

# **ATTITUDE OF NURSING STUDENTS TOWARDS PSYCHIATRY AS AN AREA OF SPECIALIZATION**

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## **Abstract**

### **Background**

There is a paucity of competent mental health professionals, including psychiatric nurses, in most developing countries such as Nigeria. The origins of this problem appear to be multi-factorial, but inadequate exposure to psychiatry, during the course of basic nursing training may be contributory to the apathy towards the specialty of psychiatry.

### **Objectives**

To examine the attitudes of nursing students to psychiatry and their intention to pursue psychiatry as a career after their basic training.

### **Methodology**

A cross-sectional survey was conducted on a convenience sample of 100 final year nursing students who were undergoing their clinical posting in psychiatry. A modified version of the 30-item Attitudes to Psychiatry (ATP-30) Questionnaire and a Socio-demographic Questionnaire were utilized.

### **Results**

The students had a mean ATP-30 score of 101.7 (s.d = 9.2, range = 77- 124). There was no gender difference in scores (102.9 vs. 100.4,  $X^2 = 21.95$ ,  $p = 0.639$ ), but a significant association was found between the age group 21-25 years and general knowledge of psychiatry ( $X^2 = 40.2$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). Psychiatric nursing was ranked fourth on the basis of expressed '*definite intention*' about choice of future career specialization.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study confirm the unpopularity of psychiatric nursing as a future area of specialization among students of basic nursing. There is the need for concerted and systematic efforts to ensure adequate exposure to psychiatry during the basic training. It is hoped that this will result in better appreciation and interest in the specialty as a consideration for subsequent specialization.

## **Key words**

Attitudes, career choices, nursing students, psychiatric nursing

## **Introduction**

The prevalence of mental illness in various Nigerian communities has been reported to be as high as 27.8% <sup>1</sup> and 21.3% <sup>2</sup> respectively. These figures imply that about one out of every four Nigerians is at risk of developing a mental illness. Unfortunately, there is a severe shortage of mental health professionals in the country to address and cater to those individuals with mental illness. Gureje also reported the ratio of psychiatric nurses to the population as 1:25,000 <sup>3</sup>.

This shortage of psychiatric nurses is not unique to Nigeria but is a common feature in most African countries and even the developed world. A basic approach towards improving the numerical strength of psychiatric nurses in the country will require improved recruitment into post-basic psychiatric nursing training as an initial step.

However, reports in the literature from the developed world, have reported that most nursing students have a negative attitude towards psychiatry as an area of specialization, stemming largely from ignorance, which can be improved upon through adequate exposure to psychiatry during basic training <sup>4,5</sup>.

Other researchers have reported that nursing students who attended a psychiatric course did not demonstrate a more positive attitude towards the mentally ill, when compared with those who did not attend similar courses <sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, they reported that even after the psychiatric education, the mistrust and fear towards psychiatric patients were not eliminated, although there were some positive changes in their attitudes.

There is a dearth of studies about the attitudes of nursing students towards psychiatry as an area of specialization from the developing countries generally and from Africa specifically. This study therefore, aims to assess the attitude of nursing students in Maiduguri towards the choice of psychiatry as an area of specialization.

## **Subjects and Methods**

A convenience sample of 100 undergraduate students from the School of Basic Nursing, University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital, Maiduguri, who were undergoing their psychiatric posting were recruited into the study. The students were in their final year and therefore, at the point of determining their subsequent choice of specialization.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the School of Basic Nursing, before the subjects were approached to participate in the survey. Subjects were recruited after the study was explained to them and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality was assured by not using identifying markers such as names of the respondents on the questionnaires.

