

Public Perception of Nursing Profession in Buea, Cameroon

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Abstract

Background: There have been controversies about public perception of the nursing profession for varied reasons. Survival of nursing as a profession is dependent upon the positive impact it has on consumers.

Objectives: This study aimed at investigating the views of participants regarding nurses and the nursing profession, reasons for their perceptions and measures to enhance the public image of nursing.

Methods: The study adopted a community based cross-sectional survey design. Purposive, convenient and snowball samplings were used to select the study site and enroll participants. The study was conducted in the Bonduma Community, Buea Health District in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon. The participants were made up of the inhabitants of the Bonduma Community aged 21 and above. Respondents who met the inclusion criteria and gave their consent to participate in the study were selected. Data was collected using a pre-tested semi-structured questionnaire made up of both open and closed-ended questions. Data collected was entered using a pre-designed EpiData version 21 for analysis.

Results: A total of 140 respondents participated in the study. The study revealed that, 58.58% of the participants had a positive perception of nursing; more males (60.35%) appreciated nursing than females (43.75%), 24.26% participants said they will encourage self and others to become nurses because it involves saving lives, 11.43% said they will not because of low salaries. Preference for old nurses was the most represented (22.86%), reasons being that they are experienced, responsible and understanding, while 20% preferred male nurses. To improve the public image of the profession, 27.86% said good conduct should be rewarded while bad conduct punished and 14.28% said salaries should be increased.

Conclusion: Generally, the public has a positive perception of the nursing profession; however, nurses need to treat all patients with unconditional love and kindness.

Keywords: Perception; Public; Nursing Profession; Nurses

Introduction

The primary goal of nursing is to provide quality care to patients and alleviate pain and suffering. Hence, the society expects nurses to create a cordial and caring relationship based on trust. Any form of malpractice by nurses will endanger the safety and welfare of the society and thus destroy the relationship between the nursing profession and the society [1]. The nurses have the duty to uphold high standards of nursing practice which is what the society values about nursing. If they fail to meet these standards and expectations, nursing loses its meaning, professional integrity and good image.

Nursing is a profession that has long had stereotyped public image; many individuals still see nurses as nice women who straighten bed sheets and empty bedpans [2]. Historically, nursing has been regarded as an important job or profession which is actually a vocation or calling. Godsey, *et al.* [3] argue that, though nursing is placed high on the list of priorities, insufficient value is attached to it which may be due to the fact that it is predominantly a female profession. Also, there has been a negative societal perception of nursing related to gender stereotyping, subordination to medical doctors, low academic standards, limited career opportunities and poor pay packets [4]. Furthermore, the media often depicts nurses working at the patient's bedside and performing repetitive and routine tasks, mostly at the doctor's command [5].

Other studies suggest that the media's definition of nurses might give a clue as to how their public image is perceived [6]. Also, literature reveals that even the most respected media sources belittle nursing, so readers do not understand that nurses are educated life-saving professionals [7]. These studies demonstrate that the public image of nurses does not always match their professional image; nurses are not depicted as autonomous professionals and the public is not aware that nowadays nursing is to a great extent a theory-based and scholarly profession [8]. The nursing discipline has undergone tremendous developments over the last 30 years of the 20th Century especially in line with professionalisation. Nightingale and Henderson were very instrumental in moving the nursing profession forward in the 19th and the 20th Centuries respectively and this led to an increase in the number of nurses.

Moreover, the nursing profession has developed numerous types of education programmes in the last decades, which resulted in a variety of nursing levels, like Bachelor, Master and Doctoral degrees [9]. Although Florence Nightingale saw nursing as an independent profession that was not subordinate but equal to the medical profession, for a long time, nursing was seen as inseparable from the medical profession. The medical (male) dominance strongly influenced the role development, the image and position of nurses [10]. The image of nurses and nursing as a profession is vital in the successful recruitment and retention of staff in the healthcare system [11] since nurses are seen as the backbone of the healthcare sector and are fundamental in the delivery of quality care for all the citizens in a country.

