



## Original Article

# The effect of the pandemic on the professional values of nurses in Türkiye: a phenomenological approach

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** The COVID-19 pandemic affected healthcare professionals as well as all sectors of society. Nurses working in close contact with patients were particularly affected during this process, and it is important to reveal its effects on the professional values of nurses. This study aims to explore the effect of the pandemic on the professional values of nurses caring for patients with COVID-19.

**Methods:** A descriptive phenomenological research method was used in the study. The research was conducted with 20 nurses who care for patients with COVID-19 in the intensive care units of different provinces of Türkiye. A semi-structured interview form prepared based on the literature was used to collect the data, which were obtained by the researchers through face-to-face interviews.

**Results:** In this study, five categories with themes and subthemes emerged: (1) the professional values of nurses during the pandemic; (2) the impact of the pandemic on professional values; (3) the emotional state of nurses regarding the pandemic process; (4) the support factors of nurses in the pandemic process; and (5) the expectations of nurses. It was revealed that the professional values of nurses were affected during the pandemic process. The situations that made nurses feel bad, weak, good, and strong during the pandemic process and what their expectations were determined.

**Conclusion:** In our study, we found that nurses managed to preserve their professional values even when they worked under difficult conditions during the pandemic. They have shown that they have an important role in the health army during the pandemic process with the values they maintain by strengthening the opposite without losing. It is important to transfer the experiences of nurses during the pandemic to the new generation of nurses and conduct training to maintain professional values.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; nurse's experience; professional values; phenomenological approach.

Throughout history, nursing is a profession that aims to help and care for people in need.<sup>[1,2]</sup> The nursing profession, which dates back to human existence, adapts to time, and constantly renews itself by improving its practices and training without changing its.<sup>[1,3]</sup>

The world we live in is constantly changing due to many factors, such as war, natural disasters, epidemics, climate change, and new generation diseases. It is important that nursing preserve its values to both sustain and develop its existence in a

constantly changing world.<sup>[4]</sup>

Values are the principles that guide the purpose and meaning of an individual's life. There are different categories of values: individual and professional values. Individual values are related to the person's moral development, attitudes, and sociocultural norms. It plays a very important role in the individual's self-expression, in evaluating an event in all its aspects, in influencing or influencing others, and in distinguishing between right and wrong by making choices.<sup>[4]</sup> While reflecting

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**What is presently known on this subject?**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected health workers as well as all sectors of society. In this process, nurses working in close contact with patients were affected physiologically, psychologically, and sociologically.
- Despite these effects, it is important for nurses to protect their professional values in order to maintain and improve the quality of health care.

**What does this article add to the existing knowledge?**

- Nurses have experienced ethical problems during the pandemic and tried to cope with them. They worked under difficult conditions during the pandemic, but they managed to preserve their professional values.

**What are the implications for practice?**

- Ethical problems and coping experiences of nurses during the pandemic process should be transferred to the new generation of nurses through professional values education.
- It is important to provide education and psychological counseling services to protect nurses from the consequences of the pandemic.
- Nurses need motivational elements.
- Motivational elements should be used equally and without discrimination, especially by managers.
- Social education about the importance and value of the nursing profession should be given. Extraordinarily devoted nurses should be rewarded in the community.

individual values, codes of conduct, and standards, professional values are the beliefs or guiding principles required for ideal behaviors that individuals should exhibit while performing their professional duties.<sup>[5]</sup>

Values indicate ideals in human life. While expressing the meaning of what is important to the individual, group, or society, they also attribute an identity to the person with a sense of belonging.<sup>[6,7]</sup> In this sense, every individual has personal, social, cultural, and professional values that add meaning to his life and shape and direct his life.

Nurses' professional values help them implement care actions, make decisions, and resolve ethical problems, while also guiding their interactions with healthy or sick individuals, colleagues, other team members, and the community. Internalization of professional values ensures the maintenance of safe, quality, and ethical care by providing the competence to resolve ethical conflicts and determine priority actions.<sup>[8,9]</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic process forced nurses to work under difficult conditions, the psychological effects of which were studied. However, there are limited valuation studies on the subject.<sup>[10-13]</sup> Such studies will be important in replanning the education of professional nursing values. Therefore, this study aims to determine the effects of the problems experienced during the pandemic process on the professional values of nurses. The study will be based on the question of what nurses lost in their professional values and what they gained during the pandemic process.

