

## Impact of Clinical Placement on Nursing Students' Attitudes towards Psychiatry

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**Abstract** Research lacks studies concerning nursing students' attitude toward psychiatry. The objective of this study aimed to determine the nursing students' attitude toward psychiatric and mental health nursing and their intentions to pursue psychiatry as a future career. One hundred and fourteen nursing students, College of Nursing, King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences – Riyadh, undertaking the Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing course during the academic year 2009 – 2010 were invited to participate in this study. Participants were asked to complete the modified Burra et al. Attitude toward Psychiatry-30 (1982) questionnaire on the first day of their clinical placement and the same questionnaire again on the last day of their clinical placement. Students' participation was voluntary and confidential. Results showed that after the clinical placement, students showed more positive attitude toward psychiatry as evidenced by the mean total scores pre and post-clinical placement (89.5, 104.1 respectively). Only fourteen students (13.7) reported that they would choose psychiatric nursing as a future career, while the majority of the participants 88 (86.3%) would not choose psychiatric nursing as a future career. Positive clinical experience has impact on the students' attitude toward psychiatry. Manipulating the clinical experience might encourage nurse students to choose psychiatric nursing as their future career which in turn would help on recruitment and retention of psychiatric nurses worldwide.

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### 1. Introduction:

Mental health has been hidden behind the curtain of stigma and discrimination for long time, according to the WHO report psychiatric disorders are now among the top ten causes of economic burden of diseases while depression is second in the list (WHO, 2010). Nursing shortage has been acknowledged as a problem worldwide, furthermore attracting nursing students to specialize in psychiatry is another major issue. Negative attitudes toward mental health nursing as a career option has been identified as a major barrier to sustaining an adequate psychiatric nursing workforce (Happell and Gough, 2009). Attitude is defined by Rezler as "an emotionally linked, learnt belief around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner" (Rezler, 1976). Attitudes are major determinants of behavior (Baron, 1992), in this regard if we can manipulate the students' attitudes in a positive way, it might help to encourage those students to choose psychiatric nursing as a future career.

Attitudes toward psychiatry have been studied extensively among medical students worldwide (Abdul-Rahim and El-Assra, 1989; Baptista, et al., 1993; Al-Ansari and Alsadadi, 2002; Bulbena, et al., 2005 and Kuhnigk et al., 2009) while only few studies were focused onto nursing students (Slimmer et al., 1990; Keane, 1991; Callaghan et al., 1997; Evagelou

et al., 2005 and Happell and Gough, 2009). Although it is well documented in the literature that undergraduate nursing students held more negative attitudes toward mentally ill people and the profession of mental health nursing (Happell 2001; Davidson and connery, 2003 and Tsang et al., 2003), other research studies have concluded that those negative attitudes can be positively impacted by proper nursing education (Stevens and Dulhunty 1997; Bell et al., 1998 and Happell, 2001). Research lacks studies concerning aspects of nursing education that influences the attitudes positively.

Most research have focused on the clinical experience as a primary indicator relying on the assumption that contact and interactions with people with mental health problems reduce fear and anxiety and in turn would impact students' attitude in a more positive way (Steven and Dulhunty, 1997; Happell, 2001 and Happell and Rushworth, 2000), however, there is no direct evidence linking specific components of psychiatry attachments with the improved attitude for example: student satisfaction with psychiatric setting, staff and patients, seeing patients who respond well to treatment or direct involvement in patient care (McParland et al., 2003).

No similar study have been carried out in Saudi Arabia which has obvious acute shortage in nursing and particularly those specialized in psychiatric nursing leading mental health organization to recruit

psychiatric nurses from other countries with different lingual and cultural background. Thus, proper understanding of the attitude of nursing students toward psychiatry is essential as they are the potential trainees in psychiatric nursing and some of those students will be the near future psychiatric nurses.

#### **Purposes of the study were:**

- To identify the nursing students' attitudes towards psychiatry
- To assess nursing students' intentions to pursue psychiatric nursing as a future career
- To investigate possible differences in the attitude of the students after the completion of the theoretical and clinical training of the course of psychiatric / mental health nursing

## **2. Subjects and Methods**

### **Subjects**

A total of 114 female nursing students, College of Nursing, King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences – Riyadh (KSUHS – R), undertaking the Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing course during the academic year 2009 – 2010 were invited to participate in this study. The course consists of total of 165 hours (15 weeks), 30 hours of theory classes and 135 hours of clinical practice, clinical rotation includes acute and chronic wards, emergency services, and outpatient consultation.

Participants were asked to complete the Attitude toward Psychiatry-30 (ATP-30) questionnaire on the first day of their clinical placement and the same questionnaire again on the last day of their clinical placement. Anonymity was ensured by using identification codes on the questionnaires that facilitated individual comparison of pre and post clinical placement responses. It was clearly stated that students' participation is voluntary and confidential and that the responses would not in any way impact their final grades of the course.

