

Artigo Original


# Nursing students' understanding of professional values after practice in intensive care unit: a phenomenological study

A compreensão dos estudantes de enfermagem sobre os valores profissionais após a prática na unidade de terapia intensiva: um estudo fenomenológico

La comprensión de los estudiantes de enfermería sobre los valores profesionales tras la práctica en la unidad de cuidados intensivos: un estudio fenomenológico

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**Abstract:** **Objective:** the aim of this research is to make sense of nursing student's professional values after practice in intensive care unit. **Method:** a descriptive phenomenological study **Method:** this study conducted using the method of Colaizzi and Giorgi. The study included 18 nursing students who had completed a 5-week clinical practice in intensive care units as part of the Professional Practice Course. **Results:** beyond well-established values like dignity, empathy, and justice, students reflected a transformative grasp of professional identity emphasizing the emotional labor, ethical decision-making, and the human connection experienced uniquely in intensive care settings. **Conclusion:** nursing students nearing graduation gained valuable experience in intensive care, linking the care process with professional values and increasing their awareness. The study recommends promoting nursing values in such settings and encouraging educators to act as role models. Emphasizing holistic practices rooted in nursing values is key to preparing students for complex healthcare environments.

**Keywords:** Intensive care clinical practice, Professional values, Nursing students, Phenomenological study..

**Resumo:** **Objetivo:** o objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender os valores profissionais dos estudantes de enfermagem após a prática na unidade de terapia intensiva. **Método:** estudo fenomenológico descritivo. **Método:** este estudo foi conduzido utilizando os métodos de Colaizzi e Giorgi. Participaram 18 estudantes de enfermagem que completaram uma prática clínica de 5 semanas em unidades de terapia intensiva, como parte do curso de Prática Profissional. **Resultados:** para além de valores já consolidados como dignidade, empatia e justiça, os estudantes demonstraram uma compreensão transformadora da identidade profissional enfatizando o trabalho emocional, a tomada de decisões éticas e a conexão humana vivenciada de forma única em ambientes de terapia intensiva. **Conclusão:** estudantes de enfermagem próximos da graduação adquiriram experiências valiosas em cuidados intensivos, relacionando o processo de cuidado com os valores profissionais e aumentando sua consciência. O estudo recomenda promover os valores da enfermagem nesses ambientes e incentivar os educadores a atuarem como

modelos. Enfatizar prácticas holísticas basadas em valores da enfermagem é essencial para preparar os estudantes para ambientes de saúde complexos.

**Decritores:** Prática clínica em terapia intensiva; Valores profissionais; Estudantes de enfermagem; Estudo fenomenológico.

**Resumen: Objetivo:** el objetivo de esta investigación es comprender los valores profesionales de los estudiantes de enfermería después de la práctica en la unidad de cuidados intensivos. **Diseño:** estudio fenomenológico descriptivo. **Método:** este estudio se llevó a cabo utilizando los métodos de Colaizzi y Giorgi. Participaron 18 estudiantes de enfermería que completaron una práctica clínica de 5 semanas en unidades de cuidados intensivos como parte del curso de Práctica Profesional.

**Resultados:** más allá de los valores bien establecidos como la dignidad, la empatía y la justicia, los estudiantes reflejaron una comprensión transformadora de la identidad profesional, destacando el trabajo emocional, la toma de decisiones éticas y la conexión humana vivida de manera única en unidades de cuidados intensivos.

**Conclusión:** los estudiantes de enfermería cercanos a la graduación adquirieron una valiosa experiencia en cuidados intensivos, relacionando el proceso de atención con los valores profesionales y aumentando su conciencia. El estudio recomienda fomentar los valores de enfermería en estos entornos y alentar a los educadores a actuar como modelos a seguir. Enfatizar prácticas holísticas basadas en los valores de enfermería es clave para preparar a los estudiantes ante entornos sanitarios complejos.

Palabras clave: Práctica clínica en cuidados intensivos, Valores profesionales, Estudiantes de enfermería, Estudio fenomenológico.