## Materials and Method

### Research design

This study uses a descriptive phenomenological research method. A qualitative research method was chosen to evalu-

ate the participants' experiences during the pandemic on the basis of what they gained and lost. A semi-structured interview form prepared based on the literature was used to collect data.

### Participants and research context

This study used a purposeful sampling method, and 20 nurses caring for patients with COVID-19 in Türkiye from February 1, 2021, to March 25, 2021, were selected. The inclusion criteria included nurses who provided nursing care for patients with COVID-19 and volunteer participants. Nursing participants who cared for patients with COVID-19 for at least a year met the inclusion criteria.

### Data Collection

The nurses were informed about the purpose of the study that qualitative interviews would be recorded, their names would not be used in the study, and their data would only be used within the scope of the study. The interviews were mostly conducted in the participants' working environments. The researchers conducting the interviews were not previously acquainted. Interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, the study was explained, the participants were asked if they had any questions, and each participant was given a code name by the interviewer. Each interview was recorded on an audiotape, and the interviewer also took written notes. Sampling and data collection continued until information redundancy was achieved, at which point, no new information emerged from the data analysis.

### Data analysis

This study used Colaizzi's phenomenological method to qualitatively analyze the experiences of nurses caring for patients with COVID-19. Colaizzi's phenomenological method focuses on participants' experiences and emotions and finds common patterns rather than individual characteristics in research subjects.<sup>[14]</sup> This scientific approach assures the authenticity of the collected experiences so that participants comply with scientific standards.

The interviews with the participants were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Nonverbal expressions, such as pauses during speaking, laughing, and crying, are processed on raw documents to record and reveal the exact meaning of the spoken words in the written text.

The texts were read repeatedly by the researchers. All interviews were evaluated thoroughly through an in-depth thinking process. Each interview was subjected to thematic analysis, and the expressions describing the individual experience were underlined. These statements were compared with descriptions of similar experiences to reveal a pattern. Moving forward, subthemes were revealed. These subthemes were combined under the themes that indicated the common meanings they contained. In this process, expert support concerning qualitative research methods was received. The determined themes were evaluated with comparative reading, and

then they were finalized. No qualitative software was used to analyze the data.

## Results

In this study, 4 males and 16 females between 25 and 44 years of age (average:  $35.7 \pm 5.28$ ) were enrolled. The working experience ranged from 1 to 31 years (average:  $16.25 \pm 5.12$ ). All of them had undergraduate degrees, and none had a diagnosis of COVID-19. We explored the effects of the nurses'

experiences on their professional values during the pandemic process using phenomenological methods.

Five categories and the themes and subthemes belonging to these categories emerged from the results of our interviews. The five themes are summarized below, and sample quotations for each theme are shown in Table 1.

The following are the themes: professional values of nurses during the pandemic; the impact of the pandemic on professional values; emotional state of nurses during the pandemic process; support factors of nurses in the pandemic process;

