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Motivational factors for choosing the degree course in nursing: a focus group study with nursing students

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Abstract. *Background and aim of the work:* Maintaining the number of new students entering nursing programs and remaining in the nursing occupation largely depends on the ability to recruit and retain young people. The motivational factors that induce young people to choose nursing as a career were investigated through a qualitative research approach. *Methods:* Different focus groups were organised involving 32 students at the end of the first year of Nursing. Then the factors affecting their choice of course and the reasons for satisfaction and frustration connected with the course of study were analyzed. *Results:* The main motivational factors for choosing Nursing that emerged include the following: having done voluntary work in the care area, attraction to the occupation since childhood/adolescence, failure of other plans, possibility to find work, personal acquaintance of nurses. The reasons for satisfaction with the course include: tutor support, workshop activities, placement experience. The reasons for frustration among the students included the complexity and extent of the study plan, elements that often they had not envisaged or had underestimated upon enrolment. *Conclusions:* Providing more information on the course of study, the working conditions and characteristics of the nursing occupation, could help young people to make an informed and aware decision, in order to reduce any disappointment and students dropping out of nursing education and attrition in the future. Improving the organisation of the course of study, supporting students' motivation through counselling activities and choosing suitable placement sites, could prevent drop outs.

Key words: nursing student, motivation, attrition, education, nursing, baccalaureate

Background and aim of the work

The shortage of people entering the nursing occupation and the high attrition rate of qualified nursing personnel are issues causing concern in many countries (1-6). This fact is even more worrying if it is set against the context of an ageing population in which the prevalence of chronic diseases is leading to an increase in the demand for nursing care (7). The recruitment and maintenance of nursing personnel are therefore recognised as a priority and largely depend on the recruitment capacity of young people born between 1980 and 2000 (8).

When trying to understand the phenomenon, it is impossible to ignore the motivational factors on which the choice of the nursing occupation is based, which have been studied in depth for a number of decades. However, the generations that have turned to the occupation since the new millennium, display different personal values, perceptions and career expectations from the previous ones (9-11), therefore it is necessary to continue studying the phenomenon so as to understand the deep motivational factors that induce people to choose nursing and target recruitment and retention strategies for the new generations of nurses as much as possible (11). Factors already known to in-

fluence the choice of the nursing occupation are: desire to help others, opportunity to work in different contexts, employment opportunity, friends and relatives who are nurses, positive image of nurses, previous job experience in health care or experience caring for relatives or friends, watching nurses in action, negative experiences in other educational or work settings defined as being “impersonal”, failure in other courses of study taken as first choice (12-19). Other motivations that emerged from the study are: special predisposition towards the occupation (20), interest in science/disease and having the chance to work with advanced and complex technology, the latter being particularly relevant for male students (21). Students belonging to minority ethnic groups recognise high standards in the levels of preparation and qualification required of nurses, which makes them well suited to the nursing occupation (22, 23).

The perception of the career opportunities connected with an occupation increases its attractiveness. In relation to the nursing occupation, the results of investigations show that over time it has lost prestige, especially when compared to the many routes which have opened up in the meantime, especially for women (24, 11). Young people perceive the nursing career as a manual and menial occupation, marked by high stress levels, lack of respect and appreciation (22), poor pay (25) and as being more suited to women (23). Even when the motivational factor supporting the choice is positive at the start of the course, it tends to get worse in a high percentage of students (69%), due to experiences both in the academic and clinical setting. This is due to the poor awareness of the high level of preparation and responsibility required of the nursing occupation, therefore the unexpected level of demands both in terms of study and the work placement is often a source of stress and a cause for drop outs (7). Then, during the work placement, nursing students realise how much nurses are underpaid and the lack of respect they receive from users, supervisors, physicians and other members of multidisciplinary staff (26, 27). From an investigation it emerges that the three factors strongly connected with a decision to remain within the occupation after graduation are: personal past experience of disease and/or hospitalisation, perception of the values connected with the occupation and sup-

port received during the course of study, especially in the area of clinical learning (28).

