



## Original Article

# Metaphors of postgraduate students for psychiatric nursing “Seeing yourself in the mirror”: A qualitative study

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** Psychiatric nursing is realized with the completion of postgraduate education in Türkiye. Individuals determine the field that they want to create and promote a professional identity in line with their personal and occupational goals. There is no study examining the perceptions of the nurses about the field they have chosen in Türkiye. This study was carried out to examine the metaphors of nurses continuing postgraduate education in the field of psychiatric nursing at a University for Psychiatric Nursing.

**Methods:** This study was conducted with phenomenology approach among qualitative research designs. Forty-seven postgraduate nursing students participated in the study. The data were collected by an Information Form and the metaphor sentence as “psychiatric nursing is like ... because...” that questions the perceptions of nurses about psychiatric nursing between July and October 2021.

**Results:** In research, 37 different metaphors were identified among the answers examined. Terms such as mirror, observatory, tree root, stained glass, and dance were included among the metaphors. The metaphors were examined under six themes including titles such as “laboring,” “providing balance and integrity,” “understanding self and the other,” “accompanying,” “eternity/life,” and “rootedness.” It was observed that holistic, balancing, caring and accompanying aspects of nursing were emphasized through metaphors used by postgraduate students of psychiatric nursing. The frequent use of terms such as dance, color and music including artistic and esthetic elements has reflected the artistic aspect of psychiatric nursing.

**Conclusion:** The study provides data on specialization in psychiatric nursing nationally from a cultural and policy perspective.

**Keywords:** Metaphor; psychiatric nursing; specialization; student.

Psychiatric nurses are the health-care professionals who protect, heal, and improve mental health by making assessments at the level of individual, family, and society.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Psychiatric nurses create and promote their professional identity from undergraduate education.<sup>[3-5]</sup> Professional identity is a set of values and benefits that shape nurse’s relationship with the patient and care.<sup>[6]</sup> These values and beliefs are expected to be improved by integrating with the philosophy of nursing.<sup>[3]</sup> The formation of professional identity introduces positive effects in terms of the nurse as well as care service.<sup>[3,4]</sup> At the

same time, building clinical competence has a critical importance for the basis of professional autonomy and decision-making.<sup>[7]</sup> Integration of individuals with their profession and their ability to bring their profession to an important position in their lives are the consequences of the establishment of a professional identity.<sup>[3]</sup>

Postgraduate education is an important step for nurses to create and develop a professional identity by enhancing the understanding of the same knowledge, experience, and professional philosophy.<sup>[4]</sup> Psychiatric nurses, whose development has been

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accelerated since 1960s in Türkiye, began with the integration of mental health issues into undergraduate education and then, continued with the increasing number of postgraduate education programs today.<sup>[2,8,9]</sup> The increase in the postgraduate programs and the applications to these programs and besides the number of thesis included in the Thesis Center of the Council of Higher Education (CHE) have shown that professionalism is promoted in psychiatric nursing today.<sup>[10]</sup>

The studies evaluating perceptions of psychiatric nurses about their professional identity and occupation have often focused on the professional roles of experienced nurses, their relationships with the patients, and facilitating and challenging aspects of the profession.<sup>[11-14]</sup> In the literature, there are studies evaluating perceptions of nurses,<sup>[4,7]</sup> midwives,<sup>[15]</sup> nursing students,<sup>[4,16]</sup> and community mental health nurses<sup>[17]</sup> about their occupation through metaphors. Some metaphor recognized for nursing or working conditions them in these studies, are such that self-sacrificing, care, leopard spot, brave, savior, angel, power source and waiting to be discovered.<sup>[4,7,16,17]</sup> Metaphors are preferred as a tool in the evaluation of the perceptions of individuals about a subject or condition.<sup>[18]</sup> Besides all these, no study that makes an in-depth investigation of the perceptions of nurses, who continue their postgraduate education to become more professional about the field of psychiatric nursing, have been found in the literature. Based on this purpose, this study was carried out to determine the perceptions of nurses continuing their postgraduate education in psychiatric nursing about this field through metaphors.