**Table 1. Themes identified through interviews with nurses.**

Theme	Subtheme	Quotations
1. Nurses values during the pandemic	i. Professional Values	
	Altruism, Usefulness, Human dignity, Equality	"In these difficult times, it is very important to sacrifice and to do this job lovingly. People need us and we must help them." N20 "It was so painful that the patients were left untouched and left pretending to be a leper. While even the relatives of the patients themselves do not care, we are very self-sacrificing." N19 "I think everyone has equal rights and the right to equal service. Equal services and opportunities should be provided especially for the elderly and children. Some of the situations where I saw this, shake, and hit me very much." N10
	ii. Individual values	
	Knowledgeable, Experienced, Empathy, Calmness, Self-control,	"It is very important to be knowledgeable and experienced to work under these difficult conditions." N8 "I tried to empathize more when approaching patients. I thought that I could have loved ones in the place of that patient." N3 "In the pandemic, I learned to work more calmly and approach people more humane." N1 "We are working under difficult conditions. We are very tired. But if we do this work, we must be conscientious." N7
2. The effect of the pandemic on professional values	Positive effect (a sacred profession, done with love)	"I believe the nursing profession is sacred. These people need us. I am doing my best." N7 "Nursing can never be done without being loved. I noticed this again in the pandemic." N8
	Negative effect (servitude, work done for a living, work I do without love)	"Nursing is like a servant. We do what people don't want to do. Nobody wants to enter the sick room, but we have to. We go in and do our job, yet we are not appreciated." N5 "We were tired, compromising ourselves. We could not see value from people for what we did. This wore us out. I just have to work for a salary." N6
3. Emotional state of nurses during the pandemic process	Fear,	"I'm afraid that something bad will happen to my relatives and loved ones, I will carry a virus to them. My son has asthma. I have to protect him. I'm getting stressed." N1
	Anxiety,	"I'm anxious and afraid. My mom and dad have a chronic illness. I thought of them." N16
	Stress,	"It is very difficult to breathe with overalls, masks, and glasses. Working soaked in those clothes is a very stressful situation. We work under intense stress." N17
	Burnout,	"I felt a lot of spiritual exhaustion. But it had no financial equivalent. Society did not support us in this regard either. I just thought of our job as rowing for nothing." N4
	Anger,	"You are thinking. While you cannot go to your child, wife, and mother even though you should, it makes a lot of thought to give care to patients who are left by the door and are not sought again. It causes anger." N1
	Feeling worthless	"I was very worn out and realized that we were not valued, we had no value, and were not liked by patients and administrators at all. We felt material and moral worthlessness." N5 "Failure to give the health personnel the value and strength they deserve were the most negative effects on me in terms of value." N10
4. Support factors of nurses in the pandemic process	Working in solidarity with team members,	"My friend's support felt good. So we gave each other strength." N9
	The health of household members	"The fact that my family was healthy and thinking about my children made me feel powerful." N8
	Their knowledge and experience	"In the early days, we were afraid because we did not know. Now we know how to protect ourselves with our knowledge and experience. Knowing gives strength." N20
	Believing in the creator	"It was my belief that made me feel strong. If a person has strong faith in him, you approach the other patient that way." N1 "There is no financial benefit in caring for patients whose relatives do not want to take care of. However, I think we are doing good deeds spiritually." N16
5. Expectations of nurses during the pandemic	Expectations from the society	"You feel weak spiritually. So you swing a shovel in vain. You feel it. No matter how hard you try, no matter how much protective measures you try to take; society does not support you because it is not conscious." N4
	(Respect for the profession, development of social consciousness)	"Believe me, if everyone thought of someone else instead of thinking about themselves, this virus would not have remained." N8 "We are dealing with people intensely throughout the day and people told us that we need to do every job. I mean, they see us like servants, our profession as an insignificant job." N14
	Expectations from managers (Improving the social rights of healthcare professionals, equality)	"The sacrifice we make must have a reward. For example, a financial reward." N8 "When we look at the health system, 90% of patient care is provided by nurses. But nurses never get praised." N10

and expectations of nurses. Sample quotations for each theme are shown in the Table 1.

### **Theme 1: Professional values of nurses during the pandemic**

Participants expressed that the values related to the nursing profession are altruism, usefulness, human dignity, and equality. At the same time, they stated that it is necessary to have personal values such as being knowledgeable, experienced, empathic, calmness and having self-control. It was determined that they benefited from their personal and professional values while creating solutions to the ethical dilemmas they experienced during the pandemic process.

### **Theme 2: Effect of the pandemic on professional values**

Most of the participants (n=14) stated that they thought that the pandemic had a positive effect on their professional values. These participants stated that nursing should be "a sacred profession" and "done with love," which shows a positive professional perspective. Some participants (n=6) stated that the pandemic had a negative effect on their professional values. These participants used expressions such as "servitude," "work done for a living," and "work I do without love" regarding the nursing profession. These participants had a negative professional viewpoint.

