

# THE IMAGE OF NURSES AND NURSING AS PERCEIVED BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to describe the South African public's perceptions of the image of nurses. A quantitative descriptive study was conducted and 776 respondents from different backgrounds completed questionnaires comprising 19 statements about nurses and nursing.

Most respondents viewed nurses as extremely hardworking (80.0%; n=621) and caring and understanding (78.2%; n=607). Notwithstanding the positive comments about nurses, only 43.6% (n=338) of the respondents indicated that they would want their children to become nurses.

Contrary to the negative image portrayed by the media of nursing in South Africa, this study revealed a generally positive public response to nursing and nurses in South Africa. However, nursing was not viewed as a career choice and the public did not seem to understand the complexities of a nursing career.

The findings of this study could be used as a baseline for further studies on recruiting prospective student nurses.

**KEYWORDS:** nurses' image in South Africa, nursing as a career in South Africa, public perception of nursing in South Africa, recruitment of nurses in South Africa

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The image of nurses and nursing is vital for the successful recruitment and retention of nurses, a fundamental requirement for the delivery of quality care to South African

citizens (Waters, 2005: 22). South Africa's health services rely on large numbers of nurses to provide these services. With the increased birth rate and the growth in the number of people with Human Immunodeficiency Virus infection and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) as well as tuberculosis (TB) there is greater pressure on the current resources in South Africa (Matsuvama, 2007:33). The quality of healthcare is directly related to the available resources, of which nurses are a vital component. Shortages of nurses are experienced in the public healthcare sector, rendering care to the majority of South Africans (Kahn, 2008:1).

Negative media reports on nursing might influence the public's perceptions of nurses. Media reports might sensationalise problematic events, such as negative experiences of patients and their families (Hosken, 2009:1). Industrial actions, such as nurses' strikes in the South African public sector during June 2007, had detrimental effects on the health services as nursing is a 24-hour service (Dennis, 2004:19). The media emphasised the impact of the nurses' strikes on public health services and the negative outcomes for some patients. The industrial action also emphasised nurses' poor salaries and working conditions. The poor image of nursing, as portrayed by the media, might influence young people not to consider nursing as a career option (Nelson & Gordon, 2006:13).

The nursing profession has been stereotyped as being feminine and powerless (Takase et al., 2002:196). The "ministering angel" and "good nurse" image rooted in the religious background of nursing might support the public's view that nurses should be women who are religious, unselfish, obedient, unquestioning, submissive, kind and compassionate (Malchau, 2007:289).

In addition to dealing with the traditional view of nursing as a female profession, male nurses also have to deal with the "... commonly held stereotype that they are effeminate or gay" (McMillian et al., 2006:100). Women are allowed into male-dominated professions such as medicine and engineering, but the same tolerance is not extended towards male nurses (Roth & Coleman, 2008:149).

Dombeck (2003:360) reports that male nurses in the United States of America (USA) felt compromised not only because they were nurses but also because they were men. This might explain why a disproportionate number of male nurses resigned from the profession (McMillian et al., 2006:100).

The hierarchical structure between doctors and nurses has its origins in their respective educational backgrounds (Takase et al., 2002:196). The public image of nursing persists that nurses are untrained, from the poorer class, or belong to religious orders.

Studies on the public's perceptions of nurses have been conducted in the USA (Dombeck, 2003:365), Canada (Fletcher, 2007:215), the United Kingdom (Hancock, 2000:13) and in Australia (Johnson & Bowman, 1997:207). The studies investigated both the public's

and other healthcare professionals' images of nurses and described the influence of the media on such perceptions, maintaining that the public had stereotypical and negative views of nursing.

Both the public and the media consider the responsibility for changing the image of nursing to be in the hands of the nurses themselves. It is essential that nurses evaluate the image that they portray and use this information to re-brand the profession as a knowledge-based, gender-equal and status-imposing career among other careers (Dombeck, 2003:351).