PREVIEW VERSION

**INTRODUCTION** Nurses draw strength from their professional values, knowledge, and skills in delivering accurate and high-quality care services.<sup>1</sup> Professional values form the foundation of nursing practices, contributing to shaping nursing behaviors and caregiving actions. In holistic nursing theory, professional values such as empathy, compassion, dignity, justice, and altruism are emphasized as central to nursing practice.<sup>2</sup> Rooted in the works of theorists like Jean Watson, holistic nursing underscores the interconnectedness of health and healing, recognizing the need for nurses to address the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological needs of patients.<sup>3</sup> In ICU settings, where the complexity and severity of patients' conditions can overshadow the human aspect of care, professional values become even more critical.<sup>4,5</sup>

Nursing students require clinical practice experience in ICUs to observe healthcare providers' interactions with patients and families, and examine complex care practices.<sup>5</sup> These experiences not only enhance technical proficiency but also reinforce holistic nursing principles, ensuring that future nurses view each patient as a whole person rather than just a clinical case. While descriptive studies exist on nursing students' views of intensive care processes<sup>6</sup>, no research has focused on how these experiences shape students' professional values through the lens of holistic nursing.

This research focuses on exploring the perspectives of final-year nursing students on their professional values after clinical practice in ICUs. By examining these values through the lens of holistic nursing, we aim to illuminate how ICUs contribute to the cultivation of compassionate, empathetic, and ethically driven nurses ready to offer whole-person care.

## METHODS

### Design

We chose a phenomenological approach to make sense of the changes in nursing students' professional values resulting from their experiences after practice in intensive care unit. Employing Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach, this qualitative research study aims to capture and describe specific phenomena, emphasizing the essence of human experiences.<sup>7</sup> Phenomenology is a research approach that aims to elucidate the fundamental nature of a phenomenon by investigating it from the standpoint of those who have experienced it.

The objective of phenomenology is to elucidate the significance of an experience, both in terms of what was experienced and how it was lived through.<sup>8</sup> This descriptive qualitative approach focused on exploring nursing student's perspectives about the impact of intensive

care clinical practice on professional values. Another way to phrase phenomenological questions is to say the focus was on making sense/meaning making of one's nature of experience. It is considered the most suitable method for elucidating the experiences and meanings of the students involved in this research. Therefore the aim of this research is to make sense of final-year nursing student's professional values after practice in an intensive care unit.

### **Population**

The population of this study consisted of 78 students who were enrolled in the nursing department of a state university's Faculty of Health Sciences and completed a 5-week clinical practice in one of the intensive care units, including anesthesia intensive care (n=22), chest diseases intensive care (n=9), internal medicine intensive care (n=12), neurology intensive care (n=9), and neurosurgery intensive care (n=9), as part of the Professional Practice Course.

The research sample was determined using the criterion sampling method. In this context, data collection continued until concepts and processes that could answer the research question were repeated, and until sentences that repeated each other started, and data saturation were reached. The overall number of respondents was determined using the meaning saturation criterion. Following the sixteenth interview, no new themes emerged, signifying data saturation. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the absence of new themes and ensure the thoroughness of data collection.

**Inclusion Criteria for the Sample:** Students in their final year of nursing who underwent a 5-week clinical internship in intensive care units as part of the Professional Practice Course during the 2022-2023 spring semester and who provided informed consent to participate in the research were included in the sample.

### **Data Collection and Data Collection Tools**

Two forms were used for data collection in the research, the "Individual Information Form" and the "Semi-Structured Interview Form."

**Individual Information Form:** This form consists of 8 closed-ended questions and included age, gender, family structure, reasons for choosing the nursing department, satisfaction with the nursing department, the students' targeted professional positions, the intensive care unit where clinical practice was conducted, previous experience in interning in the intensive care unit, and the desire to work in an intensive care unit.