### **Theme 3: Emotional state of nurses during the pandemic process**

Emotions experienced by nurses during the pandemic process were fear, anger, stress, burnout, anxiety, and worthlessness. It has been stated that these feelings are experienced due to hard work, society, healthcare managers, and patient relatives. The job is intense and tiring, with a risk of infection, society's failure to pay attention to infection control rules, and managers not using motivation tools equally among healthcare professionals. The reasons for these feelings are that relatives of patients do not want to take care of their loved ones but show violence to healthcare professionals.

### **Theme 4: Support factors of nurses in the pandemic process**

Nurses stated that working in solidarity with team members, the health of household members, their knowledge and experience, and believing in the creator made them feel good and powerful during the pandemic process. It has been determined that these support factors are at the forefront when they are feeling weak.

### **Theme 5: Expectations of nurses during the pandemic**

Nurses have expectations from society and managers during the pandemic process. They stated that they expect society to respect the profession, adapt to infection control measures, and be vaccinated. On the other hand, they expect an improvement in their social rights and equality among healthcare professionals through the use of motivational tools by their managers.

## **Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an indication that microorganisms will continue to challenge humans. The rapid spread of the virus has made life-changing changes necessary to control the pandemic. All sectors of society had to start designing themselves according to their new lifestyle using current technology related to packaging (food, shopping, and clothing) services for homes, home offices, and distance education.

In the pandemic, the paradigm in the health sector has changed. War language such as "army, soldier, struggle, fight, win, lose" started to be used in health discourses.<sup>[15]</sup> Individual health has found meaning with the concept of public health. Healthcare professionals, on the other hand, experienced that they worked harder than before for the health of others, despite this virus, which also threatened their health. It was watched in movies, written in books, and told in schools, but it was completely different when experienced, especially for nurses who are in close contact with patients affected by COVID-19. The increasing number of patients has also increased the need for care, which increases the need for nurses. Nurses have shown that they are the most important power in the health care system by working at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, despite limitations, such as their small number, the risk of infection, and the loss of their colleagues.<sup>[16]</sup>

It has been observed that nurses, in particular, face complex ethical problems in extraordinary situations. Turale et al.<sup>[17]</sup> stated that nurses working in hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes under harsh conditions across borders and cultures need to preserve and reinforce their values. Therefore, it is recommended by national nursing organizations, educators, and nurse leaders to revise or improve the ethical frameworks for nursing practices. This study focused on the experiences of the nurses who were closest to the people affected by COVID-19 when they felt alone and helpless. Their experiences have been analyzed in terms of ethics. The results obtained are also important in determining how nurses are valued and affected by the pandemic, thereby, replanning the education of professional nursing values for future nurses.

Professional values are abstract and general behavioral principles that are formed by the strong emotional bond of professional members and provide basic standards for evaluating professional practices.<sup>[18]</sup> Experts have emphasized that professional nursing values are the foundation of nursing practices.<sup>[19]</sup> The American Nurses Association (ANA) and the The International Council of Nurses (ICN) emphasized that the most important condition is the well-being of the healthy or sick individual, and accepted the basic value as a utility.<sup>[20,21]</sup> Human dignity, honesty, sacrifice, and justice were reported as important professional values in the nursing profession.<sup>[19,22,23]</sup> The highest scores in the study of Erkuş and Dinç in our country in 2018 are trust, justice, impartiality, happiness, equality, reliability, openness to change, privacy, loyalty, and

respect for human dignity, altruism, social status, and obedience to authority.<sup>[18]</sup> Among these values, trust and justice were the foremost professional values, and sacrifice, and obedience were less preferred. In our study, the participants stated that professional values such as altruism, usefulness, human dignity, and equality are important. However, in this study, unlike in Erkuş, and Dinç's work, altruism was expressed more as an important value. The difference between these two studies stems from the fact that nurses prioritized the value of "sacrifice" more in their actions during the pandemic than before it because they fulfilled their care obligations despite the risk of infection. To fulfill these obligations, they remained separated from household members, their children, and loved ones. They found meaning in this situation through the value of sacrifice.

