

## **Student Nurses' Attitudes and Perceptions towards People with Mental Illnesses**

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**Abstract:** Mental illnesses can be defined as, health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotion, behavior or a combination of these. Nurses play a key role in caring for the mentally ill and in rehabilitating them after an episode of illness. The aim of this study was to determine student nurses' attitudes and perceptions towards people with mental illnesses. A quantitative descriptive study was conducted with a purposive sample of 150 third year nursing students who have completed their five weeks psychiatric training programme at School of Nursing, Mulleriyawa, Sri Lanka. Data were collected by utilizing a self-administered questionnaire, consisting of three sections, Section A: Socio-demographic information, Section B: Mental Health Problems perceptions Questionnaire (MHPPQ) and Section C: Attitudes scale for Mental Illness (ASMI). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Majority of participants, 84.66% had negative attitude of restrictiveness and 83.33% had positive attitude of benevolence. Overall, 74.66%, 68% and 63.33% of participants had perceptions of therapeutic commitment, role support and role commitment respectively. Study concluded that the nursing students had positive attitudes toward mental illnesses in the sub scale of benevolence and separatism and negative attitudes for other four sub scales of ASMI. These students also had positive perceptions towards mentally ill. These findings direct future researches of the influence of psychiatric training on attitudes and perceptions of student nurses in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: attitudes, mentally ill, perceptions and student nurses

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Mental illnesses have become a leading cause for ill health and disability around the world. One out of four people in the world will be affected by mental illnesses in their lifetime. And also, 450 million people globally suffer from mental or neurological disorders or from psychosocial problems (WHO, 2001). Approximately less than one percent (0.7%) of Sri Lankan population is suffering from mental illnesses requiring medical attention (Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, 2017). Mental illnesses can be defined as health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotions, behaviors or a combination of these (American Psychiatric Association – APA, 2018). These disorders are often missed and mismanaged due to poor attitudes and perceptions about mental ailments amongst health care professionals.

Attitude may be outlined as psychological tendency that's expressed by evaluating a specific entity with a point of favor or disfavor (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). In Psychology, Perception is defined as the process or result of responsiveness to objects, relationships, and events via the senses, which incorporates such activities as recognizing, observing, and discriminating. These activities enable organisms to organize and interpret the stimuli received into meaningful knowledge and to act in a coordinated manner (APA, 2018).

Nurses are the providers, who spend the most time with patients and their families, who know the intricacies of their patients' families, and who have connected with family units in a way that other health professionals typically are not able to provide holistic care to the individual and the family (Dempsey & Ribak, 2012). Psychiatric or mental health nursing is dealing with the prevention, treatment and providing a quality nursing care of people of all ages who are suffering from mental illnesses and its consequences. Student nurse refers to a person following in a program leading to certification in a form of nursing (South African Nursing Council, 2005). Nursing students are future health manpower and they will be a part of societal development. In order to fulfil their role, they need to be trained in such a way to develop positive attitudes toward the needs of the people.

Gough and Happell (2009) reported that positive clinical experience can positively influence the attitudes and perception of student nurses in the field of mental health. Most of student nurses express positive shifts in attitudes and perception towards persons with mental illnesses, after they have completed their mental health nursing clinical experiences. Some researches indicate that, although nursing students had diverse views and attitudes regarding mentally ill, generally those attitudes are positive (Surgenor et al., 2005).

There are abundant studies relevant to this context conducted in various countries in the world. But Sri Lanka is handicapped by the dearth of research relating to the student nurses' attitudes and perceptions regarding mental illnesses. Thus, present study aims to examine attitudes and perception among nursing students towards people with mental illnesses.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### ***2.1 Participants***

Study was conducted by enrolling 150 third year nursing students who have completed their five weeks psychiatric training programme at School of Nursing, Mulleriyawa, Sri Lanka. A Self-administered questionnaire designed to evaluate attitudes and perception was used as data collection instrument.

### ***2.2 Attitudes scale for Mental Illness (ASMI)***

Attitudes towards mental illness were evaluated using Attitudes scale for Mental Illness (ASMI) which is a valid and reliable self-rating questionnaire that consists of 34 items. Respondents were given the choice of five response categories to select based on their feelings from strongly disagree to strongly agree (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, uncertain = 3,

agree = 4, strongly agree = 5) accordingly. It consists of six sub-scales: Benevolence, separatism, stereotyping, restrictiveness, pessimistic prediction and stigmatization.

### 2.3 Mental Health Problems perception Questionnaire (MHPPQ)

Perception towards mental illnesses was valuated using Mental Health Problems Perception Questionnaire (MHPPQ). This is a 27 item self-reporting inventory measure using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items were categorized into three sub-scales: therapeutic commitment, role support and role competency.

### 2.4 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First stage consisted of testing the reliability and validity of the measurement. Second stage involved analysis of descriptive statistics to identify the prevalence of certain attitudes and perceptions according to sub-scales. Data analysis was carried out by using SPSS (version 19).

### 2.5 Ethical Consideration

Approval was taken from Ethics Review Committee of National Institute of Mental Health, Angoda, Sri Lanka to carry out the research.

## 3. RESULTS

Among the study population (n = 150), there were 05 (3.3%) male students and 145 (96.7%) female students. The mean age of the participants was 25years. Two (1.33%) participants had followed psychological counseling course before entering to the Nursing school.