Many studies have revealed that the public has stereotypical and negative views regarding nursing [12,13]. Despite the fact that nurses are now being trained at higher levels, and nurses having great autonomy in practice in the world in general and Cameroon in particular, most people still have a negative perception about the nursing profession [14]. These informed the objectives of this study; we investigated the public's perception of the nursing profession. Specifically, we sought to assess public's knowledge and explore their perceptions of the nursing profession as well as the reasons for perceptions and how to improve the image of nursing. This may go a long way to bridge the knowledge gap between the public perception and professional image of the nursing profession.

Materials and Methods

A community-based cross-sectional study was conducted from March to June, 2018 to assess public's knowledge and explore their perceptions of the nursing profession as well as the reasons for perceptions and how to improve the image of nursing. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to collect and process data. A questionnaire made up of both open and closed ended questions was used to collect data. The target population was made up of all the inhabitants of Bonduma Community in Buea aged 21 years and above. Buea is the headquarters of the South West Region of Cameroon; the Bonduma Community is one of the many small communities that make up the city of Buea. The people living in Bonduma are of diverse tribes and cultures with most of the inhabitants involved in small scale businesses.

All individuals who met the inclusion criteria and gave their consent to participate in the study were selected. A sample of 140 participants selected by purposive and consecutive convenient sampling participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected to participate in the study according to their availability. Data was collected on participants' knowledge, perceptions of nursing profession and their reasons, and how to improve the image of nursing. Participants' knowledge on nursing profession was evaluated using three questions each given a point, making a total of three points. A score of 1 on 3 (33.33%) was referred to as not knowledgeable (poor knowledge) while a score of 2 on 3 (66.66%) was referred to as knowledgeable (good knowledge). Similarly, perception was scored on a scale of

six. Participants with scores of 3 and above on 6 (50 - 100%) were considered to have positive (good) perceptions while those with scores of 0 - 2 on 6 (00 - 33.3%) had negative (bad) perception towards nursing profession.

Before administering the questionnaire to the participants, it was pre-tested by administering 10 copies to ten individuals who were not part of the study sample. Their responses confirmed the clarity and validity of the questions. Copies of the questionnaire were then administered to the study participants who completed the various sections of the questionnaire. The investigator read the questions to those who could not read and their responses were written down. This study was authorised by the Department of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Buea, Cameroon. Administrative authorisation (ethical clearance) was first obtained from the Regional Delegation of Public Health and then from the Chief of the Bonduma Community. Also, permission was sought from the heads of the various quarters.

Before responding to the questionnaire each respondent gave her consent by signing the consent form. Data collected was entered into Epi info 7 and Microsoft Excel 2013 and was analysed using SPSS Version 21. Data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods; open ended questions were analysed using the systematic process of thematic analysis where ideas or viewpoints were grouped under umbrella terms or key words. Chi-Square (χ^2) test of equality of proportion was used to measure the association between the study indicators and background information. The results were presented in frequency, percentages and means and tables, charts were also used to facilitate understanding.

Results

All 140 respondents enrolled, participated in the study giving a response rate of 100%. The mean age of the participants was 31, more than half of the participants (57.14%) were in the age group 21 - 40 years and the males were the most represented (54.29%). Most of the respondents were students (42.86), 63.57% of the respondents had attained tertiary level of education, while (4.28%) of them had never been to school and most respondents (96.43) were Christians (Table 1). Concerning knowledge on the nursing profession, participants defined nursing in various ways; most (77.14%) of them said nursing is “taking care of the sick”, 0.07% defined nursing as “a noble profession” while 10% of respondents did not know the definition (Figure 1). When asked their first thought regarding when they heard the word nurse, participants used different words to communicate their thoughts; 50% of them said “care”, while 7.14% said “rude” (Table 2).