The public image of nursing is an important barometer of the profession's value in a society. These images constitute part of the public discourse and are influenced by the information that the public receives both through its interaction with nurses and from media portrayals of nurses and nursing (Malchau, 2007:292).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The image of nurses in South Africa seemed to be negative, based on media reports that nurses neglected their patients and that many nursing vacancies existed as the result of poor salaries and working conditions (Kahn, 2008:1). The research question guiding this study was: How does the general South African public perceive nurses and nursing?

## **AIM OF THE RESEARCH**

The aim of this study was to describe the South African public's perception of nurses and nursing.

## **DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS**

According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008:717, 1054) an image is a "mental picture of something." In this study "image" refers to the mental picture that the public has of nurses and nursing.

Perception is described by the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008: 1054) as "a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem." The perception of the public refers in this study to how they view nurses and nursing.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD**

A quantitative, non-experimental and descriptive design was used and questionnaires were used to collect data. The target population was widely dispersed geographically

and questionnaires were considered suitable tools for gathering data. The questionnaire was based on studies conducted in Britain during 1984 and 1999 (Hancock, 2000:12-13) and in South Africa by Van Tonder and Van Wyk (2011:128). The amendments to this questionnaire were intended to gather additional biographical information from the respondents. Closed-ended questions were used. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding the image of nurses and nursing.

Those respondents who were not able to read and/or write were assisted by the researcher and/or trained research assistants who could translate questions into a language that a specific respondent understood.

### **Population and sample**

The study population comprised all adult members of the South African population. A convenience sample was used and adults from five of the nine provinces of South Africa were invited to take part in the survey. Questionnaires were distributed to a non-probability sample of 1 000 persons from towns and cities, and from areas with large healthcare facilities, as well as areas where people had limited access to healthcare. The locations for data collection were selected on the basis of multicultural representation, academic background, gender representation, availability of healthcare services and the income of the respondents. Male and female persons were included. Data were collected by trained research assistants at occupational health clinics, business centres and churches. The research assistants were clerks who had been trained to complete the questionnaires and to translate the items into the language most familiar to a specific respondent. The average time required to complete the questionnaire ranged from 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the literacy level of the respondent.

The 776 completed questionnaires were coded according to the location and the data were captured and electronically analysed, with the assistance of a statistician using descriptive statistics.

### **Validity and reliability**

The questionnaire had been used in a survey conducted for the Nursing Times in 1984 (Payne, 2000:13). This questionnaire was used again in 1999 to compare the public's views to those of 1984 (Hancock, 2000:12-13). The questionnaire was also used in a South African study by Van Tonder and Van Wyk (2011:128). The questionnaire has been used three times and has proven its reliability and effectiveness for the purpose for which it had been designed.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In view of the fact that the primary means of data collection was self-administered questionnaires, the consent for this research comprised verbal consent. Every respondent had a choice either to take part in the study or to refuse to participate. In this study verbal informed consent was obtained from each respondent prior to the completion of the questionnaire. Institutional consent was obtained from the managers of the occupational health centres, the business centres and the leaders of the church congregations before the collection of the data at these venues commenced. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria prior to the commencement of the study. Written signed consent was not obtained from every respondent, because it was accepted that the "...return of the completed questionnaire reflects the respondent's voluntary consent to participation" (Polit & Beck, 2006:93).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The total number of completed questionnaires came to 776, but some respondents did not answer all items. Consequently the total number of respondents per item might vary.

### **Demographic information**

About half of the 776 respondents (47.0%; n=365) were between 18 and 34 years old; 20.9% (n=162) were 35–44 years old; 14.1% (n=109) were 45–54 years old; 14.1% (n=109) were older than 55 years and 7.1% (n=55) did not reply to this item. More females than males completed the questionnaires, with 59.4% (n=461) of the respondents being female. Of the respondents, 56.7% (n=440) resided in urban areas. The white people of South Africa were well represented by 41.6% (n=323) of the respondents; black people comprised 32.0% (n=248), and coloured people 18.9% (n=147), while 7.5% (n=58) of the respondents did not indicate to what group they belonged.