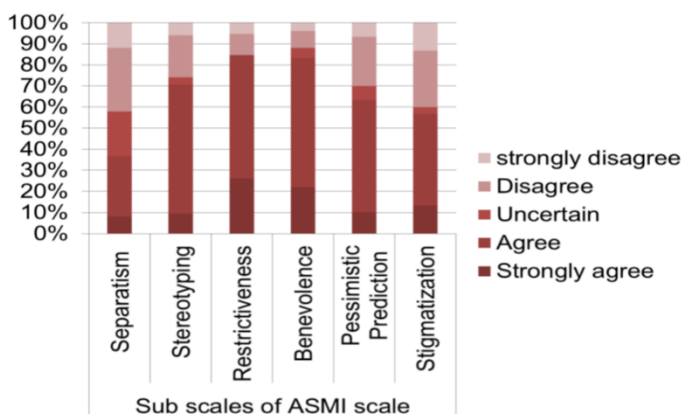


Figure 1: Levels of attitudes towards mentally ill according to the sub-scales of ASMI

Figure 1 indicates the levels of attitudes towards mentally ill according to the sub-scales of ASMI. Majority of participants, 84.66% had negative attitude on mental illness as a threat to the society (restrictiveness). Among respondents, 70.66% identified as maintaining of social distance towards the mentally ill people (stereotyping). According to the sympathetic and paternalistic views of the student nurses (benevolence), 83.33% respondents had positive sympathetic and paternalistic views towards the people with mental illnesses. As well as, 63.33% had a negative evaluative component of measure towards the people with mental illnesses (pessimistic prediction). As far as effect of the behavioral aspect is concerned, 56.66% had discriminatory behavioral idea (stigmatization). Least number of participants, 36.66% had attitudes of discrimination towards the mentally ill (separatism).

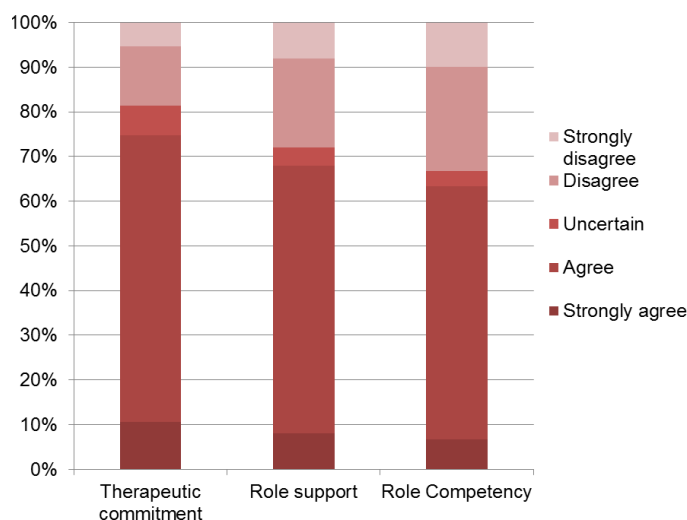


Figure 2: Levels of perceptions towards mentally ill according to the sub-scales of MHPPQ

Figure 2 depicts the levels of perceptions towards mentally ill according to the sub-scales of MHPPQ. With respect to the Mental Health Problems Perception Questionnaire (MHPPQ) scale, 74.66% respondents are having an idea of effective interpersonal characteristics such as warmth and empathy are important, when caring for mentally ill patient (Therapeutic commitment). Sixty eight percent of participants perceived that meaningful and effective work relationships are necessary for supportive and goal orientated nursing care (Role support). Finally, 63.33% respondents were with required talent and knowledge toward the proper handling of people with mental illnesses (Role competency).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to examine attitudes and perception among nursing students towards people with mental illnesses. The aforementioned was assessed by utilizing two self-report scales, the ASMI and the MHPPQ, respectively. The ASMI have six sub scales that

measured a number of conceptual factors, namely, separatism, stereotyping, restrictiveness, benevolence, pessimistic prediction, and stigmatization. MHPPQ measured the nurses' perception over three sub scales such as therapeutic commitment, role support and role competency.

In the present study, the findings showed that nursing students had positive attitudes toward mental illness in the sub scale of benevolence and separatism. There were high negative attitudes in four of other sub scales of ASMI. Positive attitude of benevolence indicated that most of the Nursing students would express kindness and altruism toward the mentally ill persons. These findings were congruent with previous research conducted by Radhakanth et al., (2016) that showed the nursing students have positive attitudes for the domain of benevolence and negative attitudes in separatism, stereotype and pessimistic predictions, restrictiveness, stigmatisation domains as they rated high (Radhakanth et al., 2016). The participants showed less separatism attitude toward mentally ill as they rated less to the statements in separatism domain. This finding indicated nursing students had lower level of attitude of discrimination towards the mentally ill.

The findings of the present study indicated that nursing students had positive perceptions towards mentally ill. That is because they showed the higher level of therapeutic commitment, role support and role competency. Opposite to those findings Ross and Goldner's (2009) study indicated that among health workers in general, commonly hold negative views about those with mental illness. Participants of the present study completed their psychiatric training and sometimes may be due to that training they may have positive views. Further research is need to confirm the above finding and to find whether psychiatric training has impact on the student nurses' attitude and perceptions towards mentally ill in Sri Lankan setting.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Nursing students had positive attitudes toward mental illness in the sub scale of benevolence and separatism. However, they had negative attitudes in stereotype and pessimistic predictions, restrictiveness, stigmatization. These students also had positive perceptions towards mentally ill persons. These findings direct future researches of the influence of psychiatric training on attitudes and perceptions of student nurses in Sri Lanka.

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