The questionnaire used for this study was a modified version of the 30-item Attitudes to Psychiatry (ATP-30) Scale <sup>7</sup>. The scale measures attitude towards psychiatry using a 5-point Likert scale and it was first designed and validated for use among medical students <sup>7</sup>. The questions cover attitudes to psychiatric patients, mental illness and treatment, psychiatrists, psychiatric institutions, teaching, knowledge, and career choice in psychiatry. It generates a score on each item of the 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 - 5; thus generating a global score between 30 and 150. Higher scores on the ATP-30 indicate more favourable attitudes towards psychiatry and vice versa.

Socio-demographic data recorded were age, gender and type of secondary school attended; while career preference was measured using a 5-item rating scale <sup>8</sup>, with possible responses ranging from 'definite intention to pursue' to 'definite intention not to pursue'. Students were asked about intent to pursue individual nursing specialties and, using the same scale, about their intent to

pursue a psychiatric nursing career. The questionnaires were distributed to the students during their four weeks clinical posting in psychiatry at the Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Maiduguri. The questionnaires were administered by self report, in their class rooms, but without the presence of authority figures such as their teachers, in order to provide a relaxed atmosphere, devoid of intimidation. The data obtained was subjected mainly to descriptive statistics using EPI info (2005) and SPSS version 11.0 statistical packages for windows. Comparisons were made between ATP-30 scores for all the groups (Kruskal- Wallis test). Non-parametric correlations (Spearman's rho and Pearson's r) were calculated and utilized as the data was not normally distributed, in order to identify the relationships between attitudes to psychiatry and intentions to pursue different nursing specialities as a career. Statistical significance was set at 5% level, with a correlation coefficient at or above 0.20.

## Results

The questionnaire was completed by 86 students, representing a response rate of 86%. However, only data from 50 students could be analysed, accounting for 58%, while the questionnaires from 36 students had to be discarded as a result of incomplete data.

Forty-one students (82%) were female and 98.9% were between the ages of 15-25 years. The types of school attended were: Private Secondary School (22.1%), Government Secondary School (41.9%), Federal Government College (12.8%), Unity College (7.0%), Military/Para-military School (2.3%).

The students had a mean ATP-30 score of 101.7 (s.d = 9.2, range = 77- 124). There was no gender difference in scores (102.9 vs. 100.4,  $X^2 = 21.95$ ,  $p = 0.639$ ), but significant association was found between the age group 21-25 and general knowledge of psychiatry ( $X^2 = 40.2$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). A positive correlation was also found between the statement, "I will like to be a psychiatric nurse" and the intention to specialise in psychiatric nursing (Spearman's  $\rho = 0.014$ , Pearson's  $r = 0.019$ ). The ATP-30 scores are shown in Table 1.

The undergraduate nursing students found more than one career choice '*very attractive*', and therefore, the numbers add up to more than the total number of respondents (students). The total scores and percentages indicate the total number of students who ticked each option.

There was a definite intention by 23.4% to study nursing after post-basic training, while twenty-one students (17.0%) had firmly decided against continuing the nursing profession. On the basis of expressed '*definite intention*' the most popular choice of career was surgical nursing (53.3%), while psychiatric nursing ranked fourth (42.3%) and dermatology came in as



the least popular, with 7.7%. Utilizing the expressed intention ‘*definitely not*’, to indicate specialties that the nursing students appear to rule out as an option for specialization, genito-urinary nursing (33.3%), geriatric nursing (31.3%) and ophthalmic nursing (31.3%) have the strongest disapproval rating; while paediatric nursing (0.0%), anaesthesia (3.4%) and psychiatry (3.8%) are the specialties that were least ruled out. See Table 2.

