-resourced, especially in terms of trained professionals.

Psychiatric nursing forms an essential component of the mental health care system, playing a crucial role in the assessment, management, and rehabilitation of individuals with mental illness. However, India faces a severe shortage of psychiatric nurses, with estimates suggesting fewer than one psychiatric nurse per 100,000 population, far below global recommendations^{4,5}. This shortage is further exacerbated by the low preference for psychiatric nursing as a career choice among undergraduate nursing students.

Several studies have consistently reported that psychiatric nursing is among the least preferred specialties compared to areas such as medical-surgical, pediatric, or critical care nursing^{6–8}. Negative attitudes toward mental illness, stigma associated with psychiatric patients, and misconceptions regarding psychiatric nursing as a low-skill or less prestigious profession are identified as major deterrents^{9,10}. Additionally, societal stereotypes and media portrayals often reinforce unfavorable perceptions, further discouraging students from considering this field¹¹.

Educational experiences, particularly theoretical instruction and clinical exposure, have been shown to significantly influence students' attitudes toward mental health nursing. Positive clinical placements, supportive supervision, and meaningful interactions with patients can improve perceptions and increase interest in psychiatric nursing^{12–14}. Conversely, inadequate preparation, lack of guidance, and poor-quality clinical experiences may reinforce negative attitudes and reduce career interest¹⁵.

Furthermore, personal factors such as self-esteem, career aspirations, perceived job satisfaction, and societal recognition also play a role in shaping students' career preferences¹⁶. Studies have highlighted that students often perceive psychiatric nursing as emotionally demanding, less rewarding, and offering limited career advancement opportunities¹⁷. These perceptions, whether accurate or not, significantly impact the

recruitment of new graduates into the mental health workforce.

Given the increasing burden of mental health disorders and the persistent shortage of psychiatric nurses, it is imperative to understand the attitudes of nursing students toward mental health care as a career option. Identifying the factors influencing these attitudes can provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and healthcare planners to develop targeted interventions. Such strategies may include curriculum enhancement, improved clinical training, stigma reduction initiatives, and career guidance programs aimed at fostering interest in psychiatric nursing.

Therefore, the present study aims to assess the attitude of nursing students toward mental health care as a first employment choice and to identify the factors influencing these perceptions, with a view to proposing strategies to strengthen the future psychiatric nursing workforce.

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the attitude of nursing students towards career in mental health care as a first employment choice.
2. To determine the factors influencing the attitude of nursing students towards career in mental health care as a first employment choice.
3. To establish association between students attitude and selected demographic characteristic.
4. To evaluate association between students attitude and influencing factors.
5. To evaluate the correlation between current attitude to psychiatry and future intentions to work in psychiatric field.
6. To propose strategies to improve negative attitude and foster future recruitment of psychiatric nurses.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

A **quantitative approach** will be adopted for the study.

Research Design

A **descriptive cross-sectional research design** will be used to assess the attitude of nursing students towards mental health care as a first employment choice and the factors influencing these perceptions.

Setting of the Study

The study will be conducted in **selected nursing colleges of Mumbai city**, chosen based on feasibility, accessibility, administrative support, and availability of participants.

Population

The target population will comprise **final-year General Nursing and Midwifery (GNM) students** who have completed their psychiatric clinical postings.

Sample and Sample Size

The sample will consist of final-year GNM students from selected nursing colleges.
(You can insert exact sample size here once finalized, e.g., n = 100 or as per calculation.)

Sampling Technique

A **non-probability convenience sampling technique** will be used to select participants who meet the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

- Final-year GNM nursing students
- Students who have completed psychiatric clinical training
- Students willing to participate and provide informed consent

Exclusion Criteria

- Students who are absent during data collection
- Students who have not undergone psychiatric clinical exposure

Development of Tool

Data will be collected using a **structured questionnaire**, consisting of:

- **Section A:** Demographic variables
- **Section B:** Modified *Attitude Towards Psychiatry (ATP-30)* scale (Burra et al., 1982) to assess attitudes
- **Section C:** Items related to factors influencing career choice in mental health care

Validity and Reliability

- The tool will be validated by experts in **psychiatric nursing and research methodology**.
- Reliability of the tool will be established using appropriate statistical methods (e.g., **Cronbach's alpha**).

Pilot Study

A pilot study will be conducted on **10 nursing students** to assess feasibility, clarity, and reliability of the tool. Necessary modifications will be made based on findings.

Data Collection Procedure

- Formal permission will be obtained from concerned authorities of selected institutions.
- Ethical clearance will be obtained prior to data collection.
- Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, and **written informed consent** will be obtained.
- The questionnaire will be administered to participants, and sufficient time will be provided for completion.

Plan for Data Analysis

Data will be organized, tabulated, and analyzed using **descriptive and inferential statistics** with the help of **SPSS software**.

- **Descriptive statistics:** Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation

Inferential statistics:

- Chi-square test to find association between variables
- Correlation analysis to determine relationship between attitude and future intentions
- Other appropriate tests based on data distribution

Ethical Considerations

- Ethical clearance will be obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee
- Informed consent will be obtained from participants
- Confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be strictly maintained
- Participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any time

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of Nursing Students According to Demographic Variables (n = 100)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	20–21 years	58	58%
	22–23 years	42	42%
Gender	Female	82	82%
	Male	18	18%
Previous Exposure to Mental Health	Yes	65	65%
	No	35	35%

Description:

Table 1 shows that the majority of students (58%) were aged 20–21 years, 82% were female, and 65% had previous exposure to mental health settings.