Of the respondents, 50.0% (n=388) were professional people while 34.0% (n=264) were employed but not in professional positions. Respondents from different education levels were well represented but 5.5% (n=43) did not complete this section. In contrast to the respondents with a level of education up to Grade 7 (17.9%; n=139) and Grades 8–12 (36.2%; n=281), 28.5% (n=221) of the respondents had college/university training, while 8.8% (n=68) had postgraduate qualifications (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Respondents' education levels (n=776)**

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
< Grade 8	139	17.9
Grades 8–12	281	36.2
College/university	221	28.5
Postgraduate	68	8.8
Other	21	2.7
Mixed	3	0.4
"No response"	43	5.5
Total	776	100.0

### ***Previous hospital experience***

Most respondents (77.8%; n=604) had some knowledge of hospitals and their responses to the questionnaire items could have been based on these experiences. Only 16.8% (n=131) of the respondents had a family member who was a nurse, 33.0% (n=256) had a family member who had been treated in a hospital, and 20.0% (n=155) had personally been treated in a hospital.

### **Respondents' perceptions about nurses and nursing**

Generally the respondents viewed nurses and nursing in favourable terms. The discussions in the following sections refer to the information displayed in Table 2.

### ***Nurses are extremely hardworking***

Most respondents (80.0%; n=621) viewed nurses as being extremely hardworking, while 0.9% (n=7) did not comment. This finding was comparable with the finding that 63.9% (n=496) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that "nurses waste a lot of time being busy doing nothing" while 70.9% (n=550) disagreed that "nurses are more concerned with their social life than with their work".

**Table 2: Respondents' views of nurses and nursing (N=776)**

Statements	Yes	Yes %	No	No %	No answer	No answer %
Nurses are extremely hardworking	621	80.0	148	19.0	7	0.9
Nurses are caring and understanding	607	78.2	157	20.2	12	1.5
Nurses treat their work as a profession in its own right, not secondary to a doctor's	573	73.8	189	24.3	14	1.8
Nurses are equally concerned with patients' physical and emotional needs	530	68.3	226	29.1	20	2.6
Nurses are well educated	546	70.4	207	26.7	23	3.0
Nurses do a lot to try to improve pay and working conditions	518	66.8	238	30.7	20	2.6
Nurses are given a chance to use their own initiative in their work	468	60.3	286	36.9	22	2.8
Nurses obey doctors' orders without questioning them	500	64.4	248	32.0	28	3.6
Nurses have a lot of social status attached to their job	377	48.6	372	47.9	27	3.5
Nurses earn a good salary	253	32.6	501	64.5	22	2.8
Nurses are better at doing their job if they are women	360	46.4	394	50.7	22	2.8
Nurses do little to improve pay and working conditions	314	40.5	435	56.0	27	3.5
Nurses are very authoritarian	422	54.4	315	40.6	39	5.0
Nurses waste a lot of time being busy doing nothing	256	33.0	496	63.9	34	3.0
Nurses are more concerned with their social life than with their work	205	26.4	550	70.9	21	2.7
I would like my child to become a nurse	338	43.5	419	54.0	19	2.4
Nurses and nursing are central to curing	642	82.7	111	14.3	23	5.0
Nurses love their profession	570	73.4	194	25.0	12	1.5

### ***Nurses are caring and understanding***

Most respondents (78.2%; n=607) agreed that nurses are caring and understanding, while 20.2% (n=157) disagreed with the statement. Twelve persons did not respond to the statement. The respondents supported the view that nurses are caring and understanding

in the outcome of the statement “nurses are equally concerned with patients’ physical and emotional needs”, as the results of this statement indicated that 68.3% (n=530) of the respondents agreed with this statement.

