

Postgraduate Nursing Students' Expectations of their Supervisors in Iran: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Background: Exploring the expectations of postgraduate nursing students from their supervisors is required in order to meet the expectations, raise the general students' satisfaction, and enhance the students' capabilities to the highest degree possible. The present study was conducted to explore the expectations of postgraduate nursing students from their supervisors. **Materials and Methods:** This qualitative study was done through semi-structured individual interviews with seven PhD students and 14 master's students in two focus groups from three universities in Tehran, Iran. The data were analyzed using the inductive approach and through conventional content analysis. **Results:** The analysis of the data led to the extraction of five categories (support for the students, good communication skills, professional competence, guiding the students, and professionalism) within 12 subcategories. **Conclusions:** The results revealed that postgraduate students expect their supervisors not only to guide and support them in education and research but also have good communication skills, be professional, and value professionalism. Therefore, supervisors should try to meet these expectations and offer practical strategies for better realization of their needs.

Keywords: Education, Iran, nursing, qualitative study, supervision

Introduction

Nursing education in postgraduate program has a major role in ensuring the adequacy of nurses' competence.^[1] This academic level is particularly important to the nursing profession because studying at the master's level leads to an enhanced self-esteem, further personal and professional growth, and increased knowledge of nursing theories.^[2] In Iran, nursing profession encountered many improvements in recent years, and therefore, the number of postgraduate programs at the PhD level has increased.^[3] Postgraduate education places greater emphasis on the students because studies at this level require a higher quality of teaching and learning.^[4] According to accreditation point in nursing school, continuous evaluation of nursing education environment is necessary because of its close relationship with society health.^[5] Nursing schools require the best conditions and resources are available in order to well prepare their postgraduate students. Supervisors can contribute significantly to the preparation of postgraduate students for obtaining academic and clinical experience. In postgraduate programs, the students

spend an extensive amount of time with their supervisors, and this amount of time and the type of relationship established between the two parties generate expectations in the students.^[6] Supervisors help students acquire professional conduct and competence in their professional activities and also guide, advise, and assure them of the scholarly quality of their academic pursuits.^[7] The role of supervisors is also integral to postgraduate studies for other reasons.

Postgraduate students are faced with many problems; therefore, it is necessary for supervisors to spend sufficient time with the students to attend to their needs. Lewallen and Kohlenberg (2011)^[8] argued that the shortage of teachers ready to supervise students in nursing schools is exacerbated by the increasing number of nursing PhD programs. Students happen to be directly in contact with the teachers to have valuable information on this subject and are also the stakeholders of the educational environment and have a valuable role in teaching and learning processes.^[9] Postgraduate students experience the educational environment

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from beginning to end, so their view can be valuable. Ability of the nursing school in meeting the students' needs in educational environment is one of the criteria in evaluation of faculty effectiveness.^[10] Assessing the students' expectations of supervisors through quantitative methods means accessing limited perspectives that do not fully uncover the underlying factors at play, the strengths and weaknesses of the system, and helpful strategies to overcome the problems. Considering that qualitative approaches and interviews held with postgraduate students offer the chance of fully understanding the subject, a qualitative approach seems the best choice for studying this subject. Precisely, for these reasons and also given the importance of the students' expectations of the supervisors and the insufficient number of qualitative studies in this field, the present study was conducted to explore the expectations of postgraduate nursing students from the supervisors.

Material and Methods

This qualitative study on inductive approach was conducted using conventional content analysis during 2014–2015. The participants consisted of postgraduate nursing students (Masters and PhD students) from Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran and were selected through purposive sampling. The participating students had spent at least one semester with their current supervisor and were selected with maximum diversity in terms of gender, age, work experience, academic term, and nursing discipline at the postgraduate level. Being an exchange student from other universities was the only exclusion criterion. Table 1 presents participants' details.

Semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews were held with the PhD students. Focus groups discussion for master's students was selected as a way of obtaining more specific opinion and ideas of students about their expectations of supervisors. The time and place of the interviews were set according to participants' preferences. After making the necessary arrangements with the research team, the first interview was conducted with a PhD student, with whom one of the researchers was acquainted as a key informant with ample knowledge about the study

subject and a willingness to participate in the study. The participants were asked to speak freely and express their expectations of their supervisors. The questions asked included:

What expectations did you have of your supervisors when you were in contact with them? What are your feelings about how the guidance of professors?

When required, appropriate follow-up questions, such as "Please expand on this subject" and "What did you mean by this?" were used. The interviews continued until the saturation of the data, when no further new categories could be extracted.^[11] The interviews were transcribed in the shortest possible time after recording. Each individual interview lasted 20 to 60 min with mean of 40 min. The two focus group interviews lasted for 45 (6 students) to 57 min (8 students). The saturation of data was reached after seven individual and two focus group interviews.