**Table 1: Attitude of nursing students toward psychiatry**

<b>ATP- 30 Score</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<90	4	8.0
90- 99	13	26.0
100- 109	21	42.0
>109	12	24.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Total score = 5093, mean = 101.7, range = 77- 124, s.d = 9.2

Total respondents =86

Total respondents after exclusion due to absent response = 50

**Table 2: The popularity of psychiatric nursing relative to other subspecialties of nursing**

<b>Specialty</b>	<b>Definitely not</b>	<b>Not very attractive</b>	<b>Very attractive</b>	<b>Definite intention</b>	<b>Total</b>
Paediatric nursing*	0(0)	6(26.1)	12(52.2)	5(21.7)	23
Surgical nursing	2(6.7)	1(3.3)	11(36.7)	16(53.3)	30
General Practice nursing	4(13.3)	2(6.7)	10(33.3)	14(46.7)	30
Psychiatric nursing*	1(3.8)	3(11.5)	11(42.3)	11(42.3)	26
Internal Medicine nursing*	3(18.8)	5(31.3)	5(31.3)	3(18.8)	16
O&G nursing	4(23.5)	4(23.5)	4(23.5)	5(29.4)	17
Infectious Diseases nursing*	3(20.0)	4(26.7)	6(40.0)	2(13.3)	15
Ophthalmic nursing	5(31.3)	4(25.0)	4(25.0)	3(18.6)	16
Anaesthetic nursing	1(3.4)	1(3.4)	14(48.3)	13(44.8)	29
Ear, Nose and Throat nursing	3(18.8)	5(31.3)	5(31.3)	3(18.8)	16
Dermatological nursing*	4(30.8)	5(38.5)	3(23.1)	1(7.7)	13
Genitourinary nursing*	5(33.3)	4(26.7)	3(20.0)	3(20.0)	15
Nursing for the Elderly*	5(31.3)	3(18.8)	4(25.0)	4(25.0)	16
Total	40(15.3)	47(18.0)	92(35.1)	83(31.7)	262
Nursing as a whole	21(17.0)	30(24.2)	44(35.5)	29(23.4)	124

\*Specialties under medical nursing

## Discussion

It is not altogether surprising, that psychiatry was low in the ranking of preferred career choices; despite the fact that nearly one third (31.7%) of the final year undergraduate nursing students indicated a definitive interest in further specialization after their basic nursing training.

The results of this study only corroborate the findings of previous reports<sup>5,9,10</sup>, indicating that trainee student nurses usually have a poor impression and a negative attitude towards psychiatry and mental illness. Possible reasons for this negative attitude towards psychiatry in this environment may include the pervasive stigma and widespread ignorance about mental illnesses and its aetiology. Beliefs about the supernatural causation of mental illness are still quite common, and a study from Ilorin reported that 40% of patients presenting to the psychiatric unit, had initially consulted with a traditional/spiritual healer prior to the hospital visit as a last resort<sup>11</sup>. This route to mental health care did not differ across socio-economic classes and was also unaffected by educational background, thus indicating the pervasiveness of this beliefs in the society.

The results from our study also agree with the work of Stevens & Dulhunty<sup>10</sup>, which suggested that undergraduate nursing students tend to favour the highly technical areas of nursing practice, such as surgery and anaesthesia. In this study, and on the basis of expressed '*definite intention*', the most popular career choices were surgical nursing (53.3%), followed by general nursing (46.7%) and then anaesthetic nursing (44.8%).

Although psychiatric/mental health nursing has consistently emerged as an unpopular career choice, the findings in this study appear to hold out some hope, as many of these students do not rule out psychiatry, unlike some other

specialties that they appear to strongly dislike. This should prompt attention towards improving the exposure and curriculum of nursing students in the area of psychiatry with a view to improving their disposition towards the specialty. There is documented evidence in the literature to support the effectiveness of such educational approaches towards improving the attitudes of nursing students to psychiatry as a career choice<sup>12, 13</sup>. It is hoped that this approach would also prove useful in this environment in the near future.

### **Limitations**

This study was a small exploratory survey to provide insight into the situation among nursing students in this environment. The findings therein, may therefore not be generalizable, but may only typify local perceptions.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study confirm that nursing students have negative attitude and low interest in the specialty of psychiatry as a career choice for specialization. Further research, is however required, on a wider scale and preferably with a design to assess the efficacy of educational interventions to improve their attitude and knowledge of psychiatry.

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