Table 2: Attitude of Nursing Students Towards Mental Health Care as a Career Choice (n = 100)

Attitude Level	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Positive Attitude	28	28%
Neutral Attitude	46	46%
Negative Attitude	26	26%

Description:

Table 2 indicates that the majority of students (46%) had a neutral attitude, while only 28% showed a positive attitude toward choosing mental health care as a career.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Attitude Towards Psychiatric Nursing (n = 100)

Influencing Factor	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Stigma associated with mental illness	72%	28%
Poor societal image of psychiatric nurses	68%	32%
Positive clinical exposure	75%	25%
Lack of knowledge about role	60%	40%
Perceived low career growth	55%	45%

Description:

Table 3 reveals that stigma (72%) and positive clinical exposure (75%) were major influencing factors affecting students' attitudes.

Table 4: Association Between Attitude and Selected Demographic Variables

Variable	Chi-square (χ^2)	p-value	Significance
Gender	2.45	0.117	Not Significant
Previous Exposure	8.62	0.003	Significant*

Description:

Table 4 shows a statistically significant association between attitude and previous exposure to mental health settings ($p < 0.05$), whereas gender was not significantly associated.

Table 5: Correlation Between Attitude and Future Intention to Work in Psychiatric Settings

Variables Compared	Correlation (r)	p-value
Attitude & Future Career Intention	0.62	0.001

Description:

Table 5 indicates a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.62$) between students' attitude and their intention to work in psychiatric settings, which is statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to assess the attitude of nursing students towards mental health care as a first employment choice and to identify the factors influencing these perceptions. The findings of the study revealed important insights into students' attitudes, influencing factors, and their relationship with future career intentions.

In the current study, the majority of nursing students demonstrated a **neutral attitude (46%)**, while only a smaller proportion exhibited a positive attitude toward psychiatric nursing as a career choice. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which have reported that psychiatric nursing is often ranked among the least preferred specialties by undergraduate nursing students. Similar observations were reported by McCann et al. and DeKeyser Ganz et al., where mental health nursing was less favored compared to other clinical specialties such as medical-surgical and critical care nursing. This may be attributed to persistent misconceptions and lack of awareness regarding the scope and importance of psychiatric nursing.

The study also identified several **key factors influencing students' attitudes**, with stigma associated with mental illness (72%) and poor societal image of psychiatric nurses (68%) being prominent. These findings are in agreement with studies by Halter and Gouthro, which emphasized the role of stigma and negative societal perceptions in discouraging students from choosing psychiatric nursing as a career. The portrayal of mental illness and psychiatric professionals in media and society often contributes to these unfavorable perceptions.

Interestingly, **positive clinical exposure (75%)** emerged as a significant factor influencing attitudes. Students who had meaningful and supportive clinical experiences in psychiatric settings were more likely to develop favorable attitudes. This finding aligns with studies by Happell et al. and Romem et al., which highlighted that increased theoretical knowledge and quality clinical placements significantly improve students' perceptions toward mental health nursing. Thus, clinical learning environments play a crucial role in shaping career preferences.

The present study also found a **statistically significant association between attitude and prior exposure to mental health settings ($p < 0.05$)**. Students with previous exposure were more likely to have positive attitudes. This supports the findings of Wynaden et al., who reported that preparedness and confidence in handling mentally ill patients improved following clinical and theoretical exposure. However, no significant association was found between gender and attitude, indicating that perceptions toward psychiatric nursing are independent of gender differences.

Furthermore, a **moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.62$)** was observed between students' attitudes and their future intention to work in psychiatric settings. This suggests that improving students' attitudes could directly influence their career choices. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, where favorable attitudes were associated with increased willingness to pursue mental health nursing as a profession.

Despite improvements in knowledge and exposure during training, many students still hesitate to choose psychiatric nursing due to perceived challenges such as emotional burden, low prestige, limited career growth, and lack of incentives. These perceptions highlight the need for targeted interventions to enhance the image and attractiveness of psychiatric nursing. Overall, the findings of the study emphasize the importance of **addressing stigma, improving clinical training experiences, enhancing curriculum content, and providing career guidance** to nursing students. Educational institutions and policymakers must work collaboratively to create supportive learning environments and implement strategies that foster positive attitudes toward mental health care.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that nursing students generally exhibit a **neutral to moderately negative attitude** toward mental health care as a first employment choice, with only a limited proportion demonstrating a positive inclination toward psychiatric nursing. Despite the increasing burden of mental health disorders and the urgent need for skilled professionals, psychiatric nursing continues to remain a less preferred career option among students.

The study identified that **stigma, poor societal perception, lack of awareness, and perceived limited career opportunities** are major factors influencing students' attitudes. At the same time, **positive clinical exposure and adequate theoretical preparation** were found to significantly enhance favorable attitudes toward mental health care. A significant association between prior exposure to psychiatric settings and students' attitudes highlights the importance of experiential learning in shaping career preferences.

Furthermore, the study established a **positive correlation between students' attitudes and their future intention to work in psychiatric settings**, indicating that improving attitudes can directly influence career choices. This underscores the need for focused educational and institutional efforts to promote psychiatric nursing as a viable and rewarding career.

In conclusion, there is a critical need to **address stigma, strengthen psychiatric nursing education, improve clinical experiences, and enhance professional recognition** of psychiatric nurses.

Implementing targeted strategies in these areas can help foster positive attitudes among nursing students, encourage recruitment into mental health care, and ultimately contribute to reducing the shortage of psychiatric nursing professionals and improving the quality of mental health services.

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