## Materials and Method

### Study Design

The study was conducted with a phenomenology approach that is one of the qualitative research designs. Phenomenology aims to reveal the meaning attributed to a phenomenon or experience by the individuals or their perceptions on this aspect.<sup>[19]</sup> This study used the consolidated criteria guide (COREQ) checklist for reporting qualitative research.

### Participants and Setting

The study group of the research consisted of students who were continuing their postgraduate education in the fields of psychiatric nursing, community mental health nursing, consultation, and liaison psychiatric nursing at Ege University Institute of Health Sciences, Department of Psychiatric Nursing (n=44). Participants were selected for sampling based on ease of accessibility. In Ege University Institute of Health Sciences, three master programs with thesis, one master program without thesis and one PhD program are carried out by the Department of Psychiatric Nursing.

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

- No national study examining the perception of professional psychiatric nursing could be found.

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

- Most metaphors are related to consultation and liaison psychiatry.

#### What are the implications for practice?

- Metaphors reflect the working conditions of psychiatric nursing in the country.

## Instruments

Data were collected online by using an Information Form and a Semi-Structured Interview Form between July and October 2021.

### Information Form

This form consisted of five questions to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants including age, sex, education status and institution, working status, and working experience in the psychiatric clinic.<sup>[8,12,13,15,16]</sup>

### Semi-Structured Interview Form

This form included the sentence as “*Psychiatric nursing is like ..... because.....*” where the spaces were expected to be filled out.<sup>[5,20]</sup>

## Data Collection

Participants were contacted at postgraduate courses and during their individual times with their supervisors. They were informed about the study and volunteer participants were sent forms. Participants filled out data collection forms as online within 10 min.

## Data Analysis

In the study, descriptive data were analyzed by basic statistics including number, mean, and percentage. The metaphors created by the participants were assessed by content analysis.<sup>[19]</sup> A guide was used in the analysis of the data.<sup>[5,18,21,22]</sup> The guide was first used by Saban (2009) and has five stages. The first stage is the metaphor coding and extraction stage. At this stage, all metaphors produced are given a number and it is evaluated whether the metaphors are clearly expressed or not.<sup>[5,18,21]</sup> In this study, four forms where there was a metaphor but no reason, relevant concept was only described and there was not any metaphors were excluded from review; and 43 forms were evaluated in the end (Author 1). In the second stage, which is the sample metaphor compilation stage, a relationship is established between the metaphor and the material, and the similar and the likened (Author 1). In the third stage, category development, the justifications of the metaphors are evaluated. As a result of this evaluation, categories are created (Author 1).<sup>[18,21]</sup> In the validity-reliability step, the representation of the created categories and metaphors is evaluated by experts.<sup>[18,21]</sup> Author 2 and two lecturers were requested to pro-

**Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the participants**

	n	%
Age	29.07±5.58 (min: 22–max: 52)	
Sex		
Female	38	88.40
Male	5	11.60
Education program		
Master with a thesis in psychiatric nursing	18	41.88
Master without thesis in psychiatric nursing	2	4.65
Master with thesis in community mental health nursing	4	9.30
Master with a thesis in consultation-liaison psychiatric nursing	5	11.62
PhD in psychiatric nursing	14	32.55
Working status		
Yes	41	95.30
No	2	4.70
Field of work*		
Nurse	31	77.5
Academician	7	17.5
Other	2	5
Duration of work*(years)	7.04±6.82 (min: 0- max: 32)	
Working experience in the psychiatric service		
Yes	8	18.6
No	35	81.4
Duration of work in the psychiatric service* (years)	0.71±2.02 (min: 0 max: 8)	
Total	43	100

\*: Row percentage was taken.

vide expert opinions. The Cohen's K coefficient, which reflects the agreement between the coders, was found to be 0.82. In the last step, all data were transferred to digital media.