Characteristic		No (%)
Age	21 - 40 years	80 (57.14)
	41 - 65 years	60 (42.86)
Gender	Female	64 (45.71)
	Male	76 (54.29)
Level of education	Primary	7 (5)
	Secondary	38 (27.14)
	Tertiary	89 (63.57)
	No Schooling	6 (4.28)
Employment Status	Employed	41 (29.29)
	Not Employed	20 (27)
	Retired	4 (2.86)
	Students	60 (42.86)
Religion	Christianity	135 (96.43)
	Others	5 (3.57)

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants.

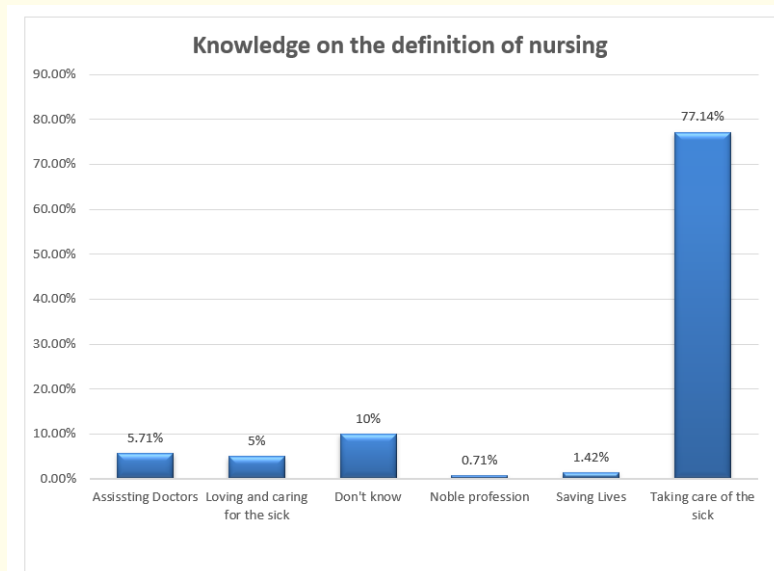


Figure 1: Definition of nursing.

First Word	No (%)
Care	70 (50)
Drugs/Injection	19 (12.86)
Health Professional/Sickness	26 (18.57)
Helper/Kind/Life Saver/Passion	13 (7.85)
No Response	2 (1.43)
Rude	10 (7.14)

Table 2: Distribution of responses based on first thought on hearing the word nurse.

Majority (66.43%) of the respondents said nursing is a vocation and mentioned various reasons with the majority (35) stating that “nursing services are priceless” (Table 3). Regarding respondents’ perceptions about the nursing profession, majority (72.86%) of them liked the nursing profession mostly because of “the love and care given to the sick” (15.71%), 14.29% of respondents said they don’t like nursing profession because of “the poor behaviour of nurses (Table 4). Majority of the respondents (54.29%) had had contact with female nurses while (26.43%) reported having had contact with both male and female nurses. Most of the respondents (72.15%) loved the approach to care and various reasons such as “felt at home” (9.29%) and “nurses were polite” (2.86%) were mentioned amongst others (Table 5).

When participants were asked how they were treated, 21.43% said they were treated kindly with love and care, (15.71%) mentioned the nurses were friendly and welcoming while 0.71% said the care was unsatisfactory (Table 6). Majority (22.86%) of the participants preferred old nurses while 20% preferred male nurses. They gave various reasons for their preference such as old nurses are experienced,

Reasons	No (%)
Reasons why nursing is a vocation	
Nursing services are priceless	49 (35)
Compassion	2 (1.43)
Dedication	11 (7.86)
Passion and mission	6 (4.86)
It is about sacrificing and being unselfish or putting others first	13 (9.26)
Sympathy and empathy	8 (5.71)
It is about saving lives and serving humanity	5 (3.57)
Reasons why it is a job	
They lack passion	4 (2.86)
They are in the profession for the money (Earn a salary and selling drugs)	28 (20)
There is retirement	2 (1.43)
Has a work schedule	6 (4.86)
No response	6 (4.86)

Table 3: Distribution of reasons based on why nursing is a vocation or a job.