The aim of this study was to assess the motivational and decision-making process, to help to understand the motivational factors that induce young people to choose the nursing occupation today, through a qualitative research approach.

Method

Focus groups are a data collection method commonly used as a form of qualitative research method in the sociology of health and illness. Data is collected through a semi-structured group interview process. Focus groups are moderated by a group leader and are generally used to collect data on a specific topic (29).

In the present study, focus groups discussions were used to explore 32 students who had concluded the first year of the degree course in Nursing at a University in Northern Italy. The participants were sampled by purposive sampling and included 6 males and 26 females, aged between 19 and 31, from different Italian regions, including two regions in the South of Italy. The study was approved by the chief of the University; written consent was obtained from all the students. The focus groups were carried out in July 2014; they were conducted by a researcher with experience of the method and a second researcher appointed to make observation notes. A semi-structured guide was followed with initial questions and a conversational approach allowed the participants, to provide descriptions of the factors that influenced their decisions to choose the nursing occupation.

The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim; the transcripts were read, re-read and analyzed separately by two researchers. The thematic analysis was used to derive themes from the data (30,31). Transcripts were read several times to gain primary perception and identify the themes; finally the main themes were extracted. All the analyses were performed by hand. Analysis of the themes shed light on the process of choosing the nursing occupation and to explain motivational and influential factors.

The general themes investigated within the focus groups regarded: social image and personal consid-

erations on the nursing occupation, the motivational factors on which enrolling for the Degree Course in Nursing is based and expectations that had been fulfilled and disappointments at the end of the first year work placement.

Results

The first theme that emerged concerns social image and personal considerations on the nursing occupation: participants think that is a very undervalued occupation compared to others, subordinate to other occupations and underpaid, with respect to the required responsibilities and skills. General opinion is that the Degree Course in Nursing is less important than others; also, basic ignorance as to what a nurse can do in a clinical setting also emerged: *"...after starting the course, I was amazed about what we have to study to become nurses!"*.

It emerges the conviction that citizens are not sufficiently well informed as to the evolution of the role of the nurse over the years; they are amazed about the course taken at university: *"... when I told my friends I'd got into Nursing, they looked a bit concerned and asked me if I really needed to go to university to become a nurse..."*.

Nurses are also generally undervalued by doctors, especially those of the "older generation", whereas: *"... young doctors appreciate nurses and nursing students more, there is more collaboration and they are convinced of the usefulness of the university nursing education ..."*.

Most participants think that nurse acts as a mediator and is a connecting bridge between the hospitalised person, the doctor, their family and the members of the healthcare team: *"For me a nurse is an independent figure with various responsibilities from an organisational, technical, human, relational, communicative, educational ... point of view"*.

Another important aspect is the emotional bond created with the hospitalised person. According to some students: *"... you need to have a neutral attitude, you need to preserve your mental health ..."*.

Whereas other students reflect on the need to be able to put themselves in the hospitalised person's shoes to care for them better: *"It would always be useful to ask yourself: if we were in their place what would we experience?"*.

The importance of scientific discussion and cooperation with the other occupations is considered essential, as well as an even more specific and in-depth course of study, in order to take the person in charge appropriately: *"... you need to study more, be increasingly more competent, responsible, also to gain respect from the other professionals..."*.

The participants believed that a positive aspects of the nursing profession, was related to the satisfaction of seeing the progress made by the patient, as well as the satisfaction of feeling useful for that person at that specific time of their life, which leads to a development process also on a personal level: *"I'm starting to look at life in a different way from before ..."*.

The positive aspects also include getting to know new people and establishing relationships with people on a human level: *"They are experiences that shock you, overwhelm you and change you..."*.

The nursing occupation is defined as being varied and versatile, can be expressed in many working environments, exposing nurses to the most intimate side of people: *"You understand people's mental processes ..."; "... you can work in various environments, it is useful for helping others and looking after your own family and friends, you become a reference figure in the context where you live ..."*.

The recognition expressed by patients is very important for feeling useful: *"... it's really nice to hear someone say thank you ..."*.