### **Instrument**

The 30-item Attitude toward Psychiatry-30 (ATP-30) questionnaire was developed by Burra et al. (1982) to study attitudes toward various aspects of psychiatry on the basis of a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale measures attitudes toward mental illnesses, psychiatric patients, psychiatrists, psychiatric institutions, teaching, knowledge, and career choice. The scale has four subscales "domains" as following: Attitude to Psychiatry and Mental Illness (11 items), Attitudes to Patients and Treatments (8 items), Attitudes to Psychiatric Nursing and Institutions (7 items), and Attitudes to Psychiatric Teaching and as a Career (4

items). Total score ranges between 30 and 150. The higher the score, the more favorable the attitude toward psychiatry (minimum score 30 = very negative attitude; maximum score 150 = very positive attitude; score of 90 = neutral attitude). The ATP – 30 has been used and validated with medical, pharmacy and nursing students. Minor adaptations were made to the questionnaire to accommodate nursing students. The modified ATP – 30 questionnaire was completed by students before and after taking the course.

The questionnaire was designated in the way that in some questions a higher number reflects a better attitude, while in others lower number reflects a better attitude. To allow for statistical comparison, all scores were converted so that a higher number represented a better attitude.

In addition to the ATP – 30, sociodemographic characteristics of the students including age, any past experience with a mentally ill person. In addition, their intention to choose psychiatric nursing as a career in the future was included.

### **Research Design**

A quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive correlation research design was utilized to conduct the current study.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The data were analyzed using SPSS (SPSS version 17.0). A paired t test was used to analyze the total scores of students before and after the course, furthermore, each specific question was analyzed separately with the same method. Between-group Sociodemographic and attitudinal differences were analyzed using  $\chi^2$  tests. Pearson Product Moment test and t test for independent samples were used when applicable.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In line with most research studies, this study has few limitations, which might influence the generalizability of the findings. One limitation is that it was conducted in a single institution, used internal controls (before versus after placement within the same group of students) rather than comparison with external controls. In case the study had included students from other similar institutions, interinstitutional comparison might have added to the weight of the study. One other limitation is that the participants were aware of the researcher interests, which could affected some of the responses as they may have given responses that they thought were desirable or more socially acceptable.

### 3. Results

#### Demographics:

There were 102 female respondents who completed both the pre and post clinical placement questionnaires out of total of 114 students in the fall, spring 2008-2009 and fall 2009 academic years. This gave an overall response rate of 89.5%.

Participants' age ranged between 20 and 28 years with a mean age of 23.9 years. Of the participants 38 (37.3 %) had a personal past experience with a mentally ill person while 64 (62.7 %) did not have such experiences.

Before the clinical placement, only fourteen students (13.7) reported that they would choose psychiatric nursing as a future career, while the majority of the participants 88 (86.3%) would not choose psychiatric nursing as a future career, while after the clinical placement the numbers improved to 29 (28.4 %) would select psychiatric nursing as their future career, while around three quarters of the participants 73 (71.6 %) still would not choose psychiatric nursing as their future career.

#### Attitude toward Psychiatry

Total attitude toward psychiatry score was divided into three categories as following (negative attitude, lowest score – 80; neutral attitude, 81 – 100; and positive attitude 101 – highest score), results of the current study showed that before the clinical placement, half of the participants (51 students, 50 %) showed neutral attitude while only 19 (18.6 %) showed positive attitude and 32 (31.4 %) compared

to only nine students (8.8 %) showed negative attitude, 52 (51 %) neutral attitude and more than third the participants, 41 (40 %) showed positive attitude toward psychiatry after the clinical placement (table 1). The paired *t*-test was used to compare the attitude score before and after the clinical exposure, results indicated a statistically significant difference in the mean scores conducted pre- and post clinical training. The difference in the mean score was fourteen higher after training ( $p = 0.000$ ,  $t = 5.687$ ).

After the clinical placement, students showed more positive attitude toward psychiatry as evidenced by the mean total scores pre and post clinical placement (89.5 and 104.1 respectively) with pre clinical placement minimum total score of 37 and maximum score of 119 (SD 20.9), after the clinical placement the minimum total score raised to 61 and maximum score was 146 (SD 16.2). Additionally, results of the current study showed little changes in the scale domains as following:

Attitudes to psychiatry and mental illness showed minimal improvement as reflected in the mean score before and after the clinical placement (39.4 - 42.8, SD: 5.4 – 5.0) respectively, same with the students' Attitudes to Patients and Treatments (Mean 25.9 – 29.1, SD: 4.6 – 4.7), Attitudes to Psychiatric Nursing and Institutions showed no changes after the clinical placement (Mean scores 21.1 – 21.4, SD: 3.6 – 3.6) and Attitudes to Psychiatric Teaching and as a Career showed minimal negative changes after the clinical experience (Mean 12.1 – 10.8, SD: 3.4 – 2.5) (table 2).

