

Defense Styles and Choice of Nursing Career among Women

Dinesh K Arya, Ajit K Avasthi, Santosh K Verma
Arunima Mahajan, Rajinder Kaur



Defense Mechanisms in Nursing Students

The profession of Nursing is very noble indeed, but it also has a few complexities. Need for total devotion towards patient care, frustration of monotonous order taking and necessity of commanding high esteem from patients, requiring a lot of personal sacrifices, have only added to make the choice of a career in nursing more and more difficult. The problem acquires greater significance considering that the decision to choose this graceful but demanding profession has to be made at a young age.

In the West a very high drop out rate is reported from nursing programmes with nursing students shifting to an allied or entirely different profession. Baker (1975), Knoff (1972) and Munro (1980) have found the drop out rate from the nursing programme to be in the range of 27% to 50%. Though the prime reason for student attrition from the nursing programme is scholastic failure (Jones 1975; Knoff 1972; Miller 1974), other reasons as loss of interest or disliking for nursing (Munro 1980; Rotkamp 1968; Wilson and Levy 1978) have also been cited as important factors in the

research literature. In Indian setting another factor of drop out must be increasing numbers of females leaving this profession in between to join the coveted profession of the traditional housewife.

The increased drop out rates have already provided enough momentum to efforts towards ascertaining the factors influencing the career choice of nurses.

Many workers have explored factors which attract women into this profession. In the 1960's, Pariko (1969) did a longitudinal study of recruitment of nurses. He was specifically interested in determining the social characteristics of young women recruited to the nursing profession. Dunkelburger (1984), working to replicate and extend the investigation into the factors responsible for the recruitment, emphasized factors such as lack of aptitude, being black and low socio economic status, common in those who planned to become nurses when seniors in high school but had not achieved their goal by the time they reached young adulthood.

According to Dunkelburger (1984) the advent of women's liberation movement in the 1970's and the pressures for greater equality of educational and occupational op-

portunities as compared with the 1950's led women to reject stereotypical women's occupations such as nursing because they were considered 'traditional' or 'women's work'.

Considering that nurses require some special attributes to pursue their career, a very important question arises: do nurses acquire these qualities during their training and practice or are there certain special attributes in their personality makeup which attract them towards this profession?

This study examines one of the many variables which might be ingrained in their personality make-up and may contribute towards choice of nursing as a career. The variable under investigation is an intra psychic variable i.e. Defense Mechanism.

Defense Mechanisms are an individual's habitual patterns of behavior to tackle life situations. Since the defense mechanisms are not a transitory or situational phenomena but develop over a long period of time, these may influence the

The authors are with Department of Psychiatry, Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh

subject's decision making and thus career preference. These may determine one's inclination towards a medical speciality which he or she finds more suitable to his or her ingrained behavior patterns.

Over the years many workers have tried to assess the defense mechanisms in a variety of ways. Some used interview techniques, others relied on psychological tests, projection techniques and other procedures (Vaillant, 1986). Bond et al (1983) introduced a novel approach to assess the defense styles by a questionnaire method. Since this approach is less time consuming and straightforward, and was found to be valid as far as measuring of defense styles is concerned, it was adopted for this study.

Material and Methods

Sample

The sample comprised of fifty students from the College of Nursing of the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh (India). The subjects of the study were chosen from among the nursing students who had completed at least two years in the nursing college and had been inducted into the training of direct patient

Defense Styles	I	II	III	IV	V
Total Scores	902	280	239	243	367
Range	0-1500	0-600	0-400	0-400	0-500
% of Total Responses	60.13	46.66	59.75	60.75	73.40

Table II : Scoring Patterns with Both "Strongly Agree" and "Not Sure" Responses Considered

care. It was presumed that by then they would have had enough exposure and experience in the profession. The sample comprised of female students only. The male students were deliberately excluded from the study.

Tool

Bond's Defense Style Questionnaire: Bond et al (personal communication) provided 68 item questionnaire. Details regarding its preparation, reliability and validity are described by Bond et al (1983). The 68 item questionnaire was adopted and found reliable and valid for Indian population (Arya et al, 1988). With the help of this questionnaire it is possible to assess the defense mechanisms in an easy, objective and reliable way, thus overcoming

the major deficit in such studies, i.e., the inability of replication. The participants were asked to answer the items on the degree of the suitability perceived.

Administration of the Questionnaire

All the participants volunteered for the study. Confidentiality was assured and the participants were given the liberty of keeping back their identity if they so desired. They were asked to answer all the items on a three-point scale. Also, they were asked to tick either "strongly agree", "not sure", or "strongly disagree", depending upon the perceived suitability with the item.

Results

Table I shows the scores obtained when only "strongly agree" responses were considered.