### Ethical Permissions

Permission was obtained from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study (date: January 06, 2021; protocol number: 998). The participants were informed about the study and they were made to sign an informed consent form. Necessary permission was obtained from the institution where the research would be conducted. The study was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics of the Participants

The mean age of the participants was 29.07±5.58 years old and 88.4% were females. Out of them, 67.4% were registered to master programs and 32.6% were registered to PhD programs. 95.3% of the participants were also working. While 77.5% were working as a nurse in a health-care institution, 17.5% were ac-

ademicians. The mean duration of work was 7.04±6.82 years among the participants. Only 18.6% had working experience in the field of psychiatry for nearly 9 months (Table 1).

### Main Outcomes

The participants generated 37 different metaphors. Among these, the mirror (f=3) metaphor was the most common (Table 2). Their metaphors were examined under six categories including titles such as "laboring (f=14)," "providing balance and integrity (f=9)," "understanding self and the other (f=9)," "accompanying (f=5)," "eternity/life (f=4)" and "rootedness (f=2)" (Table 2).

#### Category 1: Laboring

When Table 2 was examined, 14 various metaphors were observed under this theme. These metaphors were generated by 14 participants (32.55%). Participants justified the metaphors they presented under this category with the concepts of workpower, making effort, and problem-solving.

*"It is like caring a flower because just care is not enough as in psychiatric nursing. It is necessary to provide suitable environment and conditions and the most important is to love." (P,16)*

**Table 2. Metaphors developed by the participants for “Psychiatric Nursing” and categories of metaphors**

Category name	Metaphor	(f)	%
Laboring	Key	1	2.32
	Firefly	1	2.32
	Being multiple things at once	1	2.32
	Caring a flower	1	2.32
	Wearing double eyeglasses	1	2.32
	A ship resisting the waves	1	2.32
	Need	1	2.32
	Finely embroidered lace	1	2.32
	Silkworm	1	2.32
	Ointment	1	2.32
	Music	1	2.32
	Observatory	1	2.32
	Magic	1	2.32
	Light of hope	1	2.32
Understanding self and the other	Mirror	2	4.64
	A labyrinth lined with mirrors	1	2.32
	Explorer	1	2.32
	School	1	2.32
	Art	1	2.32
	Being a liquid	1	2.32
	A magical door	1	2.32
	Stained glass	1	2.32
Providing balance and integrity	Mirror	1	2.32
	Dance	2	4.64
	Sea	1	2.32
	House	1	2.32
	A nice and well-prepared dinner	1	2.32
	Puzzle	1	2.32
	Trivet	2	4.64
Accompanying	Parent of the patient	1	2.32
	Patient's best company	1	2.32
	Companionship	1	2.32
	Roadmap	1	2.32
	Journey	1	2.32
Eternity/Life	Sea	1	2.32
	Rainbow	1	2.32
	A big ocean	1	2.32
	Life	1	2.32
Rootedness	Tree root	2	4.64
	Total	43	100

*“It is like a **key** because it opens the lock there in crisis situations and keeps the road going.” (P,34)*

*“It is like an **ointment** because you apply and it heals slowly.”(P,42)*

*“Psychiatric nursing is like an **observatory** because it observes the individual it cares for, collects data, provides the necessary intervention, observes and records the changes.” (P,1)*

### **Category 2: Providing Balance and Integrity**

Seven different metaphors under this category were generated by nine participants (20.93%) (Table 2). They justified these metaphors with the concepts of rhythm, holistic assessment, and caring.

*“It is like a **mirror** because it makes the individual to confront existing situations and to cope with it due to its ability to make a complete assessment in bio-psycho-social aspect.” (P,17)*

"Psychiatric nursing is like **dance** because it requires acting in concert with the patient for a quality care." (P,29)

"It is like a **house** because it includes all rooms, hall, kitchen and the environment and neighbors." (P,37)

### Category 3: Understanding Self and the Other

Nine participants (20.93%) generated eight metaphors under this category (Table 2). They justified these metaphors with the concepts of reflection, revealing self, engaging self, power of harmony, and creativity.