The data obtained were analyzed using conventional content analysis based on the steps proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then the initial codes (related ideas and concepts) were obtained after choosing the meaning units and reviewing them a number of times. The similar codes were then collected and named under one "subcategory."^[12] To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, Guba and Lincoln's criteria were used.^[11] The credibility of the data was ensured by interviewing students from different schools at different times. A member check was also performed to confirm the data and the extracted or integrated codes. The data were reviewed by two experts in qualitative studies for ensuring the consistency of the categories with participants' statements. For ensuring the dependability of the data, an external check established whether others would reach the same conclusion or not. The transferability of the data was achieved by distributing the text of some of the interviews and some of the subcategories and categories among two nonparticipating experts in qualitative studies (peer check). For confirmability, data collection and analysis took about 10 months (October 2014–July 2015) with prolong engagement for immersing in data and analyzing them with research team. In spite of enough explanation to

Table 1: Participants' details

| Participant | Number | Academic level/rank | | University | | | Gender | | Mean age (years) | Mean work experience (years) |
|--------------|------------|---------------------|--------|------------|------|-----------------|--------|--------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| | | Semester | Number | Tehran | Iran | Shahid Beheshti | Male | Female | | |
| PhD Students | 7 students | 6 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 37.7 (range: 29 to 50) | 11.8 |
| | | 7 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | 8 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| | | 9 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| MSc Students | Group 1: 8 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 6 | 27 (range: 25 to 31) | 3.7 |
| | | 4 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| | Group 2: 6 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 | | |
| | | 4 | 4 | | | | | | | |

participants, researchers tried to maintain the neutrality and prevented personal bias to achieve confirmability.

Ethical consideration

The subjects were fully briefed on the study objectives and methods and were ensured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage before submitting their informed consents. To this end, the cellphone number and e-mail address of one of the researchers were distributed among them to contact if they wished to withdraw. They were also ensured of the confidentiality of the data and the storage of the documents. An approval was obtained (code of ethics: IR.SBMU.PHNM.1394.214) and the participants were given a letter of introduction from the university.

Results

The analysis of the data led to the extraction of 764 codes, 12 subcategories, and five categories. Table 2 presents the meaning units, the condensed meaning units, the codes, and the subcategories. Table 3 presents the initial codes, the categories, and the subcategories extracted.

Support for the students

The participants expected support of both emotional and academic type from their supervisors.

Emotional support

The majority of the participants stated that their problems were a combination of employment and academic issues and family responsibilities, and expected to receive emotional support. A PhD student said: *"I expect the supervisor to take into account the fact that students are also employed, mothers and spouses. There are a lot of other pressures as well. So they should understand us ..."* (P7; 50 y/o).

Academic support

The students also expected the supervisors to be available for meeting academic support. A PhD student revealed: *"It was always difficult to arrange to see my supervisor, who could never give me an enough appointment and make time for me"* (P3; 29 y/o).

Good communication skills

The students expected their supervisor to be able to establish a good relationship not just with them but also with other teachers inside and outside the school.

Proper relationship with the students

The students expected the teachers to establish a good relationship with them. A postgraduate student discussed her expectations: *"My teacher has an excellent rapport, is very friendly, yet extremely strict and serious, but friendly"* (Focus group 1; 28 y/o).

Proper relationships with other teachers

The students expected their supervisors to establish good relationships with other teachers at their school. The majority argued that the relationship between their supervisor and the other teachers affected their own performance as well. A postgraduate student explained: *"My supervisor's relationship with others is a stressful subject for me. I constantly worry about who is going to be my observer or my advisor and how my supervisor's relationship is with these people"* (Focus group 2; a 27 y/o).

Establishing contact with other schools

The students noted that they expected their supervisors to be able to establish a good relationship with other schools. A PhD student said: *"Because of my supervisor, I was able to experience a good relationship with foreign universities and teachers... This really widened my horizons"* (P5; a 32 y/o).

Professional competence

Professional competence was one of the main expectations discussed by the students.

Ethical behavior

The teachers' ethical behavior was very important to the students. A PhD student said: *"He/she was very well-behaved, and I felt that he/she was a well-respected person, very knowledgeable but modest. I mean, we saw in him/her all the virtues that humans should possess"* (P3; a 29 y/o).