According to Babadağ (2010), nurses need to be aware of the values that guide their personal and professional behaviors to apply quality care by respecting the life, dignity, personality, values, and autonomy of the person who is accepted as the most valuable existence of life.<sup>[8]</sup> Professional values are rooted in professional ethical values and are formed by the reflection of personal values.<sup>[24]</sup> In this study, the participants stated that besides their professional values, it is important to have personal values, such as being knowledgeable, experienced, empathic, patient, and self-controlled during the pandemic process.

Participants stated that they thought that the effect of the pandemic on their professional values as nurses was generally positive. This was due to the participants finding meaning in the ethical dilemmas they faced during the pandemic as being worthwhile (altruism, usefulness, human dignity, and equality). According to Monroe (2019), professional values are highest among nurses with longer practice experience and nurses with increased ethical training. Most of the participants in this study had worked for a long time in the profession, acquiring experience, and university education.<sup>[25]</sup> For this reason, their statement on the pandemic having a positive effect on professional values was related to knowledge, experience, and education.

According to Sperling, in pandemics, nurses work under stress due to their increased workload, the risk of infection, the deaths of healthcare professionals, and their inability to meet with their loved ones for fear of contagion, despite their inadequate number.<sup>[22]</sup> While working under this stress, they also experience ethical pressure because they feel obliged to provide care. In this study, the participants sought valuable answers about the ethical dilemmas they faced. They thought with conscience and responsibility in the ethical dilemma of infecting themselves or someone else's health. From these, it was determined that, with an altruistic approach, they prioritized the health of other people more than their own. In doing so, they prioritized human dignity, empathy, and patience (tolerance) in their professional and personal values.

Justice and equality are important nursing values.<sup>[23]</sup> Serving

many rather than the individual patient is the goal, especially in extreme situations, and the management of resources is an important consideration. A fair and equitable approach is important in the use of limited resources for public health.<sup>[26]</sup> In Sperling's study, it was stated that during the pandemic, every patient should have the right to receive equal and optimal treatment regardless of their age, medical history, or personal responsibility.<sup>[22]</sup> Likewise, in this study, the participants stated that equality is an important nursing value in the problem of limited use of resources during the pandemic process.

Experiences encountered in the pandemic affected professional values. Most of the participants (n=14) who reported that these experiences positively affected their professional values stated that nursing should be "a sacred profession" and "done with love." In this study, some participants (n=6) stated that the pandemic hurt their professional values. These participants used expressions such as "servitude," "work done for a living," and "work I do without love" regarding the nursing profession. This negative view of the profession was thought to be caused by the negative experiences encountered during the pandemic, which caused them to feel worthless. In the study of Cici and Yılmaz, it was reported that nurses' perspectives on the profession after the pandemic were negatively affected.<sup>[27]</sup>

Working in an infectious environment caused by a pandemic can more easily confront nurses with ethical challenges, which can cause nurses to succumb to negative emotions and psychological pressure, thereby hurting their mental health.<sup>[28]</sup> In this study, the emotions experienced by nurses during the pandemic process were fear, anger, stress, burnout, anxiety, and worthlessness, which are intense, and tiring feelings, and carry the risk of infection, with the community's failure to pay attention to infection control rules and managers not using motivational tools equally among healthcare professionals. It was stated that the relatives of the patients did not want to take care of their loved ones but showed violence toward healthcare professionals.

Jia et al.<sup>[28]</sup> stated that the biggest ethical difficulty faced by nurses stems from the patient. In this study, nurses felt bad due to the attitudes and behaviors of the patients and their relatives.

The physical and verbal violence of some of the patients or their relatives toward healthcare personnel, who are working selflessly without consideration for their health and safety, caused a separate feeling of sadness and anger on their side. These feelings caused conflicts with professional values, resulting in "why should I sacrifice?" or "who and what do I sacrifice for?" in their pursuit of finding a worthwhile meaning. The nurses who answered these questions stated that they should approach their patients and their relatives with more tolerance and empathy in this process in which their society is physically and psychologically affected.