**Semi-Structured Interview Form:** Interview questions were structured according to qualitative research methods and were based on the literature<sup>1,2</sup> suitable for the qualitative nature. The Semi-Structured Interview Form contains "What impact did the intensive care clinical practice process have on your nursing professional values?" the main question.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected using the individual introduction form and the semi-structured interview form. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet room with the researcher and every interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Participants received a clear explanation of the research process, its purpose, note-taking, and confidentiality commitments. Those who chose to participate were informed and gave written and verbal consent, and no student requested to terminate the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of participants' experiences involved a typically reductive process, wherein a substantial volume of expressed experiences were condensed into smaller categories. In this context, the analysis of transcripts was grounded in the procedures established by Colaizzi (1973)<sup>9</sup> and Giorgi (1970).<sup>10</sup> The data, initially transcribed from interviews, were analyzed using the updated version of the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 program in the year 2023. Each student had a dedicated document and was independently coded by two researchers. Main and subthemes were established. A third experienced researcher verified and finalized the results of the independent coding. The codes were refined through a process of comparing similarities and differences, creating main and subthemes. Data were organized, and themes were discussed among researchers until a consensus was reached, suitability evaluated, and the conceptual structure defined.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Methodological rigor in this study was maintained through adherence to four qualitative research criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.<sup>11</sup> Credibility was affirmed by involving participants in member checking, where they reviewed and recognized their experiences as presented by the researchers.<sup>7</sup> Member checking interviews did not result in changes to themes and subthemes. To ensure dependability, detailed descriptions of methods and analyses were provided. Researchers independently assessed information, employing triangulation to enhance credibility and mitigate biases. Confirmability was maintained through documentation of the process, known as an audit trail, allowing others to verify records. For data transferability, the sample and setting were extensively described.

### **Ethics**

In the research, written and verbal permissions were obtained from students who met the criteria for the sampling, in accordance with the permission numbered 2023-04/53 from the ethics committee. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research and publication ethics, following the Helsinki Declaration principles.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Data

The average age of the students participating in the study was 23.16. 61.1% of the students were female, 38.9% were male, 83.3% came from nuclear families, and 16.7% came from extended family structures. 27.8% of the students chose the nursing department because they love nursing, 38.9% because of the ease of job opportunities, and 33.3% because they enjoy helping people. 83.3% of the students are satisfied with the nursing department, and it was determined that 55.6% of the students plan to become clinical nurses, 16.7% aim to become nursing academics, 11.1% aspire to become nurse managers, and 16.7% aim to become education nurses after graduation. 50% of the students completed their internships in the intensive care unit, 16.7% in internal medicine, 11.1% in neurology, 11.1% in neurosurgery, and 11.1% in the chest intensive care unit. 83.3% of the students have not previously completed internships in the intensive care unit, but 55.6% expressed their desire to work in the intensive care unit after graduation.

**Table 1**

Main and subthemes determined based on participants' statements.

Nursing Values	
Themes	Subthemes
Human Dignity	-Respecting the patient and their family -Respecting patient privacy -Respecting one's personal and professional dignity
Justice	-Providing equal and fair care
Empathy	-Attempting to understand the patient
Sensitivity	-Cultural sensitivity -Moral and ethical sensitivity
Altruism	-Being helpful -Showing interest
Mercy/ compassion	-Alleviating the suffering of patients -Touching patients while providing care
Reliability	-Mutual trust
Honesty	-Professional integrity -Demonstrating moral and ethical behavior -Accountability and responsibilities

### Overview of Themes and Subthemes

In our study, qualitative findings comprise themes and subthemes related to the categories of human dignity, justice, empathy, sensitivity, altruism, mercy/compassion, reliability, and honesty (Table 1).

### Main and Subthemes Determined Based on Participants' Statements.

Main theme 1: Students' expressions regarding **human dignity**: "In the intensive care unit, most patients are unconscious, and privacy can be forgotten during procedures; it is here that the importance of

privacy is truly understood. (25 age, Anesthesia ICU) ""My respect for the profession has grown, and I've come to realize the significance of our role in the patient's life. (23 age, Internal Medicine ICU) "

Main theme 2: Students' expressions regarding **justice**:"Every patient should be treated equally, and hospital resources should be distributed fairly. (21 age, Neurosurgery ICU) "

Main theme 3: Students' expressions regarding **empathy**: "At times, I was uncertain about how to interact with and care for patients. With time, I aimed to treat them as I would wish for myself or my family. (22 age, Pulmonology ICU) "

Main theme 4: Students' expressions regarding **sensitivity**:"We need to be sensitive in our approach to patients from different cultural backgrounds. (23 age, Anesthesia ICU) " "I realized the importance of adhering to ethical principles in every procedure. (23 age, Neurosurgery ICU) "