"Psychiatric nursing is a **labyrinth lined with mirrors** because all roads get out of you; the "magical subject" that is necessary to understand the other is hidden within the human itself. For that reason, there is a mirror at the beginning, end and everywhere of each road." (P, 4)

"Psychiatric nursing is like an artistic **stained glass** because it passes and reflects the light from the sun through the colors inside." (P, 10)

"It is art because it contains the healing in color." (P, 40)

### Category 4: Accompanying

Five different metaphors were generated by five participants (11.63%) under this category (Table 2). These metaphors were justified with continuity of patient care and patient advocacy.

"Psychiatric nursing is like **companionship** because mental disorders are a group that is on the way and stays on the way for a lifetime." (P,23)

"Psychiatric nursing is like the **patient's best company** because it is the one that knows a patient's both physical and mental state best." (P,31)

### Category 5: Eternity/Life

Under this category, four different metaphors were generated by four participants (9.30%) (Table 2). Metaphors were explained by the concepts of uniqueness and diversity of patient care.

"Psychiatric nursing is **like** life because it deals with many vital events in life." (P,26)

"Psychiatric nursing is like a **big ocean** because it is so deep and so full of unknowns." (P,28)

### Category 6: Rootedness

In this last category, one metaphor was generated by two different participants (Table 2). This metaphor was justified with the concepts of being strong and nutrition.

"Psychiatric nursing is like **tree root** because the branches of the tree get stronger and turn into green when the roots are strong. If the roots cannot get sufficient care, both roots and branches dry." (P,13)

"Psychiatric nursing is like **tree root** because the root feeds the tree and keeps it upright. Psychiatric health and nursing also have a root function in holistic care." (P,18)

## Discussion

The use of metaphor is a way of thinking and evaluating that affects the individual's understanding of the world and himself in general.<sup>[23]</sup> In this study, it was determined that metaphors such as Being multiple things at once, Mirror, Sea, Dance, Companionship, Tree root, were used to evaluate the perceptions of the participants, who preferred to become professional in psychiatric nursing, about this field. In the study by Buldukoglu (2021) focusing on the roots of psychiatric nursing, participants also evaluated psychiatric nursing with metaphors. The metaphors were described as helping, engaging self, nourishing self and the field, guiding and companionship in that study. It is striking that the participants who entered the path of professionalization in the field of psychiatric nursing and those with many years of experience in psychiatric nursing described psychiatric nursing through similar concepts.

The metaphors generated by the participants were examined under six categories. The most intense among these was found to be "Laboring." Nurse's workpower and labor were generally emphasized under this category. In a study examining the perceptions of nurses and nursing students about the profession in Türkiye, sacrifice, benevolence and intense working conditions were the common themes that emerged frequently.<sup>[4]</sup> The evaluation of psychiatric nurses in England on the identity of psychiatric nursing is that the nurse does more than one job too much. This result supports our research.<sup>[11,12]</sup> All participants, whose metaphors were evaluated in this category, are the individuals who actively pursue nursing profession. Data collection process of the study was carried out during a period when COVID-19 pandemic was intense and nurses were working very hard with much more devotion. Therefore, working under COVID-19 pandemic conditions was considered to effective on the generation of metaphors in this category much more.

The second category evaluated was "Providing Balance and Integrity." As in the definition of health, nursing care should be holistic.<sup>[24]</sup> Roy's Adaptation Theory heavily emphasizes balance, harmony and integrity of care.<sup>[25]</sup> The results of the study by Simsek Aslan and Buldukoglu (2020) which was conducted with the nurses working in psychiatric clinics also emphasized holistic care. Similarly, participants underlined this aspect of psychiatric nursing with metaphors such as trivet and puzzle. Very few participants were working in a field specific to psychiatry. Therefore, the reason of generating a metaphor in this category was thought to be that they exhibited their professional identity while providing holistic care to their own patients.