Reasons	No (%)
Reasons for liking the nursing profession	
Love to care	10 (7.14)
Serving humanity	7 (5)
Saving lives	19 (13.57)
Relieving pain and suffering	9 (6.43)
The love and care given to sick people	22 (15.71)
Enjoy helping the sick	11 (7.86)
Reasons for not liking the nursing profession	
Hate night shift and blood	7 (5)
Low salary, overworked and underpaid	7 (5)
No value in the society	4 (2.86)
They always busy browsing and gossiping	694.26)
Not my calling	3 (2.14)
Poor behavior and approach	20 (14.29)
They love money	2 (1.43)
Too demanding	3 (2.14)
No reason	10 (7.14)

Table 4: Distribution on reasons why respondents like or dislike the nursing profession.

Indicators/Responses	No (%)
Reasons for liking the approach	
Comfortable (Felt at home, good and felt valuable)	13 (9.29)
Welcoming and understanding	10 (7.14)
Professional and ethical	10 (7.14)
Felt better, less tensed	9 (6.43)
Caring	10 (7.14)
Care was personalised	8 (5.71)
Polite	4 (2.86)
Friendly and gentle	9 (6.43)
Reasons for not liking the approach	
Favored the rich (Unjust)	3 (2.14)
Not caring	8 (5.71)
Poor communication	2 (1.43)
Reluctant to do her job	3 (2.14)
Rude	5 (3.57)
Unprofessional (Expose diagnosis)	2 (1.43)
Don't Know	44 (31.43)

Table 5: Distribution of reasons for liking or disliking of approach of care.

responsible and understanding (21.43%) while 4.26% said male nurses are more confidential and stronger respectively (Table 7). Majority (82.14%) of the participants could encourage self and others to become nurses due to various reasons such as “nursing involves saving lives” (24.26%) while (11.43%) said they would not encourage self and others to become nurses due to low salary (Table 8). Most (58.58%) of them had a positive opinion of the nursing profession with majority (60.35%) of them being males (Figure 2). With regards to measures that could be taken to improve the public image of the nursing profession, the highest occurrence (27.86%) was “good conduct rewarded and bad conduct punished” while (14.28%) said “increase salary” (Table 9).

Describe how you were treated	Frequency
Treated with a lot of care	30 (21.43)
Kindly	30 (21.43)
Love and respect	20 (14.29)
Rudely	22 (15.71)
Welcoming, friendly	5 (3.57)
Compassion	9 (6.43)
No attention (Spent time on the phone)	5 (3.57)
Unsatisfactory	1 (0.71)
Unfairly	9 (6.43)
No Response	9 (6.43)
Total	140

Table 6: Distribution on how participants were treated.

Please explain your answer	Frequency	Percent
Reasons why participants preferred all the groups		
Caring and loving	26 (18.57)	18.57%
Vocation	12 (8.57)	8.57%
Calm, Gentle	8 (5.71)	5.71%
Reason why they preferred both male and female old nurses		
Patient or tolerant	7 (5)	5.00%
Experience, responsible and understanding	30 (21.43)	21.43%
Soft hearted and good listeners	2 (1.43)	1.43%
Mature and empathetic	1 (0.71)	0.71%
Reason why they preferred young nurses		
Flexible	9 (6.43)	6.43%
Can make good nurses	1 (0.71)	0.71%
Smart	7 (5)	5.00%
Fresh knowledge	14 (10)	10.00%
Reason why they preferred female nurses		
Inborn caring	2 (1.43)	1.43%
Understanding	3 (2.14)	2.14%
Soft spoken	3 (2.14)	2.14%
Reason why they preferred male nurses		
More confidential	6 (4.26)	4.26%
Polite	2 (1.43)	1.43%
Receptive	2 (1.43)	1.43%
Stronger	6 (4.26)	4.26%
No reason	4 (2.86)	2.86%

Table 7: Distribution on reasons why respondents preferred various groups of nurses.

