

Association between Professional Characteristics of Nurses and Nursing Autonomy in Iraq

العلاقة بين الخصائص المهنية للممرضين واستقلالية التمريض في العراق

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الخلاصة:

خلفية البحث: الاستقلالية المهنية مهمة للممرضين/ات لاتخاذ قرارات حكيمة بناءً على حكم سريري سليم في بيئة الممارسة. لن ينعكس هذا فقط على مصلحة المريض فحسب، بل سيساهم ايضاً بشكل ايجابي في انشاء بيئة عمل آمنة للممرضين/ات، من خلال تقليل ضغوط العمل، الاكتئاب والارهاق، بالإضافة الى ذلك قد يزيد الرضا الوظيفي واستمرار الممرضين/ات في المهنة.

الاهداف: تحديد العلاقة بين استقلالية التمريض والخصائص المهنية في العراق.

المنهجية: اجريت دراسة مقطعية وصفية خلال المدة من 17 / كانون الاول / 2020 الى 13 / اذار / 2021، حيث كانت العينة غير محتملة عشوائية مكونة من (482) ممرض/ة يعملون في وحدات الرعاية الحرجة واقسام الطوارئ، الباطنية والجراحية في المستشفيات العراقية.

النتائج: أظهرت نتائج الدراسة ان اغلبية المشاركين بالدراسة هم ضمن الفئة العمرية (26-31 سنة) (38.4%) ومن الذكور (57.1%). علاوة على ذلك، كان معظمهم (59.5%) حاصلين على شهادة البكالوريوس. كما أظهرت نتائج الدراسة وجود علاقة ذات دلالة احصائية هامة بين [سنوات الخبرة في مكان العمل (0.003) وتطوير الخبرات المهنية (0.009) ومصادر تطويرها (0.016) والمشاركة في دورات الاستقلالية المهنية (0.021)] ومستوى الاستقلالية المهنية.

الاستنتاج: استنتجت الدراسة ان هنالك علاقة ذات دلالة احصائية بين [سنوات الخبرة في مكان العمل وتطوير الخبرات المهنية ومصادر تطويرها] والاستقلالية المهنية. ان ذلك يعكس بأن متغير الاستقلالية المهنية في صنع القرار السريري مفهوم ذو اوجه متعددة ولا يمكن تحديده مساره من خلال عامل واحد بل هو نتاج لتفاعل عوامل متعددة منها الذاتية والمهنية والمؤسسية.

التوصيات: يجب على منظمات التمريض ان تكون موحدة وقوية اكثر للمضي قدماً لتحقيق الاستقلال المهني للتمريض وابداع توصيف وظيفي واضح وكامل يصف ويحدد الصلاحيات المهنية التمريضية على أن يكون مفعلاً بضمانة التشريعات القانونية المناسبة. كما يتوجب اعطاء دورات وبرامج توعوية توضح مفهوم الاستقلالية المهنية للممرضين/ات. كما توصي الدراسة بإجراء مزيد من البحوث الخاصة بالاستقلالية المهنية بسبب قلة الدراسات بهذا المجال في العراق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقلالية، تمريض، الخصائص المهنية.

ABSTRACT:

Background: Professional autonomy is important for nurses to make wise decisions based on sound clinical judgment in the practice setting(s). This will be reflected not only on patient's best interest, but also contribute positively in creating safe workplaces for nurses, by minimizing job stress, depression and burnout. Also, it may increase job satisfaction and retention of staff.

Aims of the study: To determine relationship between nursing autonomy and some selected professional characteristic in Iraq.

Methodology: A cross-sectional descriptive purposive study was conducted through the period of December 17th, 2020 to March 13th, 2021. The study sample type was purposive (non-probability), which was composed of (482) nurses who were working in critical care units, emergency and Medical-Surgical units.

Results: The study findings shows that majority of study participant's age group at a level (26-31 years) were (38.4%). (57.1%) were males. Furthermore, most of them (59.5%) were holding Bachelor's degree. The study findings shows a significant statistical association between years of experience in recent unit ($p=0.003$), developing professional experience ($p=0.009$), source of knowledge development ($p=0.016$) and participation in training sessions ($p=0.021$) and professional autonomy.