Table 2: Examples of the meaning units, the condensed meaning units, the codes, and the subcategories

| Meaning unit | Condensed meaning unit | Code | Subcategory |
|---|--|---|---------------------------|
| My supervisor understood my employment problems | Understanding the students' employment problems | Understanding the students' problems | Support for the students |
| Treated me like a colleague | Colleague-like conduct with the students | Respectful conduct with the students | Good communication skills |
| I sometime thought my supervisor had never written even one article independently | Ability to write articles | Research experience | Professional competence |
| Good supervisors are also a good guide for the students | The need for guiding the students | Attention to research guidance | Guiding the students |
| We are really need to be respected as PhD students not as undergraduate students | PhD nursing students need to be respected as postgraduate students | Expecting postgraduate studies to be well respected | Professionalism |

Table 3: The categories, subcategories, and examples of the codes

| Category | Subcategory | Example of the Code (number of interview) |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Support for the students | Emotional support | Understanding the problems caused by the students' employed status (1) Understanding the problems caused by the students' married status (focus group 1) |
| | Academic support | Investing time in the students (3) Reinforcing critical thinking (6) |
| Good communication skills | Proper relationship with the students | Respecting the students (focus group 2) A friendly relationship with the students (2) |
| | Proper relationships with other teachers | A friendly relationship with the advisors (focus group 2) A friendly relationship with the observers (3) |
| | Establishing contact with other schools | Establishing contact with foreign nursing schools (4) Establishing contact with other domestic nursing schools (1) |
| Professional competence | Ethical behavior | Strictness (2) Order (5) |
| | Work experience | Research experience (3) Clinical experience (focus group 2) |
| | Professional knowledge | Being knowledgeable on the thesis' topic (7) Clinical nursing knowledge (7) |
| Guiding the students | Educational guidance | Giving feedback (3) Teaching skills (4) |
| | Research guidance | Guidance for proposal development (3) Guidance during the stages of drafting the thesis (focus group 1) |
| Professionalism | Making an effort to promote the nursing profession | Making efforts to reduce the gap between theoretical and clinical knowledge (5) Making efforts to resolve the real problems of nursing (7) |
| | Holding postgraduate studies in high regard | Generating a positive feeling about postgraduate studies in the students (5) Making efforts to improve the quality of postgraduate studies (2) |

Professional knowledge

The students expected their supervisors to have expertise in the academic subjects related to their field of research. A PhD student said: *"We expect the supervisors to be an expert in what they say, but this is not the case..."* (P3; a 29 y/o).

Work experience

The students expected their supervisors to have teaching, research, and clinical experience. On some of the supervisors' inexperience, a PhD student revealed: *"I felt that he/she had not written even one article by himself/herself to know how to write a paper at all..."* (P7; a 50 y/o).

Guiding the students

A supervisor's work is based on guidance, as suggested by the term "supervisor." This guidance includes both an educational and a research aspect.

Educational guidance

The students expect to receive adequate educational guidance. A student commented: *"Sometimes I felt that the supervisor wasn't sufficiently adept at the subject. Then how is he/she going to guide me?"* (Focus group 2; a 28 y/o).

Research guidance

Research guidance was another aspect of guidance expected by the students. The students said that they expected to be guided in all the aspects of the research for their thesis. A PhD student explained: *"My supervisor was excellent. When I proposed my research title, he/she enriched my proposal, and treated me the same way throughout the entire course of my thesis"*(P5; a 32 y/o).

Professionalism

The students stressed the supervisors' endeavor to promote the nursing profession and hold postgraduate studies in high regard.

Making an effort to promote the nursing profession

The students expected the supervisors to take measures to promote the nursing profession and solve its problems. A PhD student said: *"The easiest thing for a supervisor who wants to give postgraduate students a thesis is that he/she be involved in different nursing contexts. It is better if they focus on actual nursing problems"* (P3; a 29 y/o).

Holding postgraduate studies in high regard

The students expected the supervisors to hold postgraduate nursing studies in high regard. On expecting postgraduate studies in nursing to be held in high regard by the supervisors, a PhD student said: *"He/she made you feel like an undergraduate students rather than a PhD student"* (P4; a 30 y/o).

Discussion

This study was conducted to explain the postgraduate nursing students' expectations of their supervisors. The findings suggest that the students expect their supervisors to guide and support them, have good communication skills, be professional, and value professionalism.

In the present study, the students stated that they were faced with several academic problems and they expected their supervisors to give them emotional and educational support. Evans and Stevenson (2011)^[13] reported support from the supervisor as a positive experience in nursing PhD students. Essa (2011)^[14] reported the teachers' support of students as key factors in shaping the learning experiences of postgraduate students. The interviews revealed that postgraduate students are faced with many challenges. Lee (2009)^[15] reported students' experiences of postgraduate studies and stated that students need more emotional support from their school, especially from their supervisors. The students also revealed educational support as their expectation and considered improved levels of knowledge and skills, strengthened critical thinking, and improved motivation during their studies as part of the support they expected. Students' capabilities while studying and when graduating can symbolize the school's efforts to promote the nursing community's knowledge. A supportive environment is essential for a more successful and effective experience of learning.^[16]

Supervisors' communication skills comprise another expectation of the students that involved both proper communication with the students themselves as well as with other teachers and also encompassed extra-organizational communication. Evans and Stevenson (2011)^[13] proposed that the students' communication with the teachers comprises one of the most important learning experiences of postgraduate students. In the present study, the students expected their supervisors to have friendly relationships with them and to show them a colleague-like attitude. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012)^[17] reported the role of the school, especially that of the teachers and supervisors, as one of the factors encouraging the students to stay at a given university. In fact, the nature of the students' relationship with their supervisor can largely affect the progress of their thesis.