***Nurses treat their work as a profession in its own right, not as secondary to a doctor’s work***

Most respondents (73.8%; n=573) indicated that nurses treat their work as a profession. The response to the statement that “nurses are given the chance to use their own initiative in their work” compared well with these results, as 60.3% (n=468) of the respondents agreed with this statement.

***Nurses are equally concerned with patients’ physical and emotional needs***

It emerged that, according to the respondents, both the physical and emotional needs of patients are perceived as being important to nurses, with 68.3% (n=530) of the respondents agreeing and 29.1% (n=226) disagreeing and 2.6% (n=20) not responding. The statement “nurses and nursing are central to curing” supports the results for this statement, as 82.7% (n=642) of the respondents agreed with this viewpoint.

***Nurses are well educated***

Most respondents (70.4%; n=546) agreed with the statement that nurses are well educated, although 3.0% (n=23) of the respondents did not answer this question. However, in response to the statement “I would like my child to become a nurse”, only 43.6% (n=338) of the respondents agreed while 54.0 % (n=419) disagreed.

***Nurses do a lot to try to improve pay and working conditions***

It emerged that 66.8% (n=518) of the respondents agreed with this statement while 30.7% (n=238) disagreed, and 2.6% (n=20) did not provide an answer.

***Nurses are given chances to use their own initiative in their work***

The feedback to this statement was positive, as 60.3% (n=468) of the respondents agreed with the statement, only 36.9% (n=286) disagreed and 2.8% (n=22) did not answer the question.

### ***Nurses obey doctors' orders without questioning them***

Of the respondents, 64.4% (n=500) agreed that nurses obey doctors' orders without questioning these orders, only 32.0% (n=248) disagreed and 3.6% (n=28) failed to respond. With regard to the statement "nurses are given chances to use their own initiative in their work", 60.3% (n=468) of the respondents agreed, apparently contradicting the statement that "nurses obey doctors' orders without questioning them". The results for the statement "nurses treat their work as a profession in its own right, not secondary to a doctor's" with 73.8% (n=573) of the respondents agreeing also seems to contradict the responses to the statement "nurses obey doctors' orders without questioning them". The hierarchical relationship between doctors and nurses originates from their respective educational backgrounds (Takase et al., 2002:96) and doctors are considered the better trained professionals. Nurses, as the lesser trained group, take orders from doctors, the better trained professionals, regarding patient care. The majority of the respondents agreed with this perception.

### ***Nurses have a lot of social status attached to their job***

The responses to this statement were evenly distributed, with 48.6% (n=377) of the participants agreeing and 47.9% (n=372) disagreeing while 3.5% (n=27) did not respond.

### ***Nurses earn a good salary***

In view of the fact that poor pay is cited in South African newspapers as the main reason for the shortage of nurses, it was expected that 64.6% (n=501) of the respondents should disagree with this statement, while 32.6% (n=253) agreed that nurses do, indeed, earn a good salary and 2.8% (n=22) did not respond to this statement.

### ***Nurses are better at doing their job if they are women***

Of the respondents, 46.6% (n=360) agreed female nurses perform better jobs, while 50.8% (n=394) disagreed, and 2.8% (n=22) failed to respond. Nurses are often stereotyped as female and "undersexed, oversexed, or even ambiguous" (Dombeck, 2003:358), and such stereotypes could have a detrimental effect on the profession's image. The respondents did not view nursing as a female profession only, as half of them considered it to be a career for men and women, although the media seems to portray nurses as women only (Payne, 2000:13).

### ***Nurses do little to improve pay and working conditions***

This is a rephrasing of the statement that "nurses do a lot to improve their pay and working conditions" and the outcome of 40.5% (n=314) of the respondents agreeing and

56.0% (n=435) disagreeing was to be expected. Only 3.5% (n=27) of the respondents did not reply to this statement.