Main theme 5: Students' expressions regarding **altruism**:"At the start of my practice, I believed conscious patients, who could express their needs, needed extra attention. Yet, I later realized that all patients require care and support, without distinguishing between conscious and unconscious ones.(25 age, Anesthesia ICU) "

Main theme 6: Students' expressions regarding **mercy/compassion**:"While in the intensive care unit, I tended to many patients with complex health issues and learned the importance of offering care with compassion and physical touch. (22 age, Neurosurgery ICU) " "Mercy involves approaching patients sincerely and respectfully, and I realized that it contributes to alleviating their suffering. (24 age, Neurology ICU) "

Main theme 7: Students' expressions regarding **reliability**:"There should be communication and collaboration based on mutual trust between patients and nurses. (30 age, Internal Medicine ICU) ""Many of the patients in the intensive care unit are highly dependent on nurses, so trust is important, and we need to ensure that patients trust us or feel that way. (25 age, Anesthesia ICU) "

Main theme 8: Students' expressions regarding **honesty**:"Honesty is crucial in both student and work life. (25 age, Anesthesia ICU) " "Performing the correct procedures and accurately documenting patient data is essential in patient care.(21 age, Anesthesia ICU) " "Accuracy and accountability are paramount in the procedures and measurements we undertake. (24 age, Neurology ICU) "

## DISCUSSION

Professional values underpin nursing practice, guiding ethical behavior in interactions with patients/people who access care, colleagues, and the public. <sup>12</sup> While formal education is crucial for instilling these values, their development continues throughout a

nursing career.<sup>13</sup> Educators, clinical settings, education, patient care experiences, and individual values all contribute to this development.<sup>12</sup> In line with holistic nursing theory, these values, such as empathy, dignity, and altruism, are fundamental in high-intensity environments like ICUs. In this qualitative study on the impact of intensive care clinical practice on senior nursing students' professional values, our discussion is structured around 8 main themes and their subthemes. It should be noted that no prior research has been found in the literature related to our study topic, and our findings could not be directly linked to the results of relevant studies.

In nursing, dignity is the foundation of respect for individuals and their unique qualities, encompassing autonomy, integrity, empowerment, and effective communication. It involves an individual-centered approach, integrity, and privacy.<sup>2,14</sup> A study emphasized the importance of respecting patients and their rights, including maintaining privacy.<sup>15</sup>

Naden and Eriksson (2004)<sup>16</sup> identified courage, responsibility, respect, commitment, and ethical desires as components of human dignity. A study on male nursing students in the neonatal intensive care unit stressed the need for comprehensive support to develop their professional dignity values and highlighted the importance of involving students in decision-making during care.<sup>17</sup> Another study highlighted that patient dignity can be compromised when caregivers ignore patients, speak for them, or neglect their personal space.<sup>18</sup> Our study's participants stressed the significance of respecting patients and their families in intensive care settings, along with the importance of patient privacy and professional dignity. Overall, these findings underscore the ethical importance of respecting individuals, families, society, and the nursing profession, emphasizing the need to teach the value of human dignity to nursing students with great sensitivity in nursing education.

In healthcare, justice means equal access and fair treatment regardless of economic, social, or cultural status, including the right to receive services.<sup>14</sup> Student nurses in the UK and the US showed generally positive attitudes toward social justice.<sup>19</sup> Pang et al (2009)<sup>15</sup> emphasized that nurses should apply ethical and legal principles for equal treatment. Study participants also believed in providing equal services to patients with diverse backgrounds and beliefs. In line with the literature and our study, equality is a fundamental professional value in healthcare, especially vital in decision-making in intensive care where life and death are at stake. This value should be developed and strengthened in senior nursing students preparing for their careers.

Empathy, a core value in holistic nursing, is the ability to deeply understand and engage with others' emotional experiences.<sup>20</sup> Nurses must establish trustful relationships with their patients.<sup>21</sup> Babaii et al (2021)<sup>22</sup> proposed that empathic skills underlie humane patient care, creating a comforting environment and alleviating patients' fears. However, empathic skills possessed by intensive care nurses are of vital importance in the care process. In fact, the students included in our study emphasized the importance of empathic skills in the intensive care setting and expressed their efforts to develop these skills. Developing empathy within the clinical setting is vital for creating trust and emotional connections, key elements of holistic care.