Table 1: Nursing Students' Attitude toward Psychiatry Before and After Clinical Placement (N = 102)

Variable	Pre – training				Post – training				Statistics “Paired Samples t test” N = 102
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	
Total ATP-30 Scale Score	89.5	20.9	37	119	104.1	16.2	61	146	$t = -5.687$ , $p = 0.000$
Attitude to Psychiatry and Mental Illness	39.4	5.4	26	51	42.0	5.0	31	54	$t = -3.282$ , $p = 0.001$
Attitudes to Patients and Treatments	25.9	4.6	16	34	29.1	4.7	16	38	$t = -4.362$ , $p = 0.000$
Attitudes to Psychiatric Nursing and Institutions	20.8	3.7	14	28	21.4	3.6	13	27	$t = -1.627$ , $p = 0.107$
Attitudes to Psychiatric Teaching and as a Career	12.1	3.4	4	18	10.9	2.5	6	16	$t = 2.831$ , $p = 0.006$

Table 2: Results for ATP-30 Scale Before and After Clinical Placement (N = 102)

Categories	Before Clinical Training		After Clinical Training	
	N	%	N	%
Negative Attitude	32	31.4	9	8.8
Neutral Attitude	51	50.0	52	51.0
Positive Attitude	19	18.6	41	40.2
Total	102	100%	102	100%

$Z = -4.354$ ,  $p = 0.000$

T test for independent samples revealed statistically significant positive relationship between attitude toward psychiatry and the intention to choose psychiatric nursing as a future career both pre the placement and after the clinical exposure ( $t = 2.439$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ;  $t = 2.853$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), tables 3 & 4. This finding indicates that those students who would select psychiatric nursing as a future career have more favorable attitude toward psychiatry.

**Table 3: Relationship between attitudes towards psychiatry and intention to choose psychiatric nursing as a future career before clinical experience**

Attitudes towards Psychiatry					
Intention To Choose Psychiatry as a Career		Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
	Yes	30	45	13	88
	No	2	6	6	14
	Total	32	51	19	102

$\chi^2 = 6.790, p = .01$

**Table 4: Relationship between attitudes towards psychiatry and intention to choose psychiatric nursing as a future career after clinical experience**

Attitudes towards Psychiatry					
Intention To Choose Psychiatry as a Career		Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
	Yes	9	40	24	73
	No	0	12	17	29
	Total	9	52	41	102

$\chi^2 = 7.730, p = .00$

No statistically significant relationship between attitude toward psychiatry and having past experience with a mentally ill person ( $t = 1.056, p = 0.294$ ;  $t = 0.834, p = 0.407$ ). Participants' age in years had no statistically significant relationship with the attitude score both before and after the placement as indicated by the Pearson Product Correlation test ( $r = 0.044, p = 0.662$ ;  $r = -.185, p = 0.06$  respectively).

#### 4. Discussion

Findings of the current study are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by (Hellesbush 1989; Demarzo 1990; Slimmer et al. 1990; Keane 1991 and Evagelou et al., 2005,) who reported that the nursing students' attitudes toward mental illness and psychiatric nursing changed for better after the psychiatric placement. Consistent with the findings of (Callaghan et al., 1997), the current study revealed no statistically significant relationship between attitude toward psychiatry and having past experience with a mentally ill person. This finding contradicts the findings of (Evagelou et al., 2005) who found that students who had a relative with a mental illness reported more positive attitude toward psychiatry. While there were many studies focused on the relationship between attitude towards psychiatry and career choice among medical students (McParland et al., 2003; Bulbena et al., 2005; Reddy et al., 2005; Issa, et al., 2008 and Khan, et al., 2008). No research studies have been found that linked the nursing students' attitude towards psychiatry with their age or the intention to pursue psychiatric nursing as a future career. Findings of the current study are consistent with the findings of the research study conducted by Murray and Chamber (1991) who reported that education prior to the clinical placement influenced student nurse's attitudes to patients, the authors also noted that increased knowledge gained during classroom

instruction had a positive effect on the student's attitudes toward the patient.

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

This study showed that CON – R nursing students showed more favorable attitude toward psychiatry after the completion of the course work of psychiatric and mental health nursing (theory and practical components). Positive clinical experience has impact on the students' attitude toward psychiatry. Manipulating the clinical experience and approaching students with high ATP individually during their internship year might encourage nurse students to choose psychiatric nursing as their future career, which in turn would help on recruitment and retention of psychiatric nurses in Saudi Arabia. It is also important for nurse educator to investigate the areas of emphasis to address as the students experiences and the difficulties in their interpersonal skills with the patients in order to promote more positive experience with the area of psychiatry.

Research studies combining both quantitative and qualitative research approaches are recommended to gain more insight on the impact of the exposure to educational experience on nursing students' attitude and selection of psychiatric nursing as their future career.

Further studies to assess the impact of theoretical part of the course versus the clinical exposure are recommended.

Research studies investigating the nature of the contact with mental illness and how it might affect the attitudes toward psychiatry are suggested.

Longitudinal research studies are recommended to assess changes in the attitudes and career choices later in life.

### Significance of the Study

- It adds to the body of knowledge on nursing students' attitude toward psychiatry and impact of clinical practice experience on the students' attitude.
- Knowledge gained from the study will help curriculum designers to develop future sound educational programs for students undertaking psychiatric nursing courses.

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