

Overcoming Stereotypes and Shaping the Future: The Motivations and Challenges of Male
Nursing Students in a Gendered Profession

by

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A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

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04/07/2025

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Aim: This study aimed to explore the personal experiences and factors influencing males' attraction to nursing while seeking to understand their motivations, perceptions, and challenges.

Background: The lack of male recruitment and retention exacerbates the nursing shortage, decreasing overall effectiveness and worsening patient health outcomes. Men offer a fresh perspective to the profession yet face greater adversity than their peers during their nursing education and careers.

Methodology: This study will use a qualitative descriptive design involving one-on-one interviews with male nursing students from all ECU College of Nursing semesters. The interview and questions will be open-ended, and each interview will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of the answers listed in this study. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: Seven male nursing students from varying levels of education, aged 21-31, responded. Themes found in the individual interviews about the recruitment and retention of males in nursing included job stability, altruism, and competitive pay. Other themes highlighted many barriers for men in nursing, including a lack of role models, a lack of masculine imagery associated with the profession, and harmful societal stigmas.

Discussion: Male nursing students face greater adversity during their education than others, struggling with a perceived stigma and rejection from their peers. They could be attracted to the profession by advertisements surrounding issues of job stability, competitive salaries, and appeals to their altruism. Future research must focus on how to appeal to men to combat a growing shortage.

Introduction

Nursing is an essential and critical component of healthcare, and it plays a vital role in saving lives across the globe. Nursing is a vast profession spanning hundreds of diverse career paths and opportunities, yet it often needs to provide equal representation for the very population it serves.

Currently, there are very few men in nursing, with only 12% of nurses being men (Munday, 2023), and even fewer make up the student population. Societal pressures, public perception, lack of male role models, and dated stereotypes can lead to many male students avoiding the profession altogether.

With an ever-growing nursing shortage exacerbated by burnout and stress (Davidson et al., 2022), we must diversify our marketing and efforts to attract more people to the field. The potential impacts of a nursing shortage could be avoided by garnering more interest in male populations. Still, to do so, we must first identify what barriers stand in the way of our male students joining this field and consolidate our efforts toward solving those issues.

Background

The presence of males in nursing brings a fresh perspective to the profession, enriching the diversity of perspectives and experiences within healthcare settings. However, this shift is not without its challenges. Male nurses often encounter gender-related stereotypes and biases, both from within the profession and from society at large. These stereotypes may include assumptions about masculinity, caregiving roles, and suitability for certain nursing specialties. These beliefs and misconceptions run deep, affecting various age groups and societal populations. A study aimed at male high school students found their perceptions of nursing to be far more negative than their female or gay/bisexual male counterparts, stating

that “the results reveal a societal culture that preserves and promotes gender and sexual orientation stereotyping to high school students” (Palazzo & Erickson, 2022, p.1).

With a shortage of male nursing students comes a shortage of male nurse educators. One study found instances of gender-based barriers, stereotypes, and discrimination experienced by male nurses in various clinical settings, with a lack of male nurse educators and role models playing a part in causing a high attrition rate among male students (Bayuo et al., 2022). Nursing has traditionally been viewed as a female-dominated profession, leading to stereotypes and misconceptions about men in nursing. Male nursing students may encounter societal expectations or biases that question their career choices. A recent study shows that “attitudes and misconceptions that elicit gender inequalities must be addressed with comprehensive strategies and de-gendered language and imagery within the profession” (Ramjan et al., 2023, p.1) to better attract more males to the field.

Research also shows that low male participation can stem from career counselors hesitating to recommend nursing to men (Davidson et al., 2022). A review of current literature supports the view that nursing is a remarkably gendered profession, with many men in the field citing a lack of awareness of nursing as a career path as a reason they didn’t initially feel drawn to the profession (Guy et al., 2022).

These issues will not help to prevent or even postpone what seems to be an ever-encroaching nursing shortage in the US. Our population is growing and aging rapidly, and nursing is an ever more necessary occupation in our society. Shortages will only lead to worse health outcomes and economic downturns, proving detrimental to our overall public health. Campaigns to increase the number of male nursing students in programs can be effective, so we can conclude that efforts to attract men to the field are a fruitful endeavor to