The total lie score was 48.6%, suggesting adequate truthfulness of responses (very low lie score suggests lying). The respondents scored high on Cluster IV defenses which comprised of apparent derivatives of mature defense mechanisms, i.e., suppression, sublimation and humor. Next in order were scores on defense styles I (withdrawal, regression, acting out, inhi-

Defense Styles	I	II	III	IV	V
Total Scores	433	116	106	142	243
Range	0-1500	0-600	0-400	0-400	0-500
% of Total Responses	28.86	19.33	26.50	35.50	48.60

Table I : Scoring Patterns with Only "Strongly Agree" Responses

bition, passive aggression and projection) and defense style III (reaction formation and pseudo altruism). Subjects scored very infrequently on defense style II defenses (omnipotence, splitting and primitive idealisation)

Table II shows summated scores obtained when both "strongly agree" and "not sure" responses were considered. This exercise was done to calculate the total intended positivity of responses.

There was a rise in scores on all the defense style, but more for defense styles I and III compared to II and IV. This suggests less ambivalence and more confidence on the part of participants while scoring affirmatively for items of defense style II and IV on the questionnaire.

Discussion

The exposure to the sacredness of the nursing profession is from early school days. The story of Florence Nightingale and other folklores do well to highlight the purity of service and the dedication needed in this profession. Fortunate ones even have one or two family members in this profession. In general it is our belief that most of the prospective nurses have enough knowledge about what they are going in for.

The need for dedication, self sacrifice and emotional strength in management of the patients who are broken physically, mentally and emotionally is surely not an easy task. The demands are many, the financial returns few and the professional standing not very satisfactory. Still we find the competition to join nurse training increasing with each passing year. With so many handicaps to start with why do people

still join nursing?

Probably a nursing career provides something extra, something special, which certain individuals are unable to derive in other professions. Here they get a feeling of accomplishment and possibly find considerable compensatory bargains in terms of what they desire. It is also possible that this very demanding profession attracts certain individuals who have characteristics and virtues suitable for this profession only, and these few reach here as if blind-folded to other aspects.

The nursing students chosen for this study were those who had completed at least two years in the college of nursing. Till this time, we believe that most of the students who had decided to stay in the course would be those who had found themselves to be suitable for the course and the profession (having had some clinical exposure too).

The findings of this study suggest that this group of nursing students predominantly utilizes Cluster IV defenses on the Bond's defense style questionnaire. While scoring on statements for other defense styles they exhibited some ambivalence (ticking 'not sure' more frequently).

Cluster IV defenses include the defenses of suppression, sublimation and humor. A virtuous nurse needs to control her impulses, desires, affects and even her actions and postpone them to a time when such an expression would not affect her chaste status, social image and moral obligations. The defense mechanism of suppression is most applicable for an individual with such needs.

The results suggest that the nursing students sublimate their wishes and desires, scoring high on sublimation. By channelising their feelings and impulses in such a con-

structive way they may, in fact, be able to tide over such demanding duties. An indirect evidence, a common observation, which points towards a high degree of sublimation in nurses, is the number of nuns and missionaries from religious sects taking up this profession.

Humor is another mature way to deal with stressors by emphasising the amusing and ironic aspect of the stressor (Perry, 1986). Though it seems a simple way to tide over a stressful situation, it requires a lot of self observation and acceptance of truth.

The Cluster IV defenses (suppression, sublimation and humor) hierarchically lie in the mature cluster of defenses (Vaillant, 1971) and are correlated with good adaptation. Norma Haan (1963, 1977) showed empirically that at least these defenses, i.e., suppression, sublimation and humor, were significantly correlated with upward social mobility, adult increase in IQ and three other measures of positive midlife outcomes, and in general with good coping. Vaillant, (1976) studied adaptive outcomes in 95 college men selected for mental health by using a 32 item scale reflecting success in working and living. He found good adult adjustment in persons using these three mature defense mechanisms. Men employing these theoretically mature defense mechanisms are also those who are psychosocially the healthiest (Vaillant, 1983).

Battista (1982) with the help of Global Assessment Schedule (Endicott et al, 1976) found that the global adjustment was better in 78 psychiatric in patients who used suppression and sublimation (humor was not rated by him). Another interesting observation of Vaillant (1980) was that 70% of men with mature defenses achieved Erickson's life tasks of intimacy and

generativity. He also comments that men with mature defenses were six times more likely to have warm relationships with a wide variety of people.

It is often debated whether such intrapsychic factors (e.g. defense mechanisms) predispose an individual to decision making or are acquired later. This study does not seem to answer that. The decision to choose nursing as a career may be influenced by several other factors. Nowadays, choosing nursing as a career is not limited to consideration of professional careers in India, many a time it seems that the competition is not because of this specific seat, but merely because this seat is available to be occupied.

At least in one of the states in India (Kerala), a state which contributes the majority of nursing students, there is a common entrance examination for admissions to Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing. The seats are filled according to the merit obtained in this common entrance examination in the given order. Many students probably are getting admitted in this profession by what seems to be the herd instinct and the admission sought may actually not have been for nursing, and it is likely that people land up in this profession by default. However, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty that defense mechanisms do contribute in continuing the career.

A word of caution may be added about the practical applicability of this work. This study is based on studying the defense mechanisms by way of a questionnaire which has its own inherent problems in assessment (Vaillant, 1986). Although Bond et al (1983) and Bond and Vaillant (1986) have found this instrument quite reliable and valid, it is important to concede that defense mechanisms are metaphors and are

not so straight forward that we can define them clearly and explicitly by way of streamlined statements.

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