Working in a stressful environment for a long time can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction and chronic emotional distress. Studies showed that nurses experience higher burnout than

other healthcare workers, increasing the intention to quit accordingly.<sup>[29-31]</sup> In studies comparing burnout and professional values, developing strategies to reduce burnout levels to increase the perception of professional value is recommended.<sup>[21,30,32]</sup> In our study, we found that burnout negatively affected professional values and perspectives.

In our study, despite the difficult working conditions of the nurses, working in solidarity with team members, the health of their household members, knowledge, and experience with belief systems were important to support factors that made them feel good and powerful. In Sperling's study (2021), knowledge and skills of the participants (72%), the necessity to treat patients (70%), and the need to earn a living (67%) were the most expressed motivational factors.<sup>[22]</sup> Turale et al.<sup>[17]</sup> (2020) stated that nurses need strong leadership and support from employers, the community, and nursing organizations as they strive for public health. Nurses' self-concepts and professional identities are affected by their social images.<sup>[33]</sup> In extraordinary situations such as a pandemic, society's need for healthcare professionals increases. To meet these needs, healthcare professionals worked, ignoring their health in the process. The consequences of the pandemic emphasized the value and importance of healthcare professionals. Demonstrating this value to society is also important in terms of professional identity. Sperling's study (2021) stated that the profession should be socially appreciated with gratitude and should work with support from colleagues, relatives, friends, and other sectors of society.<sup>[22]</sup> In this study, the participants stated that they expected society to be regarded as a profession. It made them feel bad that their social reputation was not raised in the face of their sacrifices while working under these difficult conditions.

In this study, the participants emphasized that social awareness about infection control rules should be developed to reduce the workload on healthcare personnel. The full compliance of the public with the infection control rules is important and necessary in preventing the pandemic. The total harmony of the people often requires individuals to make sacrifices for the greater social good.<sup>[34]</sup> However, the obstacle to engaging in such altruistic behavior is that individuals underestimate the possibility of being personally infected with COVID-19. At the same time, it is also an important factor to what extent human values (such as sacrifice, responsibility, and demanding the well-being of others) are valued by other citizens.<sup>[35]</sup> In this study, the fact that society did not make the same sacrifice toward the altruistic behaviors of the nurses caused negative emotions to be felt.

Nurses going to work every day means putting their lives in danger on the one hand, and on the other hand, it means an opportunity to save lives or restore health. Personal and professional values determine nurses' action preferences on the question of their own or another's health. Most of the nurses did not give up this difficult struggle that put their lives in danger, and instead of leaving the profession, they bravely contin-

ued on their way. In this study, the participants stated that they expected motivations that would strengthen their courage on this difficult path. They stated that they wanted the managers to improve the social rights of nurses and to provide equality in social rights and allowances among healthcare workers. Oliveira also emphasized in her study that nurses are less appreciated and rewarded.<sup>[36]</sup> Catton, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of honoring nurses and increasing their wages.<sup>[16]</sup> Motivating nurses working under stress, especially in extraordinary situations such as a pandemic, with tools such as appreciation and rewards is also important in terms of professional values.

## Conclusion

It was determined that nurses managed to preserve their professional values even if they worked under difficult conditions during the pandemic process. They have shown that they are an important part of the health army during the pandemic process with the values they maintained by strengthening the opposite without losing. It will be important to transfer the ethical problems and coping experiences of nurses during the pandemic to the next generation of nurses through education of professional values in order to maintain this power.

Nursing has been a profession throughout history that aims to help people in need and deals with every aspect of treatment and care in health care. Global health threats such as pandemics not only increase the burden of care for nurses but also cause them to be affected physiologically and psychologically. It is important to provide training and psychological counseling services so that nurses are least affected by the consequences of the pandemic.

Nurses need motivational elements that will keep them away from all kinds of negative thoughts and feelings. For this reason, it is necessary to protect and increase the motivation of healthcare workers in terms of professional values and professional commitment in extraordinary situations such as a pandemic. Motivational elements should be used equally and without discrimination, especially by managers.

The social rights of nurses should be supported and developed in order to protect their pandemic experiences in a positive way. At the same time, the importance and value of the nursing profession should be recognized and respected by society because those who have put the patient's health above their own, like soldiers who died in a war, deserve to be honored.

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