solve this potential crisis. As the healthcare landscape evolves and diversity within the nursing workforce is increasingly valued, male nursing students play a crucial role in challenging stereotypes, promoting inclusivity, and advancing healthcare delivery.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative research study aims to explore the personal experiences and factors influencing the attraction of male nursing students to the nursing profession. Through in-depth interviews and open-ended questions, the study seeks to uncover the individual motivations, perceptions, and challenges male nursing students face in their journey toward pursuing nursing as a career. By gaining insights into their unique experiences and perspectives, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape the career choices of male nursing students and inform strategies to attract and support future generations of male nurses.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive design involving one-on-one interviews with male nursing students from all ECU College of Nursing semesters. Male nursing students received an email inviting them to schedule an interview at their convenience. The interview and questions were open-ended, and each interview was recorded to ensure the accuracy of the answers listed in this study. This study was conducted during NURS 3750 and NURS 4750 with the mentorship and guidance of Dr. Mark Hand. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using transcription services from Microsoft Teams. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were used to represent the sample demographics and characteristics.

Interview Questions

- How did you get interested in nursing?
- Where did you first hear about men in nursing?

- Was there an aspect to it that attracted you to the profession/major?
- Why do you believe there are so few men in nursing?
- How do you think we could attract more men to this profession?
- What factors motivated you to go into the nursing profession?

Analysis of Open-ended Questions

The interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, allowed the participants to expand on their answers and give anecdotal explanations for what attracted them to the field and how their experience in nursing education has been so far. The responses that were recorded anonymously helped to ensure a safe space for the participants to expand on any grievances they may have while also cultivating more honest answers. These answers were then compiled into a Word document listing each response under their name. Responses were examined, and similar concepts or experiences were classified into different categories for thematic analysis.

Results

Respondents Characteristics

Seven male participants volunteered their time and responded to the emails sent out to them. These participants included 4 Caucasian men and 3 African Americans, aged 21-31 years old. Most of the participants were born in eastern North Carolina and remained there throughout most of their lives. Still, some were from different states, and 1 participant was a student from Nigeria. The participants were all at varying levels of education in the East Carolina Nursing program. Still, they cited many of the same topics as influences into what interested them in nursing and what experiences they've had thus far.

Job Stability

Several participants noted that stability was a key factor influencing them to consider nursing as a career path. They believed that a stable career was something most men desired in modern society, with one participant claiming, “Rarely do you hear of nurses getting laid off, or stuff like that... Nursing is stable, career advancements are the top two priorities because every man still wants to live a comfortable life and make sure that they're doing well enough to help take care of their family”. Other participants agreed with this sentiment and claimed that competitive pay was something that influenced their decision to become a nursing major at ECU. Another participant stated, “The pay is good, especially compared to most jobs in the state and jobs commonly perceived as male like, the police, the firefighters...”. With an interest in healthcare, most participants value competitive pay and a dependable career.

Other participants often mentioned how family members in the nursing field introduced the notion of job stability. Most participants had family that either were or in the nursing profession, one claiming “They’d constantly talk about my mom’s career and how solid and stable it was, so it was good to hear about going into this”. Family remarkably affected some participants’ responses and their nursing careers, offering support and stressing how stable the job is compared to other careers.

Helping Others

Several participants stated that the opportunity to help others initially drew them to the nursing field. Most claimed that they had a caring personality, enjoyed aiding people through difficult times, and found value in being depended on by their patients. One participant, when discussing what he enjoyed most about nursing, stated, “Thinking about what I like most about nursing, the biggest aspect of that once I considered nursing, was reassuring patients that are scared that for the most part... you know you're still going to be okay”.

Most felt that nursing was the best opportunity to work one-on-one with patients and build rapport with them. One claimed, “I like taking care of people. Uh, so I think that helped me go into nursing instead of trying to go a different route in the medical field”. Most cited that in their experience, nurses spent the most time with patients and got to know them personally, which attracted them to nursing over other professions.

Role Models

A common factor that participants felt would work to draw more men to the profession revolved around role models, particularly males, citing that it would make nursing a more comfortable and welcoming position for men. Most claimed not to have many male role models in their experience, but some mentioned that their fathers were nurses, stating this helped to destigmatize men in the field and normalize it. While discussing their father, one participant claimed “Seeing, you know, dress up in scrubs, go to work... it's that idea of a man or a male in a nursing profession has always been there”.

One participant, when asked what they believe causes so few men to join the profession, stated that “the other reason why it would be is that there aren't many men in our classes either”, believing that it can feel intimidating to be the only male in a large group or class. It was no secret that men were a minority in the nursing profession, but they still felt uncomfortable or excluded in group settings due to their sex. When discussing what could help alleviate this issue, a participant stated, “I think just like having the role models and mentoring, I think mentorship is an important thing for any like job with having someone that you can look up to that has kind of like paved the way for you.” This was a shared belief, with another agreeing on how to attract more men to the nursing profession by stating, “I think having like a strong support system of, I guess other men that are going through the same stuff that I've been through would help a lot.”