Conclusion: Findings of the study shows the association between professional characteristics and nursing autonomy. This reflects that the variable of professional autonomy in clinical decision-making is a concept with multiple faces, and its path cannot be determined by a single factor. Rather, it is a product of the interaction of multiple factors, including subjective, professional and institutional factors.

Recommendations: Strong united nursing groups and professional associations are also required to drive forward in self-government of nursing. Of equal importance, it is essential that the field of nursing work is fully described and clarified based on authenticated job description provided that it is activated with the guarantee of appropriate legal legislation. Provide training session and program in professional autonomy for nurses. Finally, further research must be performed in nursing autonomy due to lack of such studies especially in Iraq.

Keywords: nursing, autonomy, professional characteristics.

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INTRODUCTION

The American Nurses Association (ANA) described nursing as a profession that focuses on protecting, enhancing and improving health and human being's vital capacity, preventing disease and injury, maintaining the optimum level of wellbeing, and relieving pain; by identifying and managing human response, and providing unconditional care for individuals, families, groups, communities and society ⁽¹⁾. Nursing is the largest group in health care system; however, it has a limited role in clinical decision-making and is facing a challenge to present its independent professional identity ⁽²⁾.

Critical care nursing is described by the American Association of Critical Care Nurses (AACN) as a nursing specialty that deals specifically with human responses to life threatening conditions ⁽³⁾. Nurses who work in these fields are highly skilled and well educated. They must have advanced competencies to evaluate patients accurately and provide suitable, professional, culturally competent support, for both the patient and his or her family. These are some of the fundamental roles of nursing in critical care setting ⁽⁴⁾. Critical care and emergency nursing requires expertise, preparation, and training beyond the basics of nursing school. Assessment is the first step in health care, which involves a summary of the prior medical history of the patient, cultural and family evaluation, lab work analysis, and a patient's head-to-toe physical evaluation. In other words, critical care nurses are deeply involved in maintaining quality patient outcome through providing a competent-holistic care ⁽⁴⁾.

In order for Intensive Care Units (ICU) and Emergency Department (ED) nurses to fully perform their duties and provide a high standard of health care to their patients, they must obtain support and strength from healthcare organizations. Therefore, all interested parties are invited to empower critical care and emergency nurses in particular and Medical-Surgical ward nurses in general to exercise professional autonomy in clinical decision making ^(5, 6, and 7).

The professional authority gives the nurse the ability to think critically and to be autonomous in clinical decisions-making, which facilitates the selection of an appropriate nursing plan and the implementation of nursing interventions ^(8,9). Nurses, who are working in stressful environments such as ICUs and EDs, routinely deal with urgent and life-threatening conditions that need to make autonomous decisions to save patient's life and prevent further complications ^(10,11).

Brennan and colleagues reported that more than 65% of patient complications in clinical care setting result from incorrect clinical decision-making that can be avoided ^(12, 13).

Hodgetts estimate that 60% of cardiac arrests experienced during hospitalization by inpatients may be avoided if timely decision were made, with almost half of those cases presenting clinical signs of worsening recorded in the previous 24 hours ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Nurses must definitely be conscious that the decisions they make have a direct effect on their patients' health outcomes, but these findings pose major concerns ⁽¹⁵⁾. All the aforementioned supported evidences emphasize the importance of making sure that nurses in all health care settings, critical care setting in particular, must be armed with the moral courage, professional advocacy to produce the best clinical decision. Therefore, this study is a mandatory step to examine the relationship between professional characteristics and nursing autonomy in targeted segment of nurses in Iraq. Aiming for producing a research-based recommendation to boost this overlooked aspect of nursing professional identity.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to determine relationship between nursing autonomy and professional characteristic in Iraq.

METHODOLOGY

- **Study Design:** A cross-sectional descriptive purposive study, which was conducted through the period of December 17th, 2020 to March 13th, 2021. To determine the relationship between nursing autonomy and professional characteristic in Iraq. To achieve the study goals; the study instrument consisted of two parts: **part I:** focused on nurses professional and socio-demographic characteristics. This part is concerned with the collection of socio-demographic and professional data. The socio-demographic data included: age, gender, level of education. The professional data included: workplace, years of experience, responsibility in the unit, and work shift, **Part II:** focused on collecting data by using the Nursing Activity Scale (NAS). The NAS explains conditions in which a degree of professional nursing autonomy must be exercised by a nurse. The NAS items concentrated on wide areas such as professional growth, patient advocacy, relationships between nurses and physicians, and research ⁽¹⁶⁾.
- **Study Setting:** The study was done in Iraq by Google form survey, nurses who were working in critical care units, emergency and Medical-Surgical units.