Travelbee and Lydia E. Hall, who are included among nursing theorists, have emphasized that nurses use themselves as therapeutic.<sup>[25]</sup> While justifying the category as “Understanding Self and the Other,” some of the participants made similar explanations around the concepts of revealing self and self-worth. Themes belonging these concepts were also included in the studies evaluating professional identity of the nurses and identity perceptions of psychiatric nurses.<sup>[11,26]</sup> The similarities between the results of the current study and international studies have suggested that it may be a universal situation for nurses to reveal themselves in care processes.<sup>[7,11,17,26]</sup> From another point of view, the rest of the participants explained their metaphors by underlining the uniqueness and originality of the patient. Similarly, the study by Hurley (2009) pointed out that psychiatric nursing focused relatively more on the patient. “Accompanying” was the fourth category created. The prominent metaphors in this category were the ones related to the road and companionship. Similarly, in a study that identified metaphors for oncology nursing, metaphors such as family and mother were included, and the nurse was depicted as always accompanying the patient.<sup>[16]</sup> It was observed that participants underlined continuity while explaining metaphors. Similarly in a study evaluating psychiatric nursing, it was emphasized that care should be continued for a long time outside the hospital.<sup>[13]</sup> In Barker Tidal model, companionship for the patient and continuity of care were underlined in the nursing care.<sup>[2]</sup>

The fifth category in the study, that is “Eternity/Life,” was explained as the deepness of psychiatric nursing due to the individuality and variability of the care. This category suggested that the participants had an intense desire to learn and a sense of curiosity about the field. At the same time, when the third and fifth categories were examined, the principle of uniqueness in each patient, which is also included in the philosophy of psychiatric nursing, was observed to be adopted by the participants.<sup>[2]</sup>

The last category identified in the study was “Rootedness.” Under this category, “tree root” was explained in two different ways. Common aspects of these statements underlined the exchange in the strengthening of psychiatric nursing by nourishment. In a thematic study in Italy, which is about that community mental health nurses evaluated their professional situation, emphasized the importance of improving themselves and being rooted in order to determine the boundaries of their professional identities.<sup>[17]</sup> It was suggested that participants, who set a roadmap for professionalization in the field of psychiatric nursing, aimed to improve psychiatric nursing with their own development.

Professionalization in psychiatric nursing has been increasing day by day (CHE date: March 29, 2022). The studies on psychiatric nursing in the literature are limited to the perceptions of nurses about working conditions, professional identity

and psychiatric care and the perceptions of nursing students about psychiatric diseases. This study evaluated the perceptions of the postgraduate nursing students, who wanted to become professional in psychiatric nursing, about this field through metaphors. Participants emphasized the inclusive, creative and strong aspects of psychiatric nursing through their metaphors. According to the results, the frequent emphasis on consultation and liaison psychiatric nursing and it suggested that psychiatric nursing care is necessary in nursing care in every field. At the same time, the limited number of metaphors for mental illnesses or preventive mental health services reflects the services offered by specialized nurses in the field and the expectations of nurses.

## Conclusion

When the metaphors of postgraduate students for psychiatric nursing were examined, they were seen to emphasize holistic, balancing, caring, and accompanying aspects. Common themes of the metaphors were found to be similar to the premises of nursing philosophy and the teachings of leading theories in the field. The descriptions of the participants were also found to be comparable in both national and international literature.

No metaphor was found about the preventive mental health functions which are included among the main roles of psychiatric nursing. At the same time, the frequent use of elements such as dance, color, and music with an artistic and esthetic value by the participants has reflected the artistic aspect of psychiatric nursing. It is recommended that more comprehensive qualitative studies examining the perceptions of nurses attending postgraduate education regarding the field be conducted and that the results of these studies be used as a guide in strengthening psychiatric nursing on the path to professionalization.

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