Stigma and Lack of Masculine Imagery

A common issue the participants referenced when discussing what hurdles they've faced during their education focused on the difficulties of being in a female-dominated space due to outside stigma. Many commented on unspoken disapproval and judgment that they felt from others for choosing to pursue a career in nursing, one participant stating that "it's not portrayed as a masculine job. Whatsoever, even still, I'll talk to people about being in nursing school. And they're like, oh, really? It's very frustrating". Preconceptions revolving around men and their perceived incapability in nursing were an issue discussed at length in most interviews, with many expressing their irritation at how peers may perceive them and the hazing they can encounter. One student said, "It's just people see women all the time and don't often think men are capable," with another stating "I have some friends that still make jokes when I tell them that I'm in nursing." Many of the participants conveyed an underlying frustration with how they believe they are treated differently on account of their sex, saying that this is likely a reason so many men feel discouraged when thinking about joining the profession.

An idea that seemed to permeate each interview with the participants was to have more advertising directed towards men and to illustrate the masculine aspects of the job. One participant seemed fixated on this idea and how helpful it could be in increasing the number of men interested in nursing, claiming, "There are so many things for recruitment, right, but having more advertisements showing like men doing the job and trying to decrease the stigma."

Discussion

With an ever-encroaching nursing shortage that threatens to cause even more problems than we already face in healthcare, we must place the utmost emphasis on inclusivity in the workplace, specifically for men. The many themes and commonalities shared with each

participant's responses could be invaluable in attracting more males to the nursing profession by highlighting the key issues many men face. Identifying and breaking down the barriers male students face could work to convince them to invest in nursing as a career path.

One of the most common themes participants stated attracted them to nursing revolved around job stability. Competitive salaries, schedule, job flexibility, and the reassurance that their jobs were not only needed in society but that the career itself was expanding were often mentioned in each interview. Advertising this aspect of the nursing field to men could be the key to sparking their interest in healthcare altogether. This theme likely stems from the feelings many men relate to, a permeating idea that they must be able to provide for themselves and have stable jobs for their families. Harnessing this and using it through marketing would be very effective.

Another theme in participants' responses focused on the perceived stigma towards men in nursing and rejection from their peers. Participants often voiced their frustration at this inequality, claiming that more must be done to illustrate the masculine aspects of nursing and how it is acceptable to be a male in this environment. Many cited experiences of being ridiculed or feeling excluded based on their sex. These implications illustrate that more must be done to address this stigma around men if we are to attract more male students and retain them.

Advertising and imagery featuring men in the profession might effectively combat these harmful stereotypes and misconceptions.

The responses from the participants are consistent with past research into the subject, with men highlighting instances in their education or career in which they felt like outsiders in the nursing field due to their sex. A recent study investigated male students in nursing in their experience, finding that "literature suggests that male nursing students have generally negative experiences during their prelicensure education due to external reactions from family, friends,

peers, and healthcare providers to their choice of nursing as a profession” (Caputo and Ross, 2023). Limitations to this study include that there is a very small sample size as many eligible students never responded to requests for interviews. In addition to this, the population, although diverse in their backgrounds, all received education at the same university with the same faculty. Their issues may not reflect other male nursing students’ experiences from other areas of the world accurately.

Further research is recommended on men in nursing and their relative experiences, as well as what more we could do to alleviate the struggles they face in their education and professional careers. Research focusing on different aspects of what factors cause men to feel excluded from the profession during their education. A study that includes more universities in different states or even countries would be beneficial and likely capture a more diverse student population while still highlighting the issues plaguing male students in this field. Including male nurses early on in their careers could showcase potential problems that follow them from their education and the effect that has had on their careers. Future research could investigate how male nurses are treated beyond their education and whether that coincides with the issues male nursing students report during their experience in schools.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to explore the personal experiences and factors influencing the attraction of male nursing students to the nursing profession. Diversity in nursing is essential in ensuring that it continues to grow at the rate needed to sustain our aging population. Male nursing students face greater adversity during their education, suffering from a lack of role models and harmful misconceptions surrounding their ability to be nurses. They could be attracted to the profession more effectively with advertisements surrounding issues of job

stability, competitive salaries, and appealing to their altruism. Future research must focus on how to appeal to men to facilitate an increase in nurses overall to combat a growing shortage.

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