RESULTS:

Table (1): Participants Socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristic		F	Percent %
Gender	Male	275	57.1
	Female	207	42.9
Age/Years	20 - 25 Years Old	167	34.6
	26 - 31 Years Old	185	38.4
	32 - 37 Years Old	68	14.1
	38 - 44 Years Old	47	9.8
	45 - 51 Years Old	13	2.7
	52 - 58 Years Old	2	.4
Educational attainment	Diploma in Nursing	130	27.0
	Bachelor's in nursing	287	59.5
	Master in nursing	63	13.1
	Doctorate in nursing	2	.4
	Total	482	100.0

The underlined numbers in Table (1) represent the highest percentages of the selected variables. In which, more than half (57.1%) of the study sample were males. More than quarters (38.4%) of the study sample were classified as adult individuals within age range of 26-31 years. Furthermore, most of them (59.5%) were holding Bachelor's degree.

Table (2): Frequencies and Percentages of Professional Characteristics

Professional Characteristics		F	%
Years of Experience in Recent Unit	1 - 5 Years	364	75.5
	6 - 10 Years	86	17.8
	11 - 15 Years	19	3.9
	16 - 20 Years	6	1.2
	21 - 25 Years	6	1.2
	26 - 30 Years	1	.2
Experience development	Yes	460	95.4
	No	22	4.6
Source of Knowledge	Social Media Platform	105	21.8
	Scientific Websites	25	5.2

	Audiovisual media	9	1.9
	Books & scientific journal	62	12.9
	Professional colleagues	25	5.2
	All of the Above	43	8.9
	Not Apply to me	213	44.2
Participation in training program of professional autonomy	Yes	235	48.8
	No	247	51.2
	Total	482	100.0

The underlined numbers in Table (2) represent the highest percentages of the selected variables. In which, 1-5 years' experience in recent unit was the dominant choice of the study subjects, representing (75.5%). Of equal importance, (95.4%) of study participants were actively working on developing their professional autonomy experience. Social media (21.8%), books and scientific journals (12.9%) were the most common sources of knowledge, by which nurses were working to develop their competencies about professional autonomy. More than half (51.2%) of the study respondents were not previously participated in training programs of professional autonomy.

Table (3): Associations between Subject's Years of Experience in the Recent Unit and their Professional Autonomy Level

	Years of Experience in Recent Unit	Characteristics	Professional Autonomy			Total	Fisher's Exact Test		
			Lower level	Moderate level	Higher level		Value	Df	Asp. Sig (2-Sided)
1-5	Count	8	174	182	364	24.777	10	0.003	
	% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	2.2%	47.8%	50.0%	100.0%				
6-10	Count	4	26	56	86				
	% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	4.7%	30.2%	65.1%	100.0%				
11-15	Count	0	6	13	19				
	% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	0.0%	31.6%	68.4%	100.0%				
16-20	Count	2	1	3	6				
	% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	33.3%	16.7%	50.0%	100.0%				
21-25	Count	0	1	5	6				
	% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	0.0%	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%				
26-30	Count	0	0	1	1				
	% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%				
Total	Count	14	208	260	482				

		% within Years of Experience in Recent Unit	2.9%	43.2%	53.9%	100.0%			
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Fishers exact test in Table (3) shows strong a significant statistical association between years of experience in recent unit ($\chi^2=24.777$, $df=10$, Asp. $p=0.003$) and professional autonomy level.

Table (4): Association between Subjects' Professional Autonomy Level and their Active Engagement in Developing Professional Autonomy Knowledge & Experience.