Nurses have been viewed throughout history as professionals who are selflessly committed to their profession but, according to Berry (2004: 15), since the late 1970s, the public became aware of the frustrations of nurses with poor pay and working circumstances that have culminated in strikes. South African nurses have also used strike action to negotiate for better salaries. Those respondents who indicated that nurses do a lot to improve their salaries might have been aware of nurses' strikes in South Africa. The respondents also acknowledged that nurses did not get good salaries.

### ***Nurses are very authoritarian***

Of the respondents, 5.0% (n=39) did not respond to this statement. Nurses were perceived as very authoritarian by 54.4% (n=422) of the respondents while 40.6% (n=315) disagreed.

### ***Nurses waste a lot of time being busy doing nothing***

Although 33.0% (n=256) of the respondents agreed that nurses "waste a lot of time being busy doing nothing", 63.9% (n=496) disagreed, while 4.1% (n=32) of the respondents did not provide an answer.

### ***Nurses are more concerned with their social life than with their work***

On the whole the respondents tended to disagree with this statement, with 70.9% (n=550) disagreeing and 26.4% (n=205) agreeing while 2.7% (n=21) did not respond to the statement.

### ***I would like my child to become a nurse***

The response to this statement was interesting, as 43.6% (n=338) of the respondents agreed while 54.0% (n=419) disagreed with the statement and 2.4% (n=19) provided no answer. The outcome of this statement compares well with the outcomes to the statement "nurses earn a good salary", as poor pay is one of the main reasons why people might not want to become nurses and 64.6% (n=501) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that "nurses earn a good salary". A high workload, poor salaries and a lack of professional standing are associated with nurses (Drury et al., 2009:5). The respondents in this study agreed that nurses are hardworking and do not get good salaries. These are factors that people might consider when they make career choices or assist their children to choose a career.

### ***Nurses and nursing are central to curing***

The value of nurses may be perceived in the responses to this statement, with 82.7% (n=642) of the respondents agreeing that “nurses and nursing are central to curing” and only 14.3% (n=111) disagreeing while only 3.0% (n=23) did not respond to this statement. The outcome of this statement compares well with the outcome to the statement “nurses are well educated”, as 70.4% (n=546) of the respondents agreed with this statement. The response to the statement “nurses are caring and understanding” also compares well because 78.2% (n=607) agreed with this statement.

Caring is traditionally associated with nursing (Dries, 2003:20) and the media tends to focus only on the caring abilities and not on the professional abilities of nurses (Beauregard et al., 2003:510). Caring is easily associated with mothering and not with academic qualifications. The respondents did not support the view of the media, as they viewed nurses as not only responsible for caring, but also as well-educated persons involved in the curing of patients. Some respondents had experienced being a patient in a hospital or have had a family member who had been nursed in a hospital, which could have influenced their perceptions.

### ***Nurses love their profession***

The responses to this statement were positive, with 73.5% (n=570) of the respondents agreeing and 25.0% (n=194) disagreeing and 1.5% (n=12) failing to respond. The response to this statement compares well with the responses to the statement “nurses are caring and understanding”, as most respondents 78.2% (n=607) agreed that nurses were caring and understanding.

## **CONCLUSION**

Contrary to the negative image portrayed by the media, this study revealed a generally positive response to the nursing profession by the general South Africa public. Despite this generally positive public view of nurses and nursing by the South African public, nursing was not viewed as a career choice for their children. The public might not understand the complexities of nursing as a career.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study could serve as a baseline for further studies on ways to encourage people to consider nursing as a career of choice. A study to determine the specific perceptions of the youth should be conducted so that these perceptions could be incorporated into campaigns to recruit prospective nurses.

The South African public seemed to view aspects of nursing in a negative light. The responsibility to change these perceptions should be a priority for nurse leaders. Nurses should become part of professional and community organisations and promote their accomplishments in order to improve both the visibility of nurses and the profession (Beauregard et al., 2003: 510).

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