Another expectation the students had of their supervisors with regard to communication skills was to form a proper relationship with other teachers. In a study conducted by Lombart *et al.* (2014), professional relationships between teachers affected the atmosphere perceived by the students as well.^[18] The students also expected their supervisors to be in touch with sources outside of their own school and to guide the students in that direction too. Interdisciplinary research and collaborations in nursing have increased in the modern world of science as a result of nurses' research activities for solving complex and multidimensional health problems.^[19] Postgraduate students who conduct their

research in extensive fields, therefore need to receive adequate guidance from their supervisors.

Professional competence was another expectation the students had of their supervisors that involved knowledge, experience, and ethical behavior. Because teachers are the scientific pole of a school, their competence facilitates the realization of an important part of the goals set for postgraduate education. These goals can include enhancing the knowledge of nursing theories and their application and increasing the ability to debate and make decisions.^[14] Schools try to make the students develop their knowledge, skills, and capabilities.^[20] To develop these elements, students need to be guided by competent teachers. Aghamolaei *et al.* (2014)^[21] argued that teachers are one of the key elements in the process of education who play a major role in the realization of the educational goals. In the present study, all the participants stressed the importance of knowledge in their teachers and considered it one of their main expectations from the supervisors.

The extensive scope of the student-supervisor relationship reveals the need for supervisors' ethical behavior. Students tend to look for appropriate role models for learning values, attitudes, and behaviors.^[22] A teacher's ethical behavior in establishing relationships with the department director and other colleagues and commitment to better taking care of different matters and solving the existing problems make them work harder toward gaining full competence. A teacher's professional conduct helps with the thriving of the students and the entire profession of nursing.^[23] As role models for the students, ethical principles can have a role in forming effective mutual relationships between the students and the faculty members and can also ensure the quality of the teaching-learning process at school and increase faculty members' commitment to the students and accountability toward their needs.^[24] The participants argued that supervisors should have sufficient experience in different areas, including teaching, research, clinical work, and management. In a qualitative study, Aghamolaei *et al.* (2014)^[21] argued that the presence of experienced and adept teachers leads to a better academic experience in the educational environment. In line with the findings of the present study, Navabi *et al.* (2010)^[25] also described experience and prowess as markers of a good supervisor.

Guidance was another expectation the students had of their supervisors; in their view, guidance involved both an educational and a research aspect. In the study by Evans and Stevenson (2011),^[13] the students considered educational guidance and mastery of the subject in questioning as some of the attributes of a good supervisor. Lee (2009)^[15] argued that the quality of the guidance the students receive has a major role in preventing their withdrawal from studies. As frequently noted in the interviews, proper educational guidance was important enough to the participants to prevent their confusion.

Another dimension of guidance was research guidance. At the postgraduate level, research is so crucial that it is arguably one of the most important goals of studying. Proper research guidance is one of the main pillars of the implementation of a successful postgraduate nursing program.^[26] The participants of the present study considered research guidance as a necessity of postgraduate education, because nurses are professional and knowledgeable people who highly need to integrate their body of knowledge and practice for providing high-quality healthcare in an evidence-based interdisciplinary environment.^[27] This finding further highlights the need for research guidance by supervisors. According to the participants' statements, the students' guidance should incorporate all the stages of research, from choosing a research subject to its final defense and even through the publication of the articles.

The students also expected professionalism from their supervisors. The supervisors are expected to try to promote the nursing profession and hold postgraduate studies in nursing in high regard. The students expected to be introduced to actual nursing issues, because, as noted in the interviews, most postgraduate nursing students have teaching or clinical experience and understand the real problems of the profession and are concerned about promoting the status of their profession. Modern nursing education should seek to find real and attainable solutions to professional problems and thus help develop a professional identity in the students.^[22] The students also referred to the society's high expectations of them when they studied at the postgraduate level and stated that they needed to be professional precisely for this reason. The participants proposed supervisors' high regard for postgraduate studies as one of their most important expectations. The limitation of time and access to maximum variance of participants from other universities out of Tehran may affect the generalization of results.

Conclusion

The present findings showed that students expect the supervisors to have professional competence and good communication skills and abide by the principles of professionalism while guiding and supporting the students. Supervisors can use the findings of this study to better learn about their weaknesses and strengths and improve the quality of their work. The authorities should also provide strategies for meeting these expectations.

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Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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