Responses	Frequency
Reasons to encourage yourself or anyone to become a nurse	
Save lives	34 (24.26)
Noble and good profession	19 (13.57)
Caring for others	13 (9.29)
Prevent shortage	13 (9.29)
Impact (Help Society, Family, Sick)	7 (5)
Serve humanity	3 (2.14)
Brings hope to patients	10 (7.14)
Interact with many people	6 (4.28)
Reasons not to encourage yourself or anyone to Become a nurse	
Low salary	16 (11.43)
Vocation	3 (2.14)
It is not valued	3 (2.14)
Hate night shift	392.14)
Rude	11 (7.86)

Table 8: Reasons to encourage self and others to become nurses.

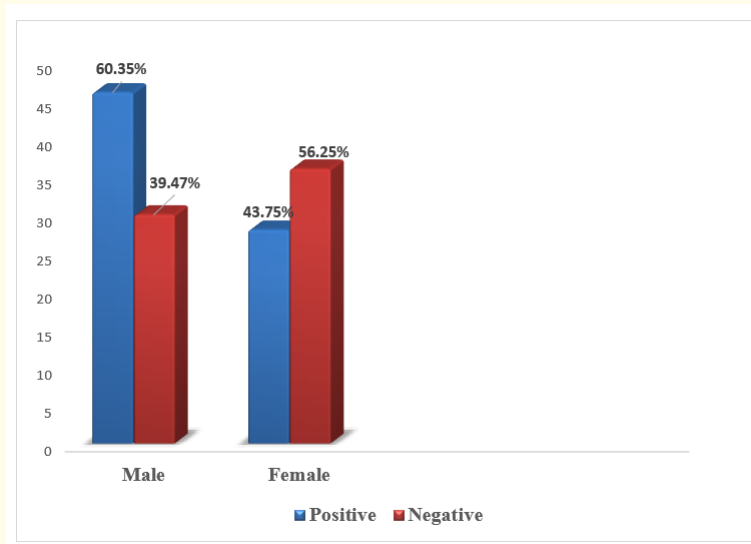


Figure 2: Distribution of perception based on gender.

Measures	No (%)
Good conduct rewarded and bad conduct punished	39 (27.86)
Increase salary	20 (14.28)
Accreditation should be done for training to be standard	15 (10.71)
Nurses should be reminded that they are in a vocation not job	11 (7.86)
Change behavior (Put patient welfare first)	13 (9.29)
Polite to patients	8 (5.71)
Encourage study of science at secondary school level	3 (2.14)
Further education	4 (2.86)
Recruit qualified nurses	4 (2.86)
Respect of ethics	5 (3.57)
Seminars	6 (4.26)
Love for the job	6 (4.26)
Team spirit	3 (2.14)

Table 9: Measures which could be taken to improve perception of the nursing profession.

Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the public’s knowledge on the nursing profession, their perceptions of the nursing profession, reasons, and ways to improve on the image of nursing. It is important to state that the primary goal of nursing is to provide quality and adequate care to patients and families, and the community in order to alleviate suffering, maintain, or attain, optimal health and quality of life. Hence, to achieve this goal the general public must have a positive impression about the nursing profession.

According to the findings of this study majority of the participants were males. This finding is contrary to that of a study conducted by Caroline Zulu [6] in Zambia where the females were more than the males. This difference could be due to the fact that more males were willing to participate in the study compared to females. Also, this study revealed that overall, more male than female participants had positive perception of the nursing profession. This could be due to the fact that more males are becoming interested in nursing [15]. Contrary to our finding, a research carried out by Giovanna, *et al.* (2017) [16] showed that more women expressed a better judgment of the nursing profession as opposed to men. This difference maybe as a result of the changing image of nursing over the years and difference in study area.