The participants identifies the nursing occupation as being full of risks, particularly in relation to the possibility of catching infectious diseases: *"I'm scared of bringing home any diseases I catch at work when I have a family ..."*.

The workload is too high, with very stressful paces and volumes; there is often a risk of burnout: *"I'm especially scared of this ... I've seen nurses on the ward who are very demotivated about work; the bad thing is that you don't realise it straight away ..."*.

Another source of concern comes from the issue of emotivity: *"... I'm scared of getting too attached to people or letting myself get too involved in their problems ..."*.

Another aspect is the possibility to make mistakes, cause damage to patients and be reported to the police: *"Often having lots of responsibilities makes you*

more susceptible to making mistakes, especially if you have a lot of work and are under tight time pressure ...".

Another issue discussed was the motivational factors for enrolling on the Degree Course in Nursing. Some students think that since they were young they had been attracted to the figure of the nurse and since then knew that it would be their future: *"I built up a really nice image in my head through my aunt and uncle who drove an ambulance; they used to go and save people, doing something for others; they felt essential ..."; "...when I was little my granddad was taken into hospital and I was really impressed seeing the nurses look after him ..."*.

Other students decided at the end of secondary school; some did not have a clear idea and had put down Nursing as a second or third choice at the entrance test for the healthcare occupations.

Most of the students said that the main reason for choosing Nursing is connected with having done periods of voluntary work at associations active in the emergency and care area (e.g. the Red Cross): *"... I was in the ambulance and went to a serious road accident involving a lad and decided then ..."; "... they were bombing it to get to the crash scene... I was really scared, my heart was beating like mad, but I realised it was what I wanted to do ..."*.

Some students state that they started Nursing while waiting to study something else and then after starting the placement decided to carry on; others were attracted to this occupation convinced of having better job opportunities. Many students had discovered the Nursing Degree Course through the web; two students took part in the University Open Day for health care occupations; other two students had taken some Nursing lessons. Friends and relatives are also sources of information: *"... I've got friends who attend the course and they explained how it's organised - they also told me that there's a lot to study..."; "... my relatives work in health care and they explained some things about nursing ..."*. Many students (17 out of 32) personally know some nurses.

Most students expressed the opinion that the placement was very useful and important: *"... the placement aligns the theory with the practical part ..."; "... the placement is well organised, obviously it includes lots of hours, to do in different settings, to learn the job well..."*.

The students reported that the laboratory lectures are also very useful, which involve the simulation of

the different procedures. The sensation of being treated and considered as human beings is also positive: *"... normally at university you're just a figure, a registration number, I would never have expected to be looked after like this ..."; "... even on the ward I found welcoming and helpful teams ..."*.

The students reported interesting moments experienced during the debriefing sessions: *"... the experiences that are reported, particularly by students from later years, had a great effect on me ..."; "... I felt listened to and reassured, by the tutors, in relation to certain unpleasant situations that happened to me ..."*.

Some students have emerged unfulfilled expectations, for example had difficulty with the theory part: *"... many subjects are too heavy ..."; "... many parts are not actually reflected in practice ..."; "... it would be better to do more laboratory hours and more exercises ..."; "... I have a lot of trouble keeping up with everything and I get in a mess ..."*.

Another disappointing aspect is the time effort required by the Course and the lack of free time: *"... with this type of attendance I can't get a job to cover the university fees, I can't help my family, I'm busy almost every day until late afternoon ..."; "... it's important to be able to maintain a suitable social life for being able to tackle this course of study as best as possible ..."; "... I wasn't expecting compulsory attendance for all the subjects, especially for the non-professional ones ..."; "... I am very demotivated because there are lots of things to study and I can't do it as thoroughly as I'd like to ..."*.

Some students were disappointed by the mentors in some wards: *"... I felt invisible ..."; "... I felt like a spare part as there were so many of us on placement - it seemed like a waste of time, I didn't manage to do much ..."; "... I'm disappointed by the nurses that didn't help me during the procedures and that didn't look after me during the placement ..."; "... I'm disappointed by the fact that often on the ward they don't know who you are and what you can do ..."*.