Working to develop Experience	Characteristics		Professional Autonomy			Total	Fisher's Exact Test		
			Lower level	Moderate level	Higher level		Value	df	Asp. Sig(2-Sided)
	Yes	Count	11	196	253	460	9.236	2	0.009
% within Developing Nurses Experience		2.4%	42.6%	55.0%	100.0%				
No	Count	3	12	7	22				
	% within Developing Nurses Experience	13.6%	54.5%	31.8%	100.0%				
Total	Count	14	208	260	482				
	% within Developing Nurses Experience	2.9%	43.2%	53.9%	100.0%				

Fishers exact test in Table (4) shows a strong statistical significant association between subjects experience development ($\chi^2=9.236$, $df=2$, Asp. $p=0.009$) and their professional autonomy level.

Table (5): Association between Subjects' Professional Autonomy Level and the Favorite Source of Knowledge Development

Source of Knowledge	Characteristics		Professional Autonomy			Total	Fisher's Exact Test		
			Lower level	Moderate level	Higher level		Value	df	Asp. Sig(2-Sided)
	Social Media	Count	5	57	43	105	24.841	12	0.016
% within Source of Knowledge		4.8%	54.3%	41.0%	100.0%				
Scientific Websites	Count	1	9	15	25				
	% within Source of Knowledge	4.0%	36.0%	60.0%	100.0%				
Audiovisual media	Count	0	3	6	9				
	% within Source of Knowledge	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%				
Books and scientific journals	Count	1	26	35	62				
	% within Source of Knowledge	1.6%	41.9%	56.5%	100.0%				

Not Apply to me	Count	3	14	8	25			
	% within Source of Knowledge	12.0 %	56.0 %	32.0 %	100.0 %			
Follows Colleague recommendations	Count	1	19	23	43			
	% within Source of Knowledge	2.3 %	44.2 %	53.5 %	100.0 %			
All of the Above	Count	3	80	130	213			
	% within Source of Knowledge	1.4 %	37.6 %	61.0 %	100.0 %			
Total	Count	14	208	260	482			
	% within Source of Knowledge	2.9 %	43.2 %	53.9 %	100.0 %			

Fisher's Exact test in Table (5) shows statistical a significant association between the favorite source of knowledge development ($\chi^2=24.842$, $df=12$, $Asp. P =0.016$) and subject's professional autonomy level.

Table (6): Association between Professional Autonomy Level and Participation in Training Sessions

	Characteristics	Professional Autonomy				Fisher's Exact Test			
		Lower level	Moderate level	Higher level	Total	Value	df	Asp. Sig(2-Sided)	
participation in Training Program of professional autonomy	Yes	Count	6	87	142	235	7.765a	2	0.021
		% within Participation in Training	2.6 %	37.0 %	60.4 %	100.0 %			
	No	Count	8	121	118	247			
		% within Participation in Training	3.2 %	49.0 %	47.8 %	100.0 %			
	Total	Count	14	208	260	482			
		% within Participation in Training	2.9 %	43.2 %	53.9 %	100.0 %			

Pearson correlation test in Table (6) shows that there is a significant statistical association between participating in training program ($\chi^2= 7.765a$, $df=2$, $Asp. p= 0.021$) and subject's professional autonomy level.

DISCUSSION

The independence level of nurses' clinical decision-making is one of the problematic research issues in developed and developing countries^(17, 18). Therefore, this study was created to help in providing research-based recommendations to enhance nurses' autonomy level .The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between nursing autonomy and professional characteristic in Iraq.

Table (1) regarding socio-demographic characteristics of study participants showed that the majority of study participants age group was 26-31 years representing (%38.4) of the study sample. This result is supported with other study a descriptive correlational design aimed to describe Jordanian critical care nurses experience of autonomy in their clinical practice, which indicated that (62%) of sample were in age group of 22-30 years⁽¹⁹⁾. Another study found that the highest percent of study participant (50%) within age group (26-34). Data were collected by using Google form survey; whereas young individuals were the most common nurses who responded. These result agreed with other study, which showed that young individuals are spending a significant amount of their time using social media^(20,21).

Regarding to level of education, findings of the study indicated that more than half of study sample were holding Bachelor's degree of nursing (59.5%). Another study conducted among nurses in the southeast of Iran, found that most of nurses were holding Bachelor's degree (97%)⁽²²⁾. Another study conducted in Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of Iran, showed that more than half of nurses who were participants in the study (85%) were holding Bachelor's degree⁽²³⁾. This not surprising findings due works in critical care unit requires nurses holding high academic level who can give efficient care.