Sensitivity is crucial in nursing, encompassing attention to individual care needs and intercultural differences.<sup>22,23</sup> Ethical sensitivity is fundamental for professional care and decision-making, and it's a vital competence for nurses. Nursing education should instill this competence in students.<sup>23</sup> In our study, students also stressed the importance of cultural and ethical sensitivity when caring for intensive care patients and in decision-making. Nursing students in this study reflected on the importance of being helpful and showing genuine interest in patients, aligning with the holistic focus on patient-centered care.

Altruism involves dedicating oneself to the welfare and well-being of others. Nurses, as healthcare professionals, work diligently to promote the health and well-being of patients, clients, families, and communities. This dedication to patient-focused care and altruism is a commitment to protecting their health and well-being.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Pang et al (2009)<sup>15</sup> emphasized the importance of nurses embodying a selfless and altruistic spirit. Our study's findings align with the literature, with students emphasizing the significance of being helpful, showing genuine interest in patients, and being willing to make sacrifices as essential professional values in intensive care settings.

Mercy/Compassion involves recognizing and alleviating others' suffering through therapeutic communication, leading to improved treatment responses, preserved dignity, and better self-care.<sup>20,24,25</sup> Care is a fundamental element of nursing characterized by sensitivity to pain and a genuine desire to alleviate it, enhancing high-quality care and a fulfilling professional experience.

Compassionate nursing care is the ability to understand and address patients' needs.<sup>20,24</sup> In a study on how compassion was expressed and received in a hospital setting, patients described compassion as touch, making them feel comfortable and safe with the nurse's touch.<sup>19</sup> A study on compassionate nursing care identified six indicators: sensitivity, awareness, non-judgmental approach, positive

attitude, empathetic understanding, and altruism.<sup>25</sup> Another study found that nurses often confused empathy and compassion<sup>20</sup>. Compassion is a fundamental healthcare value, with empathy being a common feature of compassionate care.<sup>14,21</sup> In our study, senior nursing students concurred with the literature, highlighting the importance of alleviating patient suffering and providing a comforting touch in intensive care units. Developing these values during nursing education is crucial for students preparing for their professional careers.

Reliability is crucial in nursing, where trust is the cornerstone of nurse-patient relationships.<sup>20</sup> Building trust-based relationships is a moral and healing art<sup>27</sup>. Children in a hospital setting expressed high trust in nurses<sup>27</sup>. Pang et al (2009)<sup>15</sup> found that trust and accountability were fundamental in caregiving. Trust is an ethical nursing value associated with honesty<sup>14</sup>. Nursing students in our study highlighted the importance of mutual trust in intensive care. In this context, nursing educators are responsible for preparing nursing students to provide culturally safe, quality care<sup>28</sup>.

Honesty in a clinical setting involves students openly sharing their abilities, acknowledging the limits of their knowledge and skills, conducting accurate assessments, and maintaining precise documentation. Quality and safe patient care rely on honest communication and practice.<sup>29</sup> In a concept analysis of honesty among nursing students, ethical behavior and professionalism were key aspects, with teaching staff serving as role models for honesty.<sup>30</sup> In line with the literature, students in our study emphasized the importance of professional honesty in intensive care settings, where ethical and moral behavior is crucial, and concepts like accountability and responsibility reflect honesty. It is essential for the relationship between students and educators in intensive care to be based on mutual honesty and trust, extending to interactions with the team and patients.

#### **Limitations of the study**

The qualitative research in this phenomenological study yields in-depth insights into the experiences of a small group of participants, offering theoretical groundwork for subsequent mixed-method and quantitative studies. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the study's findings are confined to the experiences of a specific group of nursing students at a single nursing school.

**CONCLUSION** This study demonstrates that intensive care practice offers nursing students a transformative learning experience that goes beyond theoretical knowledge and internalized values. Within these high-stakes settings, students deeply reinterpreted core professional values such as dignity, empathy, and justice through emotional labor, ethical dilemmas, and real patient interactions.

These experiences enhanced their professional identity and ethical sensitivity. Therefore, nursing curricula should incorporate such immersive environments, and educators must serve as value-based role models to support this development.

PREVIEW VERSION

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