Discussion

By students who took part in focus groups, it emerges that the nursing occupation is very undervalued and diminished compared to others, despite the

Table 1. Summarizes the number of occurrences relating to each theme emerged and the percentage of occurrences with respect to the number of participants

Themes emerged	Number of occurrences
Attractive factors of the nursing profession	
Attraction to the figure of the nurse	20
Voluntary work at associations active in the emergency and care area	7
Good job opportunities	18
Friends and relatives nurses	7
Motivating aspects of the course of study and the profession	
Interesting moments during the debriefing sessions with mentors	10
Nurse as mediator between patients, family and members of the team	13
Emotional bond with the hospitalised person	17
Scientific discussion and cooperation with the other members of the team	16
Variability and versatility of the work	16
Demotivating aspects of the course of study and of the profession	
Difficulty with the theory part	11
Lack of free time	27
Disappointment for the mentors of some wards	13
Social image undervalued, subordinate and underpaid	22
Profession full of risks	15
Workload too high and very stressful	25
Fear of emotional involvement	13
Fear to make mistakes and cause damage to patients	19

level of preparation required, independent planning and management of the care provided and the consequent responsibilities. This result was also obtained in other studies, which maintain that students who choose the Degree Course in Nursing have incorrect conceptions and stereotyped images of the nursing occupation i.e. of a subordinate occupation, which only requires common sense and not much preparation (7, 32). It also emerges that studying nursing gives students satisfaction when they see the progress made by the person cared for and because they feel useful for that person, at that particular time of their life. They also state that they become sensitised to others, from a human and relational point of view, in line with other studies, which describe selflessness and the desire to meet people or satisfy their emotional needs, as determined by the motivation of the nursing student (16, 17, 33).

The students highlight the fact that the nursing occupation is stressful in terms of pace, high work-loads, difficult emotional management, with a higher risk of burnout compared to other occupations; all these elements frighten and worry the students in our study

and are in line with previous studies (7, 34). It also emerges that the conciliation of compulsory attendance with free time is a very heartfelt need; students complain about having not much time for themselves and for their family and friends. This element was also described by Niemiec & Ryan (35), who maintain that fulfilling basic needs contributes to people's wellbeing and is important for the academic motivation of students.

The choice to go into the nursing occupation was made by most of our students when they were young children or at secondary school, and was dictated by personal experiences or work experiences of relatives and acquaintances in the health care setting. This result was also reported by Hartung et al. (36), who maintain that informal learning on choice of occupation starts in early childhood and is added to by initiatives in the last year of secondary school. Research on the type of course to attend by part of our students took place mainly through consulting university websites. This result is also reported in other studies (37-39), from which it emerges that websites and social media can

provide a series of information on the nursing occupation, training courses, professional development and employment opportunities.

The clinical practice experience proved to be very important and constructive; it helped students to decide more clearly if they were doing the right course and what their working future could be like. The students also found the debriefing sessions useful and constructive, as opportunities to meet, discuss, listen and redefine some unclear situations that needed to be reprocessed. But for other students, the placement experience was negative and seen as a source of disappointment; in fact, some of them state that they weren't accepted and looked after properly so as to be able to achieve the clinical learning objectives, in line with the study by Lai et al. (40) and Hanifi et al. (19) some students reported difficulties in applying theory to practice. Other students reported negative shadowing of nurses who did not take their ideas seriously. This was also found and described by Brodie et al. (7), who maintain that today's students have been educated to have faith in themselves and to be taken seriously and expect to be able to express their opinion and contribute to working practice.

A source of frustration and demotivation also comes from the pressing schedule of the course of study, which does not enable the subjects to be looked at in depth and the exams to be passed with good marks. The motivational factors for students to become nurses could be useful for recognising students who are more likely to perceive stress due to unmet expectations (41). In fact, in accordance with Matteson-Kane & Clarren (42), we believe that it is the specific responsibility of educators to identify possible drop outs promptly, so as to develop suitable support strategies for promoting success in their studies.