In the present study (57.1%) of study sample were males. in a study that examined Factors affecting clinical decision-making practice among nurses working in Jimma University Medical Center, indicated that the highest percentage of study respondents were male (54.2%)⁽²⁴⁾. Furthermore, the challenging nature of nursing profession has hindered females from joining nursing, which created a critical imbalance as shown in Iraqi Nursing Syndicate (INS)'s statistics as male: female nurse ratio is 75:25⁽²⁵⁾. This ratio was reflected by the descriptive statistics of sample demographics, which were, more male nurses (55.4%) participated in this study than females (44.6%).

According to (table 2) that is related to professional characteristics, the study found that the highest percentage in terms of years of experience in recent unit (75.5%) of study participants between 1-5 years. These findings agreed with other study which indicated that the highest percentage of experience years was less than ten years (51.0%). These results were not surprising due to the fact that the majority of study participants were within age group 26-30 years (39.4%)⁽²⁶⁾.

The results of the present study indicated that more than half (51.2%) of study respondents were not previously participated in training programs of professional autonomy. This result is similar to other study in which they found that there was not any training program about the concept of professional autonomy offered to nurses⁽²³⁾. This highlights the huge gap and emphasizes the extreme necessity of conducting such educational program to enhance nurse's awareness about their standard professional role autonomy boundaries. Unfortunately, these results were not surprising due to the fact that the majority of study respondents are from Iraq, which do not emphasize an importance of the professional independence of nursing and the necessity of training programs that clarify the limits of professional independence and the role of the nurse in order to provide the best care to the patient.

Most study participants (95.4%) had indicated that they worked on developing their knowledge & experience about nursing professional autonomy. They highlighted many sources to seek development including, social media platform (21.8%), books and scientific journal (12.9%). At the end of this section, it is important to notice that the present study is the first that deals with the aforementioned variables, which makes its findings unique in terms of highlighting new gaps that need to be addressed effectively.

Table 3, regarding subject's years of experience in the recent unit, the present study discovered that strong a significant association between years of experience in recent unit ($\chi^2=24,777$, $df=10$, $Asp. p =0.003$) and professional autonomy. These findings go in the same

way with other study that discovered that the duration of a nurse's practice influences of their interest in decision-making and willingness to criticize a physician's judgment on a patient's discharged. Skilled nurses may have high level of critical thinking skills which can be reflected in their ability to make high-quality clinical decisions ⁽²⁷⁾.

Tables 4, 5, and 6, showed that there is a significant statistical association between participating in training program ($\chi^2= 7.765a$, $df=2$, $Asp.P= 0.021$), experience development ($\chi^2=9234$, $df=2$, $Asp. p =0.009$), source of knowledge development ($\chi^2=24.842$, $df=12$, $Asp. p =0.016$) and subject's professional autonomy level. These results are congruent with many studies which indicated that working to improve expertise and involvement in training programs were found to be critical for achieving professional autonomy by promoting nurses capacity to perform and provide effective care ^(28, 29). These findings are not surprising due to the fact that scientific proficiency requires training program to develop autonomic experience in order to provide care and effective education to patients. As well as, to enable successful relationship with colleagues and the hospital administrative team, therefore, it is important to provide a strong interpersonal partnership, leadership in their service, and reverence for other peers.

CONCLUSION

Findings of the study show the association between years of experience in recent unit, developing professional experience, Source of knowledge development and participation in training sessions and professional autonomy. This reflects that the variable of professional autonomy in clinical decision-making is a concept with multiple faces, and its path cannot be determined by a single factor. Rather, it is a product of the interaction of multiple factors, including subjective, professional and institutional factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. There is a need to develop nurse's knowledge to become able to practice under the umbrella of professional autonomy in health care setting. Supporting and encouraging nurses to exercises professional autonomy in clinical practice by providing law, standards, and policies that protect them when executing their role in work fields.
2. To enhance nursing self-government, strong unified nursing organizations and professional associations are also needed. However, as a prerequisite for professional authority, the role of nurses in clinical practice must be fully defined and clear job descriptions is to be created provided that it is activated with the guarantee of appropriate legal legislation.
3. Further research must be performed in nursing autonomy area; due to lack of such studies Iraq Particularly mixed methods studies.

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