Furthermore, the study revealed that a great proportion of the respondents had knowledge on the profession, they defined nursing as the act of caring. This finding ties with that of a study by Mashal, *et al.* [17] which stated that nursing was seen as the profession most closely associated with caring. From the findings of this study, nursing was portrayed as a female profession, with nurses playing supporting roles to physicians and occupying a subordinate position with regards to decision-making and delegating tasks. This finding concurs with a study carried out by Liu [18] which revealed that nurses were seen as subordinates of physicians and played a minor role in patients' decision making process. However, the findings showed that, only a few of the respondents regarded nurses as doctor's assistants. This finding is in line with a study carried out by Ten, *et al.* [19] in Japan where only 6.32% of respondents regarded nurses as doctor's assistants, but contradicts the findings of Takese, *et al.* (2001) [20] which showed that majority of the respondents regarded the nurse as a doctor's assistant. Also, when asked what was the first thought that came to their mind when they heard the word 'nurse', majority of the respondents said 'care'. This is in agreement with a study carried out by Buresh [21].

After having explored the public's perception of the nursing profession, it was found that a greater proportion of the respondents perceived nursing positively. This finding is in accordance with a study carried out by Caroline and Ngoma, 2015 [6] in Zambia which revealed that majority of the respondents (69.7%) regarded the nursing profession positively. This result is similar to a study carried by Mering, *et al.* [22,23]. Respondents gave various reasons for their different perceptions of the nursing profession. Most of these reasons were based on the respondents' experiences with nurses. A small proportion of the respondents said nurses had poor behaviour and manner of approach which led to their negative opinion of the nursing profession.

Some of the respondents regarded nurses as live savers and this greatly influenced their positive perception of the nursing profession. A handful of the respondents viewed nurses as people who are overworked and underpaid. A minority of the respondents stated that nurses have no value in the community. These findings concur with the results of a study carried out by Reinhart [24] which portrayed that the appearance of nurses and how they behave reinforce the stereotypical image of nurses.

With regards to measures to change the stereotypical image of the nursing profession, respondents suggested different measures. "Good conduct rewarded and bad conduct punished, competent nurses should be employed, accreditations should be issued to ensure that nurses are properly trained, nurses should always prioritise patient's welfare and should constantly remind themselves that nursing is a vocation and not just a job". They also suggested that nurses should attend seminars and training workshops to upgrade their knowledge and practice. This finding is in accordance with previous studies [25-27] which revealed that "nurses must remember that in general, the public wants a competent nurse regardless of whether he or she is warm and friendly". The findings of this study are also in line with related studies conducted in which participants mentioned that defined unacceptable workplace behaviours should be spelled out and staff should be held responsible for misconduct [28,29]. Also, they stated that nurses should learn communication skills so that they can be empowered to respond to negative comments in a manner that will deter behaviours that negatively impact on the image of the nursing profession [30]. Furthermore, nurses need to constantly update their knowledge which is a pre-requisite for the vocation and academic development of the identity of the profession [31,32].

Conclusion

The study revealed that generally, a majority of the participants had a positive perception of the nursing profession and nurses. However, the findings of this study showed that a few participants had a negative image of nursing and stated numerous reasons why they

perceived the nursing profession is not what it is expected to be. They saw nurses lacking in the provision of quality nursing care, commitment and availability, effective communication and positive attitudes towards clients, expertise and professionalism. The participants stated that measures should be put in place to reward good nursing behaviours and punish bad nursing behaviours. The fundamental principles of nursing demands that nurses should render quality care to patients with optimum level of patients' satisfaction. Thus, nurses need to treat all patients with unconditional love and kindness in order to improve on the public image of the profession.

Limitations of the Study

The data on perceptions were based on experiences with nurses which was collected using a questionnaire. The data collected may not have given the true image of nurses and the nursing profession. However, to compensate for the limitations open ended questions were included and copies of the questionnaire were administered on a face-to-face basis. The data from the close and open ended questions together gave us a broad understanding of the participants' views.

Again, this study was carried out only in one community (the Bonduma Community) in Buea, hence results may not be applicable to the entire population of Buea. Thus, it is recommended that a more robust studies on the public's image of nurses and the nursing profession be conducted to increase the validity of our study.

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Authors' Contribution

Both authors participated in all steps of the study from its commencement to writing. That is, conception and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data as well as drafting and or revising and approving the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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