This study has confirmed the data reported in literature, according to which the main motivational factor in choosing nursing is the desire to help others (33). Nurses involved in nursing training are responsible for keeping this ideal high, which is possible by doing whatever they can to provide incentives for personalised care to a restricted number of patients, with a suitable nurse/patient ratio to guarantee good quality and humane care. If it is not possible to provide ideal care, university curricula should dedicate time to

helping students adapt to the reality of our health care services (12). This study has also highlighted a distinctive trait of the students of the new generations, in that they have a strong need, perhaps more so than in the past, to feel like they are taken seriously and treated with respect (7). This implies relevant training for mentors.

In reference to the critical elements that emerged in the focus groups and, in particular, the gap that can be created between the motivational factors for students to choose the nursing occupation and the demotivating factors that can emerge during the course of study, a series of interventions can be hypothesised which could support the choice made and the underlying motivations:

- *counselling* to provide support for students and identify any critical situations early on (33, 43);
- *meetings* to support motivation (44, 45);
- *identification of clinical areas of good practice* for carrying out the placement (45);
- *good communication* between students, the University and the clinical practice settings (46);
- *support for the qualification and continuing education of the nursing team* and the mentor and formal recognition of that figure;
- *one-to-one tutoring* to support the course of study, able to provide back-up in case of problems (47);
- *planning placements* in contexts able to guarantee the presence of trained mentors, a suitable number of nurses, a care model that aims to guarantee personalised care and quality (48).

Considering the significance that the relational dimension takes on in the genesis of unease and the desire to drop out, in accordance with Last and Fulbrook (49), we see the tutorial model as the key element for supporting students throughout their course of study. A well-structured tutorial system (48, 50), possibly with the support of a Faculty counsellor, is a determining factor for maintaining students on the Course. Since in Italian universities the figure of Faculty counsellor is not easy to include, it may be possible to opt for the development of counselling skills for tutors, through specific training courses (43).

Strategies for improving recruitment, socialisation and retention of nurses should include informa-

tion campaigns to support the nursing occupation to be seen as a fundamental occupation and complementary to the others. The organisations that represent nurses should be involved in creating positive images and messages regarding nurses, for the purpose of underlining their skills and intended for all age ranges (51). Furthermore, students who choose to enrol on the Degree Course in Nursing, must be given the chance to make a choice based on correct and accurate information in relation to the commitment required by the course, through informative meetings for secondary school students, run by nurses operating in training and clinical practice (52).

Limits of the study

This study has pointed out the motivating and demotivating factors that support the choice of nursing. The focus group heavily relies on assisted discussion to produce results; consequently the full freedom of discussion could not be completely guaranteed. Moreover, the participant selection system does not allow to generalize these results to the larger population outside of the context studied, since this study was conducted in a single University course of northern Italy. This research should be replicated in several different contexts, in order to outline the motivations to the choice of nursing as well as to implement all the helpful strategies to support this choice.

Conclusions

To understand the motivational factors on which the choice of the nursing occupation is based, new approaches are needed, so as to analyse the challenges of the complex world of work that distinguishes the modern world, particularly in health care, where the recruitment of new nurses is considered a priority throughout the world. The limits of theories looked at in the past, impose developing research with mixed methods, which also include qualitative research, so as to be able to provide indications for the world of nursing training for more effective recruitment of future nurses who are truly motivated to do such a complex

and demanding occupation. Exploring the motivational factors based on which current students have decided to make this choice could help to understand how the nursing occupation is perceived and the expectations that students have at the start of the course. This understanding is necessary for nurses who work in the training field, to develop curricula that consider the students' background and the perception they have of the nursing occupation. Spreading more detailed information on the course of study, on working conditions and on future career perspectives could help students to make an informed and aware decision, in order to reduce disappointments and drop outs. Informing citizens more on the real profile of nurses today could attract more young people to the nursing occupation. Improving the organisation of the course of study and supporting students' motivation through counselling activities could be a useful strategy for preventing drop outs and improving the retention of new graduates in the occupation. Finally, it is fundamental to continue investing in the quality of the placement